



"A Pulse in the Neon": Televisual Assimilation in the Works of David Foster Wallace

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"A Pulse in the Neon": Televisual Assimilation in the Works of David Foster Wallace

Jordan Benedict

A Thesis in the Field of English
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

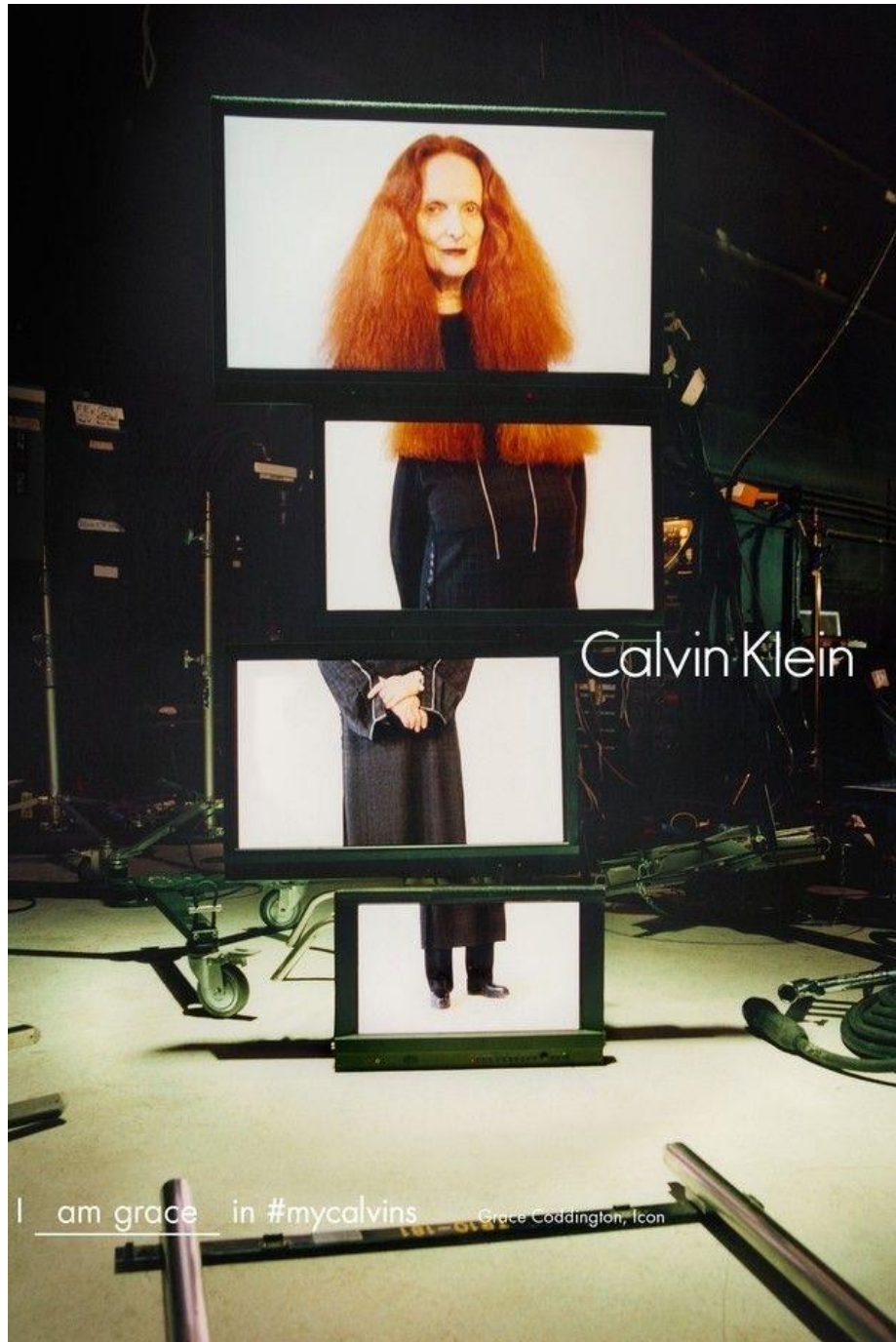
Harvard University

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Abstract

David Foster Wallace was thoroughly devoted to investigating conceptions of media, embodiment and selfhood in postmodern America and while much of the current scholarly conversation explores the nexus between television and Wallace's issue with the medium coopting irony in order to inoculate criticism, not much has been said about Wallace's portrayal of the televisual environment and how that environment isolates and consumes viewers. Think of the movie theatre or any domestic evening in the living room watching TV. How does the setting in which we watch television condition us and how does Wallace depict the components at work, the process and consequences of such conditioning? This thesis examines the way Wallace negotiates, in his writing, the relationship between spectators and spectative spaces, how the latter *assimilates* the former, and the effect of such assimilation on characters' physical body, associated sense of self and their relationships.

Frontispiece



¹ Lebon, Tyrone. "Grace Coddington." *Vogue*, July 2016.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Jordan Benedict is a U-2 reconnaissance pilot for the United States Air Force. As an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley, he studied English Literature. He lives in Grass Valley, California.

Dedication

To Bekah, the *P.G.O.A.T.*

Acknowledgments

In my time at Harvard a great number of classmates, librarians and teachers have helped give life to what has finally culminated in this thesis, and to all of them, I owe a deep thank you. I am otherwise grateful to Joyce VanDyke for giving me, a new graduate student at the time, the confidence to continue. Thank you to Rob Fox for teaching me how to write a decent paragraph and the extra time and effort it required. Thank you to Peter Becker for teaching me that frustration and not knowing what to think are part of the process. Thank you to my research advisors: Tad Davies, Richard Martin, Collier Brown, and my thesis director Matthew Cole, your patience with me has been its own achievement. Finally, thank you to my wife Bekah, who of course, made this possible.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

David Foster Wallace passed away almost fifteen years ago and if his investigations into cable television appear dated in our now, much more evolved, portable, hyper-mediated era,² then televisual aesthetics are still very much with us, perhaps more than ever, and his questions regarding entertainment and the personal consequences of living in a society deliberately shaped by and for spectatorship are especially prescient and still worth answering. In fact, many of the elements Wallace engages with concerning television, namely, the consequences of watching and of being watched, the relevant distortions screens and media play on the self and the body and how these arrangements impact our impressions of identity and community -- these themes can be easily identified in any number of contemporary advertisements.

While Wallace illustrates the overt tactics of televisual fantasy using Pepsi and Isuzu commercials from the late 1980's,³ the manipulative strategies in operation have not changed, even today. A pertinent example is the popular and ongoing #mycalvins campaign by Calvin Klein. One production features Grace Coddington with her figure, split, and fractioned across four televisions of different sizes ("Grace Coddington" and

² I like to think this era began with the first iPhone in 2007, which was just one year prior to his death in 2008.

³ See "E Unibus Pluram" (*SFT* 59-62) and these two videos -
-<https://youtu.be/edfRG9IREHc>
-https://youtu.be/b_1ASmweXYs

Yotka). Her red hair dominates the top frame and the caption where her job title would ordinarily be -- e.g., musician, artist, athlete, etc. -- instead says *icon*. The genius of the advert is not only in this idea of the icon, but in its supportive use of screen media and the way it layers one representation with another.⁴ In tandem, these deliberate techniques subtly shift the conversation from fashion (what do I wear?) to identity (how do I look?) and in doing so, the ad equates, much like television, quality and value (or any desirable aesthetic) with a distinct, measurable degree of *watchableness*. As Coddington's image is prioritized over the product being sold, we are persuaded from simply staring at the television to wanting to be stared at *inside* the television. We progress from watching to wanting to be watched, because as Calvin Klein's subtle messaging supposes, marketability -- how easily one's identity or *look* is consumed and then disseminated -- becomes the greater arbiter of human worth. The ad shapes our desire to be, not like Coddington, but rather Coddington *onscreen*. The label "icon" is thus, not coincidental. In its most basic sense, the word icon means *picture, symbol, image*, etc., but it can also signify some shortcut to say, an application on our cell phone or desktop computer, in which case, Coddington corresponds with something that is both on our screens and literally *in* our tech. This is to say, Calvin Klein, as either a mirror or conduit of culture,

⁴ This means that the portrait in question is just of another portrait. What we get "behind the scenes" (*SFT* 52), either behind the camera lens or behind the *glass* of our own personal televisions, is only four more televisions. Ordinarily, behind the photo or figurative lens, we would find what or who was photographed. The single layer of mediation would at least point to some subject in reality, but in this case, behind the representation of Coddington is only another representation of Coddington. The usual markers of mediation do not try to advance or legitimize a forged sense that the viewer can reach the spatially distant, yet visually present person. Instead, the backstage frame and other self-referential representational techniques self-reflexively emphasize that this is a carefully arranged media presentation, that all of it is artificial and that we are in fact blatantly being advertised to. As a result, the televisions transmute Coddington into an abstraction and remold her into an intentional object of speculation -- she becomes literally, a spectacle -- and when a spectacle, an illusory image, shaped by and for the camera, makes an effort to personify a brand that promotes itself as authentic or real, when what we are sold is undercut by what we see, or perhaps rather, what we see is undercut by what we understand, well -- therein lies the irony.

promotes spectation and watching in such a way that our hardware -- as Wallace would say, our "furniture" (*SFT* 38) -- becomes the consummate object of everyone's iconographic desires. In the same way Coddington's sense of self is found not in her physical body, but in its two-dimensional impression, we are encouraged to self-objectify in such a way that our value is proportionally tied to how well we appear in front of a camera, in an advertisement, or more literally, how well we fit within the frame of a photo or phone. In essence, how *televisual* we are.

While television and the entities that harness the medium's strategies condition us to certain spectative aesthetics, wherein the instigated desire to be seen engenders predispositions toward representation and "image" and wanting to get "inside" the TV (*SFT* 56), part of this thesis will explore the physical, televisual forces that act on and subsume Wallace's characters, but also how the mediagenic structures involved in such processes naturally disrupt whatever stable meaning we might have or find in the self and the physical body and how those disruptions impair our relationships with other people -- the salient question being, how are we seduced and shaped by spectation? Or with respect to this project, how are characters' physical selves, in the works of Wallace, *absorbed* and then altered by televisual media?

The word "pulse," as it relates to our heartbeat, and "neon," which, out of any number of things, can mean the gaseous element used in making the cathode-ray tubes of old TV sets, are both used together in the title of this thesis -- "A Pulse in the Neon" (*GCH* 21) -- to suggest that there is, literally or figuratively, like Coddington, *a person inside a television*,⁵ which is to say, in our example, that this person not only becomes,

⁵ For artistic visual representations that help convey this idea, see, at random, several works by Nam June Paik.

via their position behind the set, a kind of objectified, televisual "character" we now watch, "separated from us by physics and glass" (*SFT* 64), but that the television also becomes, to our character, their entire world, and the periphery from which they peer "outside the glass" to "the rest of [us as] Audience" (*SFT* 32). This relationship between looking *out* and looking *in*, in which both parties on either side of the "frame" simultaneously watch and are watched, forms the double-sided, theoretical crux of what we mean by spectation and televisual assimilation. In arguing the ways TV has managed to absorb postmodern irony and thus, any artistic, adversarial stance against its cultural proliferation of "spectation and consumption" (*SFT* 64), Wallace, in "E Unibus Pluram," comes to terms with the *two-way* "permeability" of "mass-entertainment screens" (*SFT* 50), the porous borders of technological spaces and those environments whose "boundaries have been deformed by electric signal" (*SFT* 51). Media's dissolution of important dividing lines between fact and fiction,⁶ and all the other "convolved levels of fantasy and reality and identity," create in Wallace's words, "TV's whole mirror-hall of illusions" (*SFT* 26), wherein we inevitably conflate "2-D images" with "the real human world" (*SFT* 38). In order to reimagine "what human life might truly be like," such environments necessarily require us to reach, creatively, "across the chasms of illusion, mediation, demographics, marketing, imago, and appearance" (*SFT* 52). Discussing this predicament in terms of entertainment's pervasive "televisual aura" (*SFT* 76) and our unfortunate, but absolute "residency inside that aura" (*SFT* 81), Wallace argues that TV

- <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2015.117/>

- <https://gagosian.com/fairs/2021/04/30/8-bridges-san-francisco-nam-june-paik/>

- <https://artasiapacific.com/people/the-essential-works-of-nam-june-paik>

⁶ Think of how *Infinite Jest* divulges most of its political narrative, unreliably, via Mario's film. Mario even admits that he himself often "opts for his late father's parodic device of mixing *real* and *fake* news-cartridges, magazine articles and historical headers" (*IJ* 391, italics added).

manipulates people's desire to "transcend the limitations of individual human experience" (SFT 74) and in doing so, it sells us, not "distraction," but the "dreamy promise of escape" (SFT 39). Suggesting interior and exterior notions of spectation then and the "media of framed glass" (SFT 23) which such partitioning involves, Wallace contends that "television's real pitch" is that "it's better to be *inside* the TV than to be outside" and that "true actualization of self" would consist in becoming, "one of the images that are the objects" (SFT 56, italics added) of mass spectation, e.g., Coddington. In "Deride and Conquer" -- an essay Wallace cites several times in "E Unibus Pluram" -- Mark Crispin Miller uses language conveying a similar sense of assimilation, saying, "TV advises us not just to buy its products, but to *emulate* them, so as to *vanish into* them" (224, italics added). The point here is a sort of osmosis between television and its viewers, or more accurately, a sense of assimilation, in which TV's escape is a physical and mental enveloping kind of confinement. We escape, but are immediately walled up on every side, and because there are essentially no boundaries between what is inside and outside the set, or because these borders are so distorted so as to be useless, everything is, consequently, absorbed. There is, in other words, no world outside the screen and because we are "trapped in the televisual aura" (SFT 76), "television aesthetics and rhythms become [as a result] *the natural state of being*, nurturing people in its cathode-ray glow" (Miley 143, italics added).

In terms of being inside the TV, the question which naturally arises is, how does this assimilating process work? How do we get "behind the scenes" (SFT 52)? The action here goes both ways. We are *ingested* by the TV, but we also *digest* the TV. To the former, Wallace indicates that sometimes it is we "who have crept inside television's

boundaries" (*SFT* 32)⁷ or alternatively, we have been "swallowed up" (*SFT* 131), in which case we are, whether we are active or passive, the ones being consumed and "sucked in" (*TPK* 224). In other circumstances, however, Wallace argues that "it is vice versa" (*SFT* 32). He says, the "mocking challenge...presented by television's flood of realities and choices [is] ABSORB ME" (*SFT* 81), which means that "television, even the mundane little business of its production, [becomes] our -- own interior" (*SFT* 32).⁸ This is to say that with the latter example, we are the consumers and digesters. While the direction in movement and effect is important to understand, whether we enter and are in the TV, or whether the TV enters and is in us,⁹ and how active or passive we are in the process, is in the end, tangential, because in both instances, the issue is not necessarily who does what to whom, but rather, that the TV is itself "no longer confined to the set," but is instead, in Wallace's work, unbound and intimately "part of the domestic environment the characters inhabit" (Schaefer 189).

⁷ Two examples, which use explicit language concerning characters *entering* the TV are in *Infinite Jest* and "Little Expressionless Animals." In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace writes, "Orin liked to sit in the dark and *enter* what he watched" (*IJ* 741, italics added). In "Little Expressionless Animals," Wallace writes, that while watching *Son of Flubber*, "the child's [Faye's] eyes *enter* the cartoon" (GCH 4, italics added).

⁸ An explicit example of the TV entering a character is in *Infinite Jest* when Wallace writes that "Kent Blot [...] is worried about what sorts of homemade-type potentially wicked and soul-sapping pornographic cartridges will run through his *psychic projector*" (*IJ* 390, italics added). Wallace's phrasing and use of the word "projector" supports this view of the TV being inside Kent's head or his head being a kind of TV.

⁹ In order to conceptually think about the two-sided situation of being *in* the TV or the TV being *in* us we might also think of *Infinite Jest's* James Incandenza and how he can, in one example, illustrate both sides of this idea. An example of the former -- of *ingestion* and being in the TV -- is one of *Infinite Jest's* most famous "scenes" (250), in which J.O.I. commits suicide by putting his head in a microwave. Although he does not put his head in an actual TV, the microwave and the television have the same dimensional qualities, and both use electromagnetic radiation. On the spectrum, the wavelengths used by each appliance are so close together that equating the two machines is not impossible. So, in effect, J.O.I. *literally* has his physical head in a televisual-type appliance. An example of the latter -- of *digesting* and the TV being in us -- is when J.O.I., posing as a professional conversationalist, tells Hal about the "priapistic-entertainment cartridge implanted in your very own towering father's anaplastic cerebrum" (*IJ* 31). The narration is unreliable, but still, J.O.I. speaks of the TV being physically inside his own head, which is similar to Kent Blot, who refers to his head has a "psychic projector" (*IJ* 390).

So, regardless of the direction in which television and its viewers are fused to each other, questions of process remain -- in what ways are spectators consumed by entertainment media, in what ways do they themselves consume it, and together, what are the chief components that compromise TV's absorption of its users? I argue that the principal elements that make up this idea of televisual assimilation are two-fold. The first point, in a more mechanical sense, is the televisual environment, which are certain physical and dimensional, even structural aspects of space that in turn, facilitate and amplify television's overwhelming, sensory impact. Think of the movie theatre or of an evening in front of the television where darkness and our sitting proximity to the screen are both effective components of the experience. The second point in TV's assimilating process is what most of these physical and dimensional aspects are in service to: a viewer's isolation. TV's total "ontology of appearance" (*SFT* 63) depends, in order to be effective, on its "natural Audience-conditioning" (*SFT* 52), which first and foremost, works to isolate consumers and in the process, make them so self-conscious about how they *look*, they become "even more allergic to people" (*SFT* 63).

Chapter II.

Factors of Assimilation

Televisual Environment

Darkness

Everyone can attest to the difficulty in seeing a screen under the glare of the sun or a light that is too bright and so, the first significant, structural concept necessary for watching television or any filmed entertainment, which we will discuss, is darkness. Darkness is not only essential for viewing the television or any screen well, but it also creates a "cinematic situation" (Barthes 345) whereby Wallace's characters are in several ways, immobilized and as a result, more easily subjugated and brought into TV's "televisual aura" (*SFT* 76). To start from the beginning, on the very first page of one of his earliest short stories, "Little Expressionless Animals," Wallace opens the narrative with a mother and her daughter -- Dee and Faye -- inside a movie theatre. While they are watching Disney's *Son of Flubber*, the nucleus of the scene involves Dee's sexual assault at the hands of a man sitting in the row behind her. In describing the episode, Wallace uses the word "darkness" (*GCH* 4) twice, but in such quick succession that the usage seems either superfluous or important.¹⁰ He writes "behind the woman is darkness" (*GCH* 4) and then just two, short lines later, Wallace repeats, "he plays with the woman's

¹⁰ To repeat footnote #4, this point about darkness is also repeated in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace writes that "Orin liked to sit in the *dark* and enter what he watched" (*IJ* 741, italics added).

hair, in the darkness" (*GCH* 4). The noun is used as both the object of a sentence and a parenthetical label to emphasize the mood and setting of the theatre, specifically its lack of light, but why the emphasis? Wallace stresses the aura and shade of the space, because he considers the environment an active component in viewers' *consumption*, both in the way they consume and are consumed. Curiously enough, in his essay "Upon Leaving the Movie Theatre," Roland Barthes¹¹ writes about the cinema in a manner noticeably indicative of Dee and Faye's opening scene. In asking, "What does the 'darkness' of the cinema mean?" Barthes argues that it is not only "the 'color' of diffused eroticism" (346) - - which would help explain the man touching Dee's hair -- but that it is also the "classic condition of hypnosis," at which point its affiliated forces of "vacancy, want of occupation, [and] lethargy" (345) can take effect. The theatre, Barthes claims, "buries" its viewers in a "dim, anonymous, indifferent cube" in order to "relax the posture" and fixate viewers more effectively on the "festival effects of film" (346), what Barthes calls that "dancing cone" of light (347). Darkness, in other words, to Barthes, and to Wallace, is not just a motif, but a fundamental, physical, and structural part of the assimilating televisual environment. Concerning clarity and definition, the TV must dictate the atmospheric conditions in which it is watched and in doing so, it can, via these physical qualities, *swallow* its viewers. Darkness (paired with the limits of a confined space) is preeminent then in entertainment's sense of appropriation and control and it is what facilitates television's subsequent, colonizing characteristics, namely stasis, artificial light

¹¹ As we will see, Wallace seems to emulate many of Barthes' points about the televisual environment, so much so in fact, that the parallel makes us wonder if Wallace used Barthes as a creative source. If he did, we cannot know confidently to what, if any, degree, but outside Wallace's general involvement with literary theory, where he undoubtedly engaged with Barthes, there is Barthes' obvious influence on Wallace's novella, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*. Also, see "Greatly Exaggerated," in the collection "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," in which Wallace discusses Barthes' well-known essay, "The Death of the Author."

and proximity. Echoing Barthes, Jerry Mander asserts many of the same points, observing that "television is watched in darkened rooms" such that, the "artificial environments themselves reduce and narrow sensory experience to fit their own new confined reality" (168). Arguing points that also touch on idleness and light, Mander adds that the "rest of the world is dimmed," so that our bodies are in turn dimmed as we stare at the flashing "surrogate moon" and the blinking "light [that] is projected into us" (171). This is to say that in portraying the tyrannizing effects of television and the process under which characters find themselves placed "behind the scenes" (*SFT* 52), Wallace starts with and illustrates, what is regarded by at least Barthes and Mander, as one of television's key environmental conditions -- darkness -- and how, when paired with the physicality of limiting spaces, such settings immobilize the body and make even brighter, the light acting on its viewers.

Physical Space

Moving from darkness to the tangible environment, Wallace carefully links television with the material domains in which it is watched, where a lack of light, *supported* by the partitioning barriers natural to domestic spaces, e.g. family rooms, cinemas, (Barthes' "cubes"), etc., create an imprisoning sense of enclosure and of the viewer being totally, phenomenally shrouded. The context of physical space is, in other words, an equally important part in the machinery of televisual assimilation, and as it enables the work of other absorbing components like darkness, it becomes a relevant agent in isolating viewers. Take for instance, in the same short story "Little Expressionless Animals," Faye, who, now an adult, is with her lover Julie, in the latter's apartment at night. Taking glass, as Wallace does, as a tempting "analogy to television"

(*SFT* 23) he writes that Julie's apartment is made entirely out of "walls of glass" (*GCH* 4). "Walls" and "glass" are emphasized several times, such that Julie's home becomes to the reader a metaphor for a "high tech TV show set" (Smith and Barros 6), in which the two women are "inside" (*SFT* 56) and essentially caged. The glass is thus, seen as a kind of four-sided fence, which, instead of keeping the external world *out*, it instead keeps the women *in* and now, acting like the pseudo-TV characters that they are, they "stand naked at [the] glass *wall* and *look [out]* at...[the] little bits of Los Angeles wink on and off" (*GCH* 4, italics added). The glass box -- or figuratively, the TV set -- *within* which Faye and Julie are housed and out which they now look at the world-turned-"Audience" (*SFT* 23) garners its sense of assimilation from the limits of its material space. Julie and Faye are locked in a transparent square, and as the square intensifies the presence of darkness, it is then that both can blanket Wallace's characters with a claustrophobic sense of confinement, a dark cloak of sorts. This is to say that Wallace unites Barthes' ideas underwriting "dim" and "cube" (Barthes 356) and quite literally, puts the women *in a dim cube*. He writes, "the room's darkness is pocked with little bits of Los Angeles, at night, through glass. The dark drifts down around them and fits like a gardener's glove" (*GCH* 4). Darkness here, is like a descending cloud and while Faye and Julie are swathed in its setting they are also *physically* restricted within the glass-walled-TV that they inhabit. They do however, retain, in this example, a certain corporeal autonomy. Wallace writes that "Julie and Faye lie in bed, as lovers. They complement each other's bodies" (*GCH* 4). "The 'color' of diffused eroticism" (Barthes 346) then, in this example, manifests itself as an amorous, antithetical example to Dee's earlier sexual assault. The tangible,

solid space in other words -- in this case, the glass¹² -- in conjunction with a lack of light, *absorbs* the viewer -- but in doing so, it also, in Barthes' words, "relaxes the posture" (346) and frees the body in both its negative (Dee) and positive (Julie and Faye) capacities. Wallace essentially illustrates, what Barthes writes, in that

it is in this urban dark that the body's freedom is generated; this invisible work of possible affects emerges from a veritable cinematographic cocoon [i.e. gardener's glove]; the movie spectator could easily appropriate the silkworm's motto: *Inclusum labor illustrat*; it is because I am enclosed that I work and glow with all my desire. (Barthes 346)

The focus in Barthes' quote is not the body's freedom or desire, although important, but rather what precedes and preconditions them. Darkness is the first tenant, and as it works within a *material environment*, it produces a notion of enveloping enclosure -- what Barthes in this case, sensually describes as the TV viewer's "cinematographic cocoon" (346).

Immobility

Once darkness is coupled with the isolating and artificial spaces in which television is watched and the outside, natural environment has thus been obscured, say, when all information has been flattened into one dimension (Mander 166) and the

¹² Julie's apartment is *all* windows, but for an opposite not-so-transparent example of a televisual-esque confining "cube," see *Infinite Jest*, p.110, in which the "Viewing Rooms are windowless and the air from the vent is stale." In this example there is the same sense of enclosure and thus, a subsequent feeling of residing *inside* some TV-like device. The claustrophobic portrayal of the rooms, paired with the room's lack of light and windows, destroys, as in previous examples, existing dividing lines between the television and its viewers. In discussing TV's "darkened rooms" (Mander 164), Mander writes, "because the rest of your capacities have been subdued, and the rest of the world dimmed, these images are likely to have an extraordinary degree of influence" (Mander 169). In other words, the claustrophobic confines of space *and* darkness aid in television's immediacy. Accordingly, in the V.R. rooms, where E.T.A. kids are watching a tennis video of Stan Smith, Wallace writes that "the picture almost *leaps out at you*" (*IJ* 110, italics added), and at the end of the same scene, writes again, "You're supposed to pretend it's you on the bell-clear screen [...] you're supposed to *disappear into the loop*" (*IJ* 110, italics added). There is some clear assimilating process at work, and again, there are two evident factors at play: darkness and the stuffy confines of a room.

"classic conditions" of hypnosis have been met, the absence of light works to "relax the posture" (Barthes 345) and "dim the body" (Mander 165) producing in viewers a passive dormancy. While Dee, Dee's assaulter, Faye, and Julie prove the prurient possibilities of the body in "'cinematic situation[s]'" (Barthes 345), Barthes uses the words *buries*, *relax*, and *lethargy*, each of which imply a lack of motion and inertia. Darkness then, as a function of television's hypnosis, operates with the physicality of space to *swallow* characters, but as it does this, it also acts as an agent of immobility, a kind of stationariness expressed, depending on context, as either sleep or wakeful inaction.

In terms of sleep, Mander compares the sedentary states in which we watch TV to the "unconscious" (166) condition of lying in our beds at night. When we watch television in dark rooms, he says, "dimming out your own body is part of the process;" people sit themselves in places where their "arms and legs will not have to be moved," and in positions which will allow "maximum comfort and least motion" (165). As the dim environment then, dims the body and awareness and stimulation are narrowed down to the two operating senses of sight and sound and to such a degree that the "heartbeat slows to idle, the pulse rate tends to even out, the brainwave patterns go into a smooth and steady rhythm" (Mander 165), we enter, not a more wakeful state, but rather a more dreamlike, sleepy one. Wallace, correspondingly, represents media and televisual entertainment as being near on the scale to sleep (Sayers 346-47). In Hal's E.T.A. "Big Buddy" group for example, when they watch the "undemanding visualization-type cartridge" of Stan Smith playing tennis, the kids are in their dark, "windowless," "Viewing Rooms" (*IJ* 110), where each of them is "stretched out splay-limbed" and "supported on double-width velourish throw pillows on the floor" (*IJ* 109). In what

sounds like a bedroom, tucked as they are in Wallace's "gardener's glove" (*GCH* 4) of darkness, and supported by Mander's "dimming" (165) notions of body position and comfort, each of the E.T.A. children are entirely stationary, and as Mander posits, they are "in a quieter condition over a longer period of time than in any other of life's nonsleeping experiences" (165). Except, in this instance, the Barthes-esque "cocoon" (346) is such that a few of the kids *do* fall into sleep, having apparently made the transition with ease and without notice. The players are surprised to find Peter Beak "is asleep with his eyes open [...] [he] snores softly, a small spit-bubble protruding and receding" (*IJ* 111), while Hal, nearly joining him, has his "upraised head on the pillow," where it is said, his "eyes [are] heavy too" (*IJ* 110).

While Barthes, like Mander initially describes the body under televisual hypnosis as "something *sopitive*, soft, limp and [...] disjointed" (345) focusing strictly, as he does, on movie-goers' "posture" (346), when pressed with the implications of the cinema's darkness and physical lethargy, Barthes, similarly but also more so than Mander, moves beyond the simple slack positioning of the body and begins to make explicit and direct references to sleep. In thinking of the dark televisual environment and the stagnant body, Barthes jokes, "how many members of the cinema audience slide down into their seats as if into a bed, coats or feet thrown over the row in front!" (346). Coincidentally or not, as if inspired by Barthes' own gadget-y vision of theatre chairs turning into beds, Wallace details his own variation of the lounge in the example of Prince Q----'s medical attaché, who, "at the day's end [...] reclines before the viewer in his special electronic recliner" (*IJ* 34). Again, like Dee and Faye in the movie theatre and the E.T.A. children in their "viewing room" (*IJ* 109), we start with the important structural prerequisite of darkness,

and so, after the physician goes about "adjusting the room's lighting" (*IJ* 34), it is then that he

sits and watches and eats and watches, unwinding in visible degrees, until the angles of his body in the chair and his head on his neck indicate that he has passed into sleep, at which point his special electronic recliner can be made automatically to recline to full horizontal, and luxuriant silk-analog bedding emerges flowingly from long slots in the appliance's sides; and, unless his wife is inconsiderate and clumsy with the recliner's remote hand-held controls, the medical attaché is permitted to ease effortlessly from unwound spectation into a fully relaxed night's sleep.¹³ (*IJ* 34)

Immobility, in the context of sleep, is for Wallace, as this example proves, closely linked with spectation, but why is this link in particular, between the act of watching and stasis so significant to Wallace? The connection is important because for Wallace, screen-media is tied to exploitive economics and the transactional nature of advertising and entertainment, and sleep, alongside "comfort" (Mander 165), are the disabling mechanisms whereby television first "vulnerabilizes" and then "dominates" its viewers (*SFT* 169). Outside of his fiction, Wallace alludes to these relationships in his essay, "David Lynch Keeps His Head," in which he says,

commercial film's goal is to "entertain," which usually means enabling various fantasies that allow the movie-goer to pretend he's somebody else and that life is somehow bigger and more coherent and more compelling and attractive and in general just more entertaining than a moviegoer's life really is. You could say that a commercial movie doesn't try to *wake* people up but rather to make their *sleep so comfortable* and their dreams so pleasant that they will fork over money to experience it (*SFT* 170, italics added).

As Sayers points out,¹⁴ sleep, in terms of entertainment and the "commercial movie" (*SFT* 170) lies for Wallace (and for Barthes) on a "continuum" (Lipsky 80) "at the

¹³ In "Little Expressionless Animals," Dee also falls asleep in front of the TV (*GCH* 9), and in *The Pale King*, during Fogle's epiphany, he says, "It was as if the CBS announcer's statement were speaking directly to me, shaking my shoulder or leg as though trying to arouse someone from sleep" (*TPK* 224).

¹⁴ "Representing Entertainment(s) in "Infinite Jest" by Philip Sayers

other side of which" (Sayers 347) is work. This is not the "work you did to afford the price of the [theatre] ticket," but is instead, the "interpretive work" required to get the "intellectual or aesthetic" (*SFT* 170) point of art. So, in the same way sleep lies on the continuum, opposite mental effort and labor, so too does commercial entertainment and the medium of television, lie on the opposite side of art. Whereas, Wallace says, "art "requires you to work" (Lipsky 174), entertainment's "chief job is to make you so riveted by it that you can't tear your eyes away, so the advertisers can advertise (Lipsky 79); it (entertainment) "gives you a certain kind of pleasure that I would argue is fairly *passive*" (Lipsky 80), and for all of this, Barthes agrees. In discussing viewers' narcissistic identification with the "filmic image," Barthes asks, "How to come unglued from the mirror?" after which he argues that the process might involve "some recourse to the spectator's *critical* vision" (Barthes 348, italics added). "Waking up" (*SFT* 170) he says, might involve the spectator working to assume some "critical (intellectual)" distance from the screen, in contrast to the default, "amorous" distance we most often assume (Barthes 349).

While Wallace is mindful of television's desire to lull viewers to sleep in dark rooms, this *type* of inertia is part of an overall concept of immobility, of which wakeful inaction is also a part. Instead of sleep, we might broaden our categories and instead say that the art-entertainment continuum is more comprehensively tied to motion, or a lack thereof. Musing a dystopian example of entertainment media swallowing its viewer whole, Wallace imagines us "strap[ing] on the old goggles" for a "Total Virtual *Motionless Stay-At-Home Simulated Pampering*" experience (*SFT* 330, italics added), "motionless" here, being the (in)operative word. Wallace is deliberate in reminding us

that when we watch television, *we do not move* and that this is a significant part of how television isolates us from our environment -- e.g. "Stay-At-Home" (*SFT* 330, italics added) -- and why the medium's images, as Mander argues, have such "an extraordinary degree of influence" (169). These ideas too, are irrespective of community. Even when we are with others we still do not move and Wallace notes how we "all *sit* and face the same direction and stare at the same thing" (*SFT* 44, italics added). To illustrate, take another look at Dee and Faye, who, to recap: sit in the dark, are in a confined space, and are immobile, but awake. They sit in the movie theatre together, side-by-side, shrouded in Barthes' "cinematographic cocoon" (346), but they are both motionless, despite several outside stimulants acting on them. Dee is sexually assaulted by the man behind her and yet, "she sits absolutely still" (*GCH* 4) and Faye is, in a similar manner, hooked by what Barthes calls the "perfect lure" (348). She is "glued to the representation" (Barthes 348) in such a way that her eyes "*enter* the cartoon" (*GCH* 4, italics added), which is why, despite her mother's abuse and the close, adjacent proximity of such abuse, she (Faye) "sits beside her [Dee]" (*GCH* 3), but "does not look over" (*GCH* 4). Wallace is intentional in describing the details of where each woman is *looking* and how each woman's looking cannot be interrupted by even the most traumatic of events. They are awake, but completely inactive. Each is immobile and disabled, but by -- and this is the important part -- what they are *watching* (think 'lure'). Wallace, like Barthes, uses darkness and the televisual environment to associate the theatre and to a larger extent, TV and spectatorship, with the damaging connotations of not just sleep, but stasis and stupor, what Sayers calls in *Infinite Jest*, the Entertainment's "torpor-inducing effects" (Sayers 347). Unlike the medial attaché, or the E.T.A. children in the V.R. rooms, there are times

when we are not asleep in front of the television, but are instead, "sitting there, rapt" (*SFT* 36). The main characteristic of the Entertainment, after all, around which *Infinite Jest* revolves, is a spellbound inertness so severe that "even near-lethal voltages through electrodes couldn't divert [their] attention from" it (*IJ* 549).

Light

In asking why darkness and its part in immobilizing the spectator are important to Wallace and television's assimilating process, we might return to Barthes' original idea of the "dim cube" and the "festival effects of film" (Barthes 346) and remember that the "effect and purpose" of "narrow[ing] sensory experience," in terms of light and movement, is to "increase awareness and focus upon the work, commodities [and] entertainments [...] that society uses to keep us within its boundaries" (Mander 168). Considering Wallace's vision then, entering into the TV or arriving inside society/entertainment's boundaries is, among other things, a matter of contrast and light. The darker the room and the more stationary our bodies are, the more the television is the most dynamic and "brightest image in the environment" (Mander 164). The image is as Barthes envisions it, a "dancing cone of light which *pierces* the darkness like a laser beam" (347, italics added). Barthes' use of "piercing" here, not only clarifies the difference between dark environments and televisual light, but it also hints to the *active* role such televisual light plays, because of its brightness, in overwhelming viewers. We are not discussing a neutral, natural, or ambient light, but a "purposeful and directed" (Mander 171) "artificial light" (Mander 170), which Mander argues, "is projected *into us*" (171, italics added). When Dee and Faye watch *Son of Flubber*, Wallace writes that "the cartoon's reflected light *makes faces in the audience flicker*" (*GCH* 4, italics added).

"Makes" is the key verb, which means that the "reflected light" is the active subject. As such, the cartoon, in a certain way, actively *de-faces* Dee and Faye as it superimposes its artificial and flickering expression onto theirs.¹⁵ Even with the E.T.A. kids in their V.R. room, Wallace there too makes light the semi-personified, performative subject. The video of Stan Smith is apparently "bright and bell-clear," so much so that "it's like the picture almost *leaps out at you*" (*IJ* 110, italics added). Like Dee, Faye, Hal and Peter Beak, "we turn our face toward the currency of a gleaming vibration whose imperious jet brushes our skull, glancing off someone's hair, someone's face" (Barthes 347). This is to say that in terms of darkness and the suppression of other stimulants, televisual light acts intentionally -- it "brushes our skull" -- and therefore effects, in more ways than one, our inert bodies, and is integral to it being, as Wallace says, the subjugating, "authoritative medium" (*SFT* 169) that it is. Talking about Marshal McLuhan, Robert Mcilwrath argues that since the television picture is (or was) created "by a beam of light passing through the TV screen, aimed directly at the viewer," McLuhan thought that this type of "'light-through' media" would affect viewers differently, perhaps more seriously, than "'light-on' media" (Mcilwrath 339), such as paintings. Focusing, as he is famous for, on the *mechanical* characteristics of TV, in this case, cathode-ray, rear-projection, McLuhan "felt that because TV was projected at (into) the viewer, it drove people's attention inward" (Mcilwrath 339). Who is to say whether these moves "inward" are true? If, however, they are true, for arguments sake, such moves, to Wallace, would be solipsistic, which would clarify why Faye, as Dee is assaulted, "does not look over at the woman"

¹⁵ Another example of light acting on viewers' faces is in *Infinite Jest*, when Hal is watching "*Blood Sister: One Tough Nun*" in one of E.T.A.'s V.R. rooms. Wallace writes that "Hal's turned the rheostat down low, and *the film's title and credits make their faces glow redly*" (*IJ* 701, italics added). Again, "make" is the operative word.

(GCH 4). The projected light has isolated Faye within the narrow limits of its "dancing cone" (Barthes 347) and confined her to its own circumscribed (un)reality; she is not (and cannot be) aware of anything or anyone else outside her own self and the "festival" to which she is attached.

Proximity

In terms of TV assimilating its viewers, darkness, physical space, immobility, and light are all augmented by another principle of Barthes -- proximity. Much of Barthes' solution to breaking television's hypnosis involves, as we have said, assuming some "critical distance" (Barthes 348-49) from what we are watching. Why "distance"? Because television's immediacy, the "*naturalness* (the pseudo-nature) of the filmed scene" (Barthes 349) depends on this important notion of nearness, where our feelings of presence in television are proportionally tied to proximity, i.e. how *close* we are to the screen. This idea is both physical and abstract. Wallace specifically says that Dee and Faye are only "several rows" (GCH 3) from the front of the "movie theatre screen" (GCH 4).¹⁶ In terms of distance, they are *physically* close to what they are watching, and yet, this quickly engenders in Faye an attendant sense of direct access -- "the child's eyes enter the cartoon" (GCH 4). To our point, Faye is near enough to the screen that she, to some degree, merges with it. For Faye, nearness becomes a kind of oneness, and as such, the boundaries "between on- and off-screen realities" (Schaefer 183) fade and eventually

¹⁶ An important and parallel example in *Infinite Jest* concerns Joelle, who like Faye, also sits in a movie theatre (and also with a parental figure).

"She never saw even one film there, as a girl, that she didn't just about die with love for. It didn't matter what they were. She and her own personal Daddy up in the *front row*, they sat in the *front rows* of the narrow little *overinsulated -plexes* up in the neck-crick territory and let the *screen fill their whole visual field*" (IJ 237, italics added). "Overinsulated" is italicized to reiterate our point about physical space, which, as is evident, works with darkness, but also proximity.

disappear; she becomes part of "the set" (*GCH* 31). In "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace hints at this dynamic between distance and immediacy saying,

"television," after all, literally means "seeing far"; and our six hours daily not only helps us feel up-close and personal at like the Pan-Am Games or Operation Desert Shield but also, inversely, trains us to relate to real live personal up-close stuff the same way we relate to the distant and exotic. (*SFT* 64)

Wallace here, breaks down the etymology of the word "television" to showcase how TV engenders in us the illusion of an *erased distance*, wherein spectator and spectacle coalesce -- like Faye with her cartoon -- via a false, but nonetheless felt proximity. This is to say that TV lets us break the physical limitations of our own bodies so that we can be *here* and yet *there* -- the teleportation of which, depends on TV's "fantasy of establishing an immediate contact between the viewer and the spatially distant yet visually present people, places, and events" (Schaefer 173). As Heiki Schaefer puts in their book *American Literature and Immediacy* --

The fairytale promise of TV was not only that it would allow spectators to witness events that they were not attending in person, enabling them to see what happened without having to be physically present. It also promised to carry the audience to the event -- letting them participate in the parade, the political debate, or the ball game as if they were there. Or, reversing the direction, television was to bring the world home, ushering politicians and actors, public figures and celebrities into the viewer's living room. (Schaefer 173)

Recalling televisual *ingestion* and *digestion* we can see again, in Schaefer's analysis, the bi-directional ways mediated representations work to supersede phenomenal reality. We not only creep "inside television's boundaries" (*SFT* 32) by being "carried" to events in which we are not present, but in "infiltrat[ing] the home [and] becoming its electronic hearth" (Miley 132) TV also, "even the mundane little business of its production" becomes, as Wallace says, "our -- own interior" (*SFT* 32). The "body of the home" is

(Miley 143), in this latter sense, no longer an "escape from hypermediated culture but an extension of it" (Holland 96), which allows us as viewers to then "participate directly in what [we] see on screen" (Schaefer 174). We can, in Faye's example, "enter the cartoon" (*GCH* 4), and in doing so, make the world of television our own.

If we think this idea of proximity and presence feels speculative, we might consider an experiment by Matthew Lombard, an associate professor at the Department of Broadcasting, Telecommunications, and Mass Media at Temple University, in which he took 65 undergraduate students and tested television's ability to evoke what he calls a "participatory experience," defined here by a sense of "realism," "transportation," and "immersion" (Lombard 76-77). Throughout trials and with every student evaluation, the size and range of the display correlated proportionally to the viewer's feeling of "'being there,' where 'there' is the reality portrayed in the images" (Lombard 93). One is reminded, not only of Dee and Faye, but also of the G.E. television sets in the 1960's¹⁷ that gave rise to the popular saying, "Don't sit too close to the TV!" (Castro). The fact that they were later recalled for giving off enough "X-radiation" to "make the skin red and somewhat painful" (*Desert Sun* 7) makes Wallace's emphasis on where we sit in relation to our screens, curious, both physically and metaphorically.

While "the *naturalness* (the pseudo-nature) of the filmed scene" (Barthes 348) depends, to Barthes, on him pressing his "nose against the screen's mirror,"¹⁸ Barthes

¹⁷ Trivial information, but the Palm Spring's *Desert Sun* article ran in 1967 and Dee and Faye's scene at the movie theatre is in 1970. The three-year difference is close enough to make interesting and I think the correlation between a TV physically harming its viewers and it causing in them some mental and unresponsive daze is a relevant parallel.

¹⁸ Although the gist of this quote is *proximity*, I also want to point out the literal and physical connection of pressing one's nose to a screen, which is very in tune with Mander, who believes that when we watch TV we literally (via eyesight) have a physical connection to it. Mander repeatedly emphasizes the tangible, material connection between our bodies and the TV set, saying things like, "You are as connected to the television set as your arm would be to the electric current in the wall" (171).

associates these sorts of close, "amorous distance[s]" (349) with the moves of a child, saying, "the spectators who choose to sit as close to the screen as possible are children" (348). The caricature of someone yelling "Don't sit too close to the TV!" (Castro) is after all, often that of a concerned parent scolding his or her kids and with Wallace, it is of course, no coincidence that Faye, in her opening scene, is a child, that the E.T.A. players in the V.R. rooms are children, or why when Orin sits in the dark and "enters" what he watches, Wallace highlights that it is because he was "a child raised on multi-channel cable TV" (*IJ* 741). In each of these examples, proximity and the powers of immediacy are closely associated with childhood, infancy and/or adolescence. Why however, is this connection worth noting? It is important because childhood, similar to immobility and sleep, has inherent notions that lie, for Wallace, on a continuum, between entertainment and art, or irony and sincerity. Wallace sees childhood as a time of "total, entranced, uncritical absorption into this fantasy world of TV" (Lipsky 149), but also -- and more importantly -- childhood is, for him, "characterized not only by rapt speculation but also by narcissistic (mis)identification" (Sayers 347). Proximity is, in other words, associated with children, because children are in turn associated with an easily identifiable egocentricity.¹⁹ In the instance of Barthes and Wallace, we can think here of mirrors, wherein both draw parallels "between the relationship of the spectator to the image onscreen and the relationship of the infant to his reflection in the mirror" (Sayers 348). Barthes, to his credit, specifically uses the term "screen's mirror," because he knows it

¹⁹ While Wallace most often characterizes our relationship with entertainment in terms of infancy, childhood, etc., Wallace sometimes thinks differently, saying things like, "maybe though, the relation of contemporary viewer to contemporary television is *less a paradigm of infantilism and addiction* than it is of the U.S.A.'s familiar relation to all the technology we equate at once with freedom and power and slavery and chaos" (*SFT* 57, italics added).

"sustains in [him] the misreading attached to Ego and to image repertoire" (348) which he again, identifies with children. In the case of Wallace, he often writes into his work notions of reflected light and the "media of framed glass" (*SFT* 23) because, as he sees it

television's whole raison is reflecting what people want to see. It's a mirror. Not the Stendhalian mirror that reflects the blue sky and mudpuddle. More like the overlit bathroom mirror before which the teenager monitors his biceps and determines his better profile. (*SFT* 22)

While Wallace imagines, in this instance, the vain adolescent, elsewhere, it is our "narcissistic identification with an infant" (Sayers 348) that seems to provide television and entertainment media with its disproportionate, powerful potency. As Sayers points out in *Infinite Jest*, "the camera [used to film the Entertainment] [was] bolted down inside a stroller or bassinet" (*IJ* 939), because -- and this is important -- "the lens was supposed to reproduce an *infantile* visual field" (*IJ* 940, italics added). In appearing, as a wraith, to Don Gately, James Incandenza confirms much of this when he discusses wanting to talk to Hal, saying

he spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive [...] something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come out [...] [to] make something so bloody compelling it would reverse the thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life. *A magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant* still somewhere alive in the boy, to make its eyes light and toothless mouth open unconsciously, to laugh. (*IJ* 838-39, italics added)

In trying to "simply converse" (*IJ* 838) with his son Hal, his father, the elder Incandenza, harnesses the "narcissistic susceptibility" of childhood and infancy and integrates it into the novel's death-inducing, "fatal Entertainment" (Sayers 348). Spectation is therefore linked with the *negative* connotations of infancy and the self-absorption that infants exhibit. Even so, in this example, these negative ideas are serving James' *positive* and earnest desire to communicate with his son and to see in his son, some sincerely

expressed emotion. Wallace's mixed feelings over infancy are, in other words, evident as we oscillate between reading two opposing tones in voice. Similar to the continuum between sleep and work, entertainment is sometimes associated with the passive pleasures of children and the "drug addicted newborn" (*IJ* 507)²⁰ and yet, Wallace, at other times, seems to associate infancy with sincerity and art, because it represents something honest in humanity, since, as he says, "to be really human [...] is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever *infantile*" (*IJ* 695, italics added).²¹

²⁰ As hinted to in the *SFT* quote of footnote 17, Wallace sometimes associates TV with the addictive substances of drugs and alcohol. Elsewhere however, and characteristic of this relationship between entertainment and the narcissism of children, Wallace will compare TV to candy. Candy is often culturally connected to childhood and so, in terms of viewers being children, the TV, for many addicts, becomes in turn, a kind of confectionary, which is "substitute[d] for something nourishing and needed," in which the "original hunger" is "less satisfied than bludgeoned" and it (the hunger) "subsides to a strange objectless unease" (*SFT* 39). With Lipsky, Wallace uses similar language saying in his interview that television is "real pleasurable, but it doesn't have any calories in it" (79). In discussing *passivity*, specifically, Wallace is more direct and uses the same analogy, saying --

Television's greatest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding. One can rest while undergoing stimulation. Receive without giving. In this respect, television resembles certain other things one might call Special Treats (e.g., candy, liquor), i.e., treats that are basically fine and fun in small amounts but bad for us in large amounts and *really* bad for us if consumed in the massive regular amounts reserved for nutritive staples. One can only guess at what volume of gin or poundage of Toblerone six hours of Special Treat a day would convert to. (*SFT* 37)

The Toblerone-as-TV image Wallace uses in this essay, "E Unibus Pluram," appears again, much later, when Toblerone is associated, in *Infinite Jest*, with "Prince Q----, the Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment" who is visiting the U.S.A to "cut another mammoth deal with InterLace Entertainment" (*IJ* 33). Prince Q---- apparently "refuses to eat pretty much anything but Toblerone" (*IJ* 33) and it is because of his "inability to control his appetites for Wednesday Toblerone" that he requires the assistance of the aforementioned medical attaché. Wallace writing in Prince Q---- as the "Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment" (*IJ* 33) (i.e., the viewer) and his being addicted to Toblerone (i.e., the TV) is not coincidental, given the "poundage of Toblerone" (*SFT* 37) comment he made in his essay five years earlier.

²¹ The pendulum often swings between Wallace associating infancy and childhood with the passive pleasures of entertainment on the one hand and with sincerity and art on the other. In "E Unibus Pluram," we see such swings within the span of one essay. In terms of entertainment, and again, pairing television with unhealthy food (e.g., candy), Wallace alludes to infancy, saying,

TV's self-mocking invitation to itself as indulgence, transgression, a glorious "giving in" (again, not exactly foreign to addictive cycles) is one of the two ingenious ways it's consolidated its six-hour hold on my generation's cojones [...] advising me to "Eat a whole lot of food and stare at the TV." [TV's] pitch is an ironic permission-slip to do what I do best whenever I feel confused and guilty: assume, inside, a sort of *fetal position*, a pose of passive reception to comfort, escape, reassurance. (*SFT* 41, italics added)

In terms of sincerity and art however, Wallace ends the same essay using the language of childhood, but this time his meaning is positive. Wallace says, "The next literary 'rebels' in this country might well

Isolation

Working within the "body of the home" and the domestic domains in which we often watch television, we can see, thus far, how the medium immobilizes and "slowly consumes its host" (Miley 143) via the more mechanical aspects of darkness, space, light, and proximity. When we watch TV in dark rooms, we are separated from the outside environment and our own senses as our body is "dimmed" (Mander 169), and it is these sorts of external contrivances that, as Wallace illustrates, "trap [us] in the televisual aura" (*SFT* 76). With that said, an important part of this entrapment, as Mander is eager to add, is that "many people watch television alone a substantial amount of the time" (165), which in effect, makes the coercive forces of TV that much harder to confront, let alone disregard. Much of Wallace's essay, "E Unibus Pluram," plays of course on this paradox: the contradiction in terms between the solitary viewer and the multitude of solitary viewers that compromise television's world-wide "Audience" (*SFT* 23). As Wallace says, "We are the Audience, megametrically many, though most often we watch alone: 'E Unibus Pluram'" (*SFT* 23). This is to say that, as viewers, we are part of a group, but are otherwise, in all significant respects, isolated. The viewer is, as Barthes says, "wrapped up in himself" (345), and so much so, that his home is the swaddling, one-manned "cocoon" (Barthes 346).²² It is because of this isolation, in conjunction with the dimensional atmospherics already discussed, that we find ourselves "sucked in" (*TPK* 224) and "inside television's boundaries" (*SFT* 32). Think of corporate sales and how

emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the *childish* gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles" (*SFT* 81, italics added).

²² Barthes personally reinforces film's connection to loneliness when he himself, after walking out the movie theatre, says, he "does not like discussing the film he's just seen" (345).

when we are alone and without the mutual support of a partner we can, as a result, feel more vulnerable, and are thus, that much more susceptible to whoever (or whatever) is making the pitch. Although we will discuss *relational* bonds later, for now, we will examine, a priori, how Wallace illustrates "lone viewer[ship]" (*SFT* 54) and the ways in which the "television somehow trains or conditions" (*SFT* 40) those who watch it.

Dividing Company

As Wallace illustrates, television can isolate people by dividing their company and it can separate their social presence by redirecting attention and focus onto itself. In discussing the "*self-defined* parts of the great U.S. Audience" (*SFT* 42, italics added) Wallace brings to light how we remain isolated, despite community, or perhaps in this case, what we might call the proximity of other people. Isolation, in other words, is not strictly a function of being physically alone, because, as Wallace sees it

in younger Americans' experience, people in the same room don't do all that much direct conversing with each other. What most of the people I know do is they all sit and face the same direction and stare at the same thing and then structure commercial-length conversations around the sorts of questions that myopic car-crash witnesses might ask each other -- "Did you just see what I just saw?" (*SFT* 44)

What Wallace is arguing is that we are "no longer united so much by common beliefs as by common images: what binds us [is] what we stand witness to" (*SFT* 42), which is to say, that when we watch TV, we might be next to someone, but we are in fact, for all intents and purposes, alone. The crux of the social interaction then is not between one person and another, but between two people and what they are *watching*. To illustrate this point, take our example of Dee and the "child in a dress [who] sits *beside her*" (*GCH* 3, italics added). In the same way that one loses their peripheral vision the nearer they

stand to an object in focus -- think again of proximity -- so too do Dee and Faye lose sight of each other the closer they sit to the screen in front of them. Like a horse with blinders, each woman's field of vision narrows to such an extent that they can only see what is directly ahead, or conversely, the screen, as tall and wide as it is, fills their entire view such that, they cannot see anything other than the film. Faye's failure to "look over at the woman" and Dee's insistence on sitting "absolutely still" (*GCH* 4) are functions of the televisual environment and immobility, but each instance of inaction evokes a sense of restricted vision -- like a dog wearing an Elizabethan collar²³ -- which not only weakens their feelings of mutual support, if there were any, but it separates both of them in such a way that it makes them more susceptible to the undermining televisual mechanisms at work. Put another way, the television actively nurtures isolation and in the case of Dee and Faye, it succeeds. Each woman is caught in their own kind of personal, "solipsistic, lonely" (*SFT* 38) bubble. They are physically together, but are, more importantly, socially separated,²⁴ i.e. they are sitting, facing the same direction, watching the same thing. Echoing Mark Crispin, Wallace highlights the tactics and motives behind such isolation and the advantages it has for TV in subjugating its viewers. Specifically, in the context of "television commercials" (*SFT* 55), Wallace says they

²³ Dee and Faye's sense of restricted vision recalls the abandonment of Julie by her stepfather. As the man leaves his stepchildren by the side of the road, Wallace writes that he does nothing; he just "stares straight ahead" (*GCH* 3). Like Faye not looking at Dee, Julie's father does "not look over" at his kids as they stand by the adjacent fence (*GCH* 4). Wallace associates spectation with immobility, the 'hypnotic gaze' and to our point -- isolation, but the link here is also characterized, in these two examples, with neglect.

²⁴ Karl Kroeber, in his book *Make Believe in Film and Fiction: Visual vs. Verbal Storytelling* reaffirms the isolation of each movie-going spectator, but in doing so, compares such isolation with the "imaginative communion" between readers when reading a novel. Kroeber says,

Each of us [...] sees himself or herself; visual perception is private. Language, which enters into our minds through auditory systems of perception, is interpersonal, facilitating communication with others [...] So, paradoxically, the privately created novel offers imaginative communion to a lonely reader, whereas a collaboratively constructed movie, even in an uncomfortably crowded theatre, isolates each spectator. (Kroeber 57)

always make their appeals to *individuals*, a fact that seems curious in light of the unprecedented size of *TV's Audience*, until one hears gifted salesman explain how people are always most vulnerable, hence frightened,²⁵ hence persuadable, when they are approached solo. (*SFT* 55, italics added)

The TV, in other words, engineers an artificial kind of loneliness and in doing so, exploits our innate desire for community, but it does this to serve *economic* ends. We are separated from each other, because in the end, it is what makes money.

Lone Watching

While Wallace demonstrates how television can socially split two physically collocated people and produce in them a sense of isolation, Wallace illustrates elsewhere the unaccompanied viewer and TV's continued targeting of the individual. Throughout his career Wallace continually puts characters in front of the TV alone, by themselves, and at critical narrative junctures. Shortly after the reader finds out Julie is dethroned from the *Jeopardy!* show, we find Dee alone, talking to the television, "in her office, at night, in 1987" (*GCH* 8). We first glimpse the dangers of "the samizdat" (*IJ* 90) when the medical attaché is also alone. His wife is at her "Women's Advanced League tennis night" and she cannot ready the "evening's entertainment" (*IJ* 34). Not knowing what to do, the medical attaché irritatingly unwinds by himself with the "mysteriously blank entertainment cartridge" (*IJ* 37). Hall too, when he is watching his father's movie, "*Blood Sister: One Tough Nun*," in E.T.A.'s V.R. rooms, he shuns Bridget Boonie saying, "I'm isolating. I came in here to be by myself" (*IJ* 702). Even Chris Fogle, a character written nearly two decades after Dee, is also always "solo" (*TPK* 212) in front of the TV. When

²⁵ In reference to Dee, Wallace writes that "the woman's eyes are bright with *fear*" (*GCH* 4).

gossiping about the "high-wattage Christian[s]," he claims that despite his building's "communal area" and the "social room" nature of his "dormitories' nomenclature," he rather prefers to "sit on the [...] sofa alone [...] and watch TV" (*TPK* 212), and when he has his life-changing epiphany watching the sitcom *As the World Turns*, Fogle clarifies, "I was by myself" (*TPK* 223).²⁶ This is to say that the marriage between television and isolation is, for Wallace, deeply felt and long-lived. However, whereas with Dee and Faye, the television breaks the social yoke of two viewers in order to make them feel more alone -- so as to more easily sell them something -- with the "lone viewer" (*SFT* 55), Wallace showcases the "psychic shell game going on" (*SFT* 40) wherein television tries to make people who are alone feel, after all, not so lonely. As Wallace contends, the TV must make its viewers feel independent, but not lonesome, which is why advertisements both praise and dispraise the "the great herd" (*SFT* 56). We can see this when the television tries to include Dee in "the Audience" (*SFT* 23) saying, "Let's all be there," and "We bring good things to life" (*GCH* 8, italics added) before it moves to its more individually targeted techniques: "You deserve a break," "Milk likes you," and "Are you hungry for a Whopper?" (*GCH* 9, italics added). The TV must help Dee reconcile the fact that she is by herself watching television with her desire to not be alone,²⁷ but it also has its own agenda and must confer on her a distinct but impressionable identity.

²⁶ In "Gold Old Neon," Neal also has an epiphany watching a TV show by himself. He decides to kill himself after watching an episode of *Cheers* alone (*OBV* 168-69). Of course, Neal the solitary-viewer is fully aware and even admits that he is by himself, and yet, as he sees it, he is also with the rest of the "whole national audience at home" (*OBV* 168).

²⁷ Dee's loneliness is apparent in how she responds to the TV. The sardonic "else" that shapes the rhetorical and sarcastic form of her reply, "Where *else* would I be?" (*GCH* 8, italics added) indicates that Dee is not only angry over her present lot in life, but that she is more specifically, lonely and weary of being by herself "at Merv Griffin Enterprises *every* weeknight" (*GCH* 8, italics added), especially since she recalls the absence of both her daughter -- "So did I [...] Just once" (*GCH* 8) -- and her ex-husband -- "Safe to say not" (*GCH* 9).

This manipulation creates in the viewer a false sense of security, which not only makes him or her a more easily assimilated object, but it makes television's "conditioning so subtle" (*SFT* 52) that it becomes hard to pin down the exact point at which we as viewers, took/take up "residency inside the [TV's] aura" (*SFT* 81).

Self-Consciousness

By redirecting the focus of social companions and instilling in viewers a false sense of independence (and thereby pacifying feelings of aloneness), the television can, with greater effect, "reinforce its own queer ontology of appearance" wherein the "well-trained viewer becomes even more allergic to people" (*SFT* 63). This is to say that the TV splits us from our social group while making us feel not so lonely when alone. As such, we are comfortable being by ourselves. Spending so much time however, "at home alone watching" a medium that encourages spectation and "identif[ication] with those characters we find appealing" (*SFT* 53), we begin, given long enough, to "worry about how we might come across" (*SFT* 63).²⁸ The TV and its framework of spectation then takes advantage of our natural, vain self-consciousness. We become worried about how we *look*, at which point the "stress-vanity" (*IJ* 150) continuum gets so lopsided, we become altogether "reluctant to be around real human beings" (*SFT* 38). We preoccupy ourselves with others' perceived judgement, and because of the resulting anxiety we

²⁸ Wallace parodies the idea of watching ourselves watch in many examples, one of which is with James Incandenza's film "*The Joke*," which is itself, a "parody of Hollis Frampton's 'audience-specific events'" (*IJ* 988). It is said that the "cameras in [the] theatre record the films' audience and project the resultant raster onto a screen -- the theatre audience watching itself watch itself get the obvious 'joke' and become *increasingly self-conscious* and uncomfortable and hostile" (*IJ* 989, italics added). Wallace writes that the "*The Joke's* total running time was just exactly as long as there was even one cross-legged patron left in the theater to watch his own huge projected image gazing back down at him with the special distaste of a disgusted and ripped-off-feeling art-film patron" (*IJ* 398).

become thus, more isolated. If we think all of this "'conditioning' still seems hyperbolic or hysterical" (*SFT* 53) Wallace asks us to consider the concept of prettiness. Wallace argues that "one of the things that makes the people on television fit to stand the Megagaze is that they are, by ordinary human standards, extremely pretty" (*SFT* 53).²⁹ The unfortunate issue with this however, is that "television in enormous doses affects people's values and self-perception in deep ways" (*SFT* 53), such that, it "naturally becomes more important to us to be pretty, to be *viewed* as pretty," which is "great for TV," but "less great for us civilians, who tend to own mirrors" (*SFT* 53, italics). This "ontology of appearance" then, whereby viewers are trained to wonder how they "seem to watching eyes, makes genuine human encounters even scarier" (*SFT* 63). A great example of this "emotional stress [...] physical vanity [...] and queer kind of self-obliterating logic" (*IJ* 145) is in Wallace's *Infinite Jest* parody of video calling. Again, pairing television with the motifs of mirrors and glass, Wallace writes that upon the invention of "video telephony" (*IJ* 146), callers were apparently "horrified at how their own faces appeared on the TP screen" (*IJ* 147).³⁰ This was such a problem, as the story goes, that the "entrepreneurial"³¹ ingenuity of the "telecommunications industry" created "High-Definition Masking," "High-Definition Photographic Imaging" and the "*Transmittable Tableau* (a.k.a. *TT*)," all of which offered new video-consumers "not just verisimilitude but aesthetic enhancement -- stronger chins, smaller eye-bags, air-brushed

²⁹ In addition to "E Unibus Pluram", when Wallace discusses David Lynch and the movie-going experience, he focuses again, on prettiness and this logic of appearance, saying,

Part of the magic of going to a movie is surrendering to it, letting it dominate you. The sitting in the dark, the looking up, the tranced distance from the screen, the being able to see the people on the screen without being seen by the people on the screen, the people on the screen being so much bigger than you, *prettier* than you, more compelling than you, etc. (*SFT* 169)

³⁰ The TP screen here, is a kind of mirror.

³¹ Again, this is all tied to the economics of money and consumerism.

scars and wrinkles," so they could "reflect the image of yourself you wanted to transmit" (IJ 148). The consequences of all of this, of course, was that it left consumers wanting to spend even less time "in the real human world" (SFT 38), because they began

preferring and then outright demanding videophone masks that were really quite a lot better-looking than they themselves were in person [...] [and] within a couple more sales-quarters most consumers were now using masks so undeniably better-looking on videophones than their real faces were in person, transmitting to one another such horrendously skewed and enhanced masked images of themselves, that enormous psychological stress began to result, large numbers of phone-users suddenly reluctant to leave home and interface personally with people, who, they feared, were now habituated to seeing their far-better-looking masked selves on the phone and would on seeing them in person suffer [...] the same illusion-shattering aesthetic disappointment that, e.g. certain women who always wear makeup give people the first time they ever see them without makeup. (IJ 149)

What this example proves is that in Wallace's writing, the television not only isolates via its environmental factors and/or the ways in which it redirects social focus, it also breeds and perpetuates isolation by its very *spectative nature* as it drives "people's attention [narcissistically] inward" (Mcilwrath 339). As they succumb to television's "ontology of appearance" (SFT 63) and exercise more mental energy in thinking about how they *appear*, the "lone viewer" (SFT 55) not only begins to "feel inadequate to the tasks involved in being a part of the world" (SFT 38), but the world becomes to them "an Audience" (SFT 26) in front whom they must *exhibit, present, unveil* their "heavily doctored" self, i.e. character. In other words, as the TV viewer defines themselves more and more as an "object of attention" (IJ 660), they become "snared by something untrue," "trapped" (IJ 389) as it were, into thinking that life "inside the TV" (SFT 56), will

somehow allow for "some sort of kind of meaning" (*IJ* 388) beyond what "relationships with real people" can offer (*SFT* 38).³²

³² Bringing together the concept of *appearance* with *isolation*, another good passage in "E Unibus Pluram" starts on p. 22 --

Lonely people tend, rather, to be lonely because they decline to bear the psychic costs of being around other humans. They are allergic to people. People affect them too strongly. Let's call the average U.S. lonely person Joe Briefcase. Joe Briefcase fears and loathes the strain of the *special self-consciousness* which seems to afflict him only when other real humans being around, staring, their human sense-antennae a-bristle. Joe B. fears how he might *appear*, come across, to watchers. He chooses to sit out the enormously stressful U.S. game of appearance poker. (*SFT* 23, italics added)

Chapter III.

Signs of Assimilation

As I have argued, the assimilating force of both the televisual environment -- e.g. darkness, physical space, light, proximity,³³ and isolation, work together, in Wallace's work, to "suck" (*TPK* 224)³⁴ characters into the "dark world" of televisual spectation, or what is otherwise and appropriately known to E.T.A.'s tennis players as "the Show" (*IJ* 660).³⁵ With that said, characters find themselves caught "inside the set" (*GCH* 31), in some instances, quite literally. Wallace *frames* them as if they were in a kind of reflective, TV-imitative box, while in other examples, it is more figurative; characters either work under some paradigm of objectifying spectation or their lives and experiences are instead described rather ekphrasistically and as Sayers points out, "in the same way a spectator would watch a film" (Sayers 360).

Literal

Telescopes

Commenting on television's relationship with voyeurism and the ways in which TV proffers to viewers the illusion of watching people who do not know they are being

³³ And their associated factors: immobility (sleep & wakeful inaction) and childhood (candy & infancy)

³⁴ In the span of two pages (*TPK* 223-224), Chris Fogle uses some variation of the term "sucked in" five times, which is convenient in illustrating the idea that TV, like the "eye of Sauron" (Miley 193), can *absorb*, like a vacuum, those who give it the "average six-hour stint" (*SFT* 39).

³⁵ The term "the Show," which refers to professional tennis, is used throughout *Infinite Jest*, but the best discussions of "the Show" in terms of spectation and entertainment are on p. 388 and p.660.

watched,³⁶ Wallace points out that "classic voyeurism involves media of framed glass -- windows, telescopes, etc." (*SFT* 23), which is why, he says, its (glass') "analogy to television is so tempting" (*SFT* 23). As it pertains to voyeurism then, and the physical material that compromises television screens, camera lenses, telescopes, etc., glass is important to the more literal ways Wallace frames (and thereby incorporates) his characters into the TV. For Chris Fogle the telescope image is uniquely appropriate considering his epiphany -- his discovering he is a "lost soul" (*TPK* 226) -- is triggered by *As the World Turns*,³⁷ specifically the "show's trademark shot of planet earth as seen from space" and the "CBS day-time network announcer's voice" saying, "*You're watching As the World Turns*" (*TPK* 224). "Classic voyeurism" (*SFT* 23), in other words, is elevated in this case, to a cosmic sort of scale as Fogle watches a spinning world that is itself being focused through another lens. He is like a figure seen in the lens of a telescope, which means that Fogle is effectively being watched watching, an ironic situation that is convincingly illustrated by the soap opera's title sequence³⁸ where people's domestic lives are cut up into small, picturesque, square scenes, which are then amalgamated into, as the camera pans out -- Earth. This is to say that Fogle is under the spotlight of several optical layers as he recognizes himself inhabiting one of these vignettes. He is (or was prior to his moment of insight) "inside television's boundaries" (*SFT* 32). This idea is not only confirmed by the mirror image of Fogle watching the world in the frame of the "little Zenith," which is an exact reflection of the soccer ball "framed by [his] knees" (*TPK* 223) -- Fogle and the personified TV are essentially

³⁶ Wallace makes the point that actors and actresses are "*geniuses* at seeming unwatched" (*SFT* 25), hence the voyeuristic 'illusion.'

³⁷ To reiterate an earlier point, he is *alone*.

³⁸ <https://youtu.be/bmLQa63kQCI>, 2:20-3:00

looking at each other -- but it is also corroborated as Fogle moves, during his epiphany, from the imaginary world of television to something more substantive. Fogle says he is all of a sudden, "struck by the bare *reality* of the statement," by "the *literal reality* of what [he] was doing" and that "all the while [he was inside the TV] *real* things in the world were going on and people with direction and initiative were taking care of business in a brisk, no-nonsense way" (*TPK* 224, italics added). As Fogle is sandwiched then, between several representative or mediagenic levels, he is, like Barthes "lost, into the engulfing mirror" (349).³⁹

Windows

Characters finding themselves literally or somewhat physically inside some televisual sphere goes, for Wallace, beyond the image of telescopes. This televisual framing and the split "between inner and outer" (Burn 39) worlds -- between the TV set and the reality outside of it --is paralleled, with windows and glass. Windows are, in particular, central to the everyday lives of Dee, Faye, and others as they work at Merv Griffin Enterprises (MGE), the central film studio used for taping the *Jeopardy!* show in "Little Expressionless Animals." Commenting on the ways MGE represents or is at least paradigmatic of a television set, Marshall Boswell argues that "the window image is central to the story, as it invokes, both visually and conceptually, the television screen: outside the window is the real, while inside the window is 'the game'" (72). As such, the glass of the MGE studio, much like Julie's apartment, becomes not only a reflective barrier upon which the characters spy their own "2-D images" (*SFT* 38), but it also

³⁹ At one point, Wallace refers to "TV's whole mirror-hall of illusions" (*SFT* 26). I imagine Fogle somewhere in the middle of this "hall."

becomes a (TV) screen whereby they *watch* the "scene"-ic world outside. For example, "on 12 March [...] [in] her mother's office," Faye "can see her mother's *bright-faint image* in the *window*" (*GCH 7*, italics added). Shortly after, again -- "*in the window* Faye sees Dee's *outline* check its own watch with a tiny motion" (*GCH 6*, italics added).

Elsewhere, in the same MGE office and at the same time there is Dee, Muffy deMott, Janet Goddard and to the side, there is Alex Trebek, who "sits alone."⁴⁰ There it is said, the "entire room is reflected in the *dark window*" (*GCH 5*, italics added). The gaze of the characters, their *watching*, each person's reflection in glass and the interplay between light and dark⁴¹ are all important here. Wallace writes that all the "window[s] first darken and then shine" (*GCH 5*), which is to say that like the analogue noise of old TV sets, the glass flickers black and white, before it finally reflects, after finding a good signal, the moving image of a peopled room. We might say that Wallace's characters are, at this point, clearly "assimilated" into the "inner" sphere of the TV (Burn 39), what Boswell calls the "fictive" world (72). They are the "pulse in the neon" (*GCH 21*). This is because Wallace places them in a kind of televisual box as they fixate on the screens (i.e. windows) that surround them, and as a result, MGE becomes more than just the hosting studio of *Jeopardy!*, it turns into an entirely reflected, two-dimensional space in which all of the employees become characters, characters that we can now *watch* as "the Audience" (*SFT 26*) on the outside. This is why, as Boswell concludes (72), Merv's cartoon-esque "shiny man" (*GCH 24*) wants to throw out the old "rules" (*GCH 25*) of *Jeopardy!*, the same rules that presumably govern the real external world -- it is because he is part of MGE, i.e. "the set" (*SFT 74*) -- and so has no interest in them. In a similar

⁴⁰ Reiterating an earlier point about isolation.

⁴¹ Dee's image is "*bright-faint*" (*GCH 7*).

manner, this is also why Julie's brother defeats her despite his autism. It is not that he is finally "yank[ed] outside [himself] *into* the [*real*] world (*GCH* 20, italics added), it is that he has instead found in the fictional rooms of MGE, a second sort of refuge. Julie's brother is characterized as though he were some TV-character incarnate and as such, he flourishes within the boundaries of MGE.

These glass barriers however, are not as concrete or as clearly delineated as we might presume. Boswell sees a certain "fluidity" (72) between the televisual borders Wallace creates, and as McCaffery confirms in his interview with Wallace, the story's "boundaries between inner and outer are blurred" (Burn 39). This not only means that televisual transmutations are occurring on both the interior and exterior sides of the glass, but it also means that the *real* world becomes, like MGE, a copy-cat version of another set, seen from the inside as Dee, Faye and the others look *out* from their own office windows. The TV in other words, becomes double sided. With Faye, Wallace writes that she "*watches* the freeway outside her mother's office *window*" (*GCH* 5, italics added). Dee, meanwhile, next to her, also "look[s] *out* the *window*" (*GCH* 5, italics added). The scene here essentially mimics the episode of them in the movie theatre,⁴² eighteen years earlier.⁴³ In both instances, Dee and Faye "sit and face the same direction and stare at the same thing" (*SFT* 44), which of course helps equate, in the reader's mind, the window with the TV. So, in the same way Dee, Fay and the others are fictionalized and made into TV characters by the reflective walls of the MGE studio and the *look* of not only the *Jeopardy!* audience but "the Audience" (*SFT* 26) outside,⁴⁴ so too is the

⁴² Recall our earlier point about isolation and the TV dividing company.

⁴³ Dee's assault was in 1970 (*GCH* 3)

⁴⁴ In the actual, real, external world

external world fictionalized by the frames of those same windows and each character's multifarious gaze outward. Wallace affirms the ways in which these "boundaries have been deformed by electric signal" (*SFT* 51), when he answers McCaffery's claim, saying, "what's going on on the show has repercussions for everybody's lives outside of it" (Burn 40). This is why outside the MGE building in "west L.A." (*GCH* 30), everything feels artificial and two dimensional, it is itself another "set" (*SFT* 74). Julie and Faye walk under a "sky [that] shines [...] *glassy as aftershave*" (*GCH* 33, italics added) and later, Faye notices the "gray *paste* of clouds moving back over the sun" (*GCH* 39, italics added). One thinks of the *Truman Show*, when Truman sees a stage light fall to the ground outside his front yard or when he runs his boat into the artificial horizon of the Hollywood dome. Truman is being watched, yes, but in both instances, the outside sky is just another layer of television's productional facade; it is artificial, cartoonish even. The television then, because it is *double-sided* assimilates both interior and exterior spheres. Both the audience and characters, on *either side* of the frame, see something that is televisual.

Figurative

"The Show"

Aside from Fogle, MGE and the other more literal, physical examples of characters being "inside the TV" (*SFT* 56),⁴⁵ Wallace illustrates elsewhere, more figurative spheres, that confuse in the same way as television, representation with reality,

⁴⁵ Think of James Incandenza burning his head in a microwave (*IJ* 142) or Otis P. Lord going "headfirst down through the monitor's screen" (*IJ* 342).

and thus embody the same paradigms of entertainment in which "being seen" is prioritized over the act of "seeing" (*IJ* 660). As a result of this focus on appearance Wallace's characters find themselves surrendering to, or rather aching for, the gaze of a televisual type "Audience" (*SFT* 26). In *Infinite Jest*, The Ennet Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) is one such setting. E.T.A is a place where students work hard to prepare for a career in professional tennis, a level of sport known in the novel as "the Show" (*IJ* 111). In labeling the professional league as such, thereby associating the highest tiers of tennis with drama and performance, Wallace separates the sport from its recreational context and reframes it in terms of the TV and the image culture such associations imply. As a result, the novel's tennis players are not necessarily training just for sport -- or for the sake of tennis -- but are, as DeLint says, "being made into statues to be *looked at*" (*IJ* 661, italics added). They are training for the uncaring gaze of a (sports) camera. Wallace confirms this when he writes that "the Show" promises "travel and cash prizes and endorsements and *appearance* fees, match highlights in *video mags*, action *photos* in glossy *print-mags*" (*IJ* 111, italics added). The focus is not on skill, talent, or sport, but on celebrity, self-fashioning, and display. In arguing the ways people become "commercially exploitable goods" (Steinhilber 106) within the context of professional sports, Steinhilber argues that because "the Show" requires, much like TV, someone to *watch* it, the players' physical bodies, "*as spectacle[s]* become a source of value rather than a means to the end of playing" (Steinhilber 106, italics added). Players, as subjects, are thus turned into televisual (and economic) objects and "tennis as a game that provides bodies to be looked at to an entertainment-hungry US-American society is thereby transformed from a playful and non-productive activity into a form of labor" that can then

be "'sold' on the biocapitalist marketplace of spectatorship" (Steinhilber 106). Unlike Dee or Faye, the E.T.A players are not stuck in, nor do they navigate a literal television set like the mirrored walls of MGE's studio; they also do not contend with an actual show like *Jeopardy!*, but they are, in more figurative respects, still *inside* a TV and as a result, suffer in similar ways, "the stresses of entertaining an audience" (*IJ* 661) and the painful self-consciousness feelings that are intrinsic to screens and televisual domains. In the same way the faux adjectives used to describe MGE's external world validate its mediagenic artificiality -- e.g. *glassy* as aftershave (*GCH* 33, italics added) -- so too do the descriptions of Wallace's tennis players substantiate E.T.A. as a wholly spectative space. Hal for instance, as he is introduced on court, as the "fourth-best tennis player under age eighteen in the United States of America" is seemingly done so, from behind the lens of a TV camera. Wallace writes that Hal's "head [is] closely *monitored* by deLint and Staff [and] is judged still *level* and *focused* and unswollen/-bludgeoned by the sudden *éclat*" (*IJ* 155, italics added). While the word *éclat* brings to mind success, it also calls forth notions of display and performance.⁴⁶ Paired with the way Hal's head is described as though it were viewed through a screen -- level and focused⁴⁷ -- this definition not only helps corroborate E.T.A. as a media-saturated realm; it also confirms that Hal is, unequivocally, a character in it, as he is narrated within the confines of a certain aperture. He is essentially, like everyone in E.T.A, "inside the set" (*SFT* 74). This point of course is made obvious when we consider Hal's nicknames. He is called "'The Halster'" and

⁴⁶ OED defines *éclat* as "social distinction or conspicuous success" or "brilliant *display* or effect."

⁴⁷ Wallace uses similar language when writing about the medical attaché and the Entertainment. In a play on words, commenting as we can guess, on the manner in which spectators turn into spectacles, Wallace writes that those who watched the Entertainment -- their "'lives' [...] collapsed to such a *narrow focus*" (*IJ* 549, italics added).

"Halorama," but more importantly, also "Halation," which is defined in the novel, as "a halo-shaped exposure-pattern around light⁴⁸ sources seen *on chemical film* at low speed" (*IJ* 97, italics added).⁴⁹ Hal is, in these terms, total representation. It is not so much that behind the reality of Hal is the portrait of Hal, it is more so that behind the portrait of Hal are "analog waves and ion streams and rear-screen chemical reactions" (*SFT* 24) that *project* the portrait of Hal. E.T.A., as a figurative TV, becomes like MGE, a hallway of, not necessarily mirrors, but similarly, repetitive representations, as Hal is defined two-dimensionally. Now, we have already explored how such an "image-conscious" (*IJ* 147) culture works to isolate characters by their nurturing of a vain self-consciousness (as a result of wondering "how you looked" (*IJ* 147)), but they also create in characters -- in a closed loop and complimentary kind of way -- a "secret hunger for hype" that is as equally painful as "videophonic stress" (*IJ* 146).⁵⁰ Like Hal, Hal's E.T.A. schoolmate, LaMont Chu, is described artificially, which again, not only proves E.T.A.'s mediagenic framework, but the descriptors in this case, mimic the "hagiography of image" (*IJ* 388) LaMont Chu so terribly craves. As he approaches Lyle in the locker-room, he is described as "*glabrous and high-gloss*"⁵¹ in a white towel and wristwatch" (*IJ* 388, italics added), but what has LaMont Chu come to Lyle to discuss? He wants to discuss his insecure desire for hype in (high gloss) magazines. Chu confesses "to an increasingly

⁴⁸ See *Infinite Jest* p. 876 where Hal, in the first person says, "I looked sketchy and faint to myself, tentative, and ghostly against all that blazing white." The description is not unlike someone standing between a projector and a screen.

⁴⁹ OED defines "Halation" as "the spreading of light beyond its proper boundaries to form a fog around the edges of a bright image in a *photograph* or on a television *screen*."

⁵⁰ Which is to say, via the machinations of spectatorship, characters are encouraged to desire the very things that upset them.

⁵¹ One of the perceived benefits of reaching "The Show" is that one can finally get their "action photos in glossy print-mags" (*IJ* 111).

crippling obsession with tennis fame [...] to have his picture in shiny magazines," and so pitifully that

sometimes he'll pretend a glowing up-at-net action shot he's clipping out of a shiny magazine is of him, LaMont Chu. But then he finds he can't eat or sleep or sometimes even pee, so horribly does he envy the adults in the Show who get to have up-at-net action shots of themselves in magazines. (IJ 388)

This is to say that in the hyper-mediate arena of E.T.A. and of "the Show," and in accordance with the nature of spectative structures and the "ontology of appearance" (SFT 63) which they reinforce, LaMont Chu not only loses some part of his own authentic self -- "he'll *pretend* a glowing [...]" -- but he begins to resemble, via Wallace's narrative description, the high-gloss "photographs in magazines" (IJ 388, italics added) in which he wishes to see himself. The spectator, once again, becomes the spectacle and it is Wallace's specific descriptors, which make the evolution evident.

Ekphratic Descriptions

Narrative descriptors and the more obviously named, figurative televisual worlds which they suggest are not however relegated to the campus of E.T.A. In signaling the same sort of televisual subjugation suffered by the employees of MGE or *Infinite Jest's* tennis players, Wallace uses language elsewhere to describe character's lives, as Sayers points out, "in the same way that a spectator watches a film" (360). Wallace uses, in other words, ekphratic-like descriptions, such that, characters' experiences become indistinguishable from the actions of film or the movements of a camera, a technique which not only implies the existence of some "televisual aura" (SFT 76), but also, and more importantly, affirms characters' "residency *inside* that aura" (SFT 81, italics added). Joelle van Dyne's life for instance, as she prepares to "self-cancel" (IJ 222) at Molly

Notkin's party is chronicled like a movie and her point of view is described as though it were fitted with a filter or lens. She is not under the pressure of any obvious "Show" like Hal or LaMont Chu, but the filmic figurations of her attempted suicide provide a microcosmic example of what it means to be on both sides of the televisual frame, where on the one hand, having "crept inside television's boundaries" (*SFT* 32) she *watches* her own life unfold on a screen, while on the other, her eyes become seemingly convex and the camera and the "television, even the mundane little business of its production, [become] [her] -- own interior" (*SFT* 32).

Wallace opens the scene with Joelle seated in "chairs molded in the likeness of great filmmakers from the celluloid canon" (*IJ* 219), where she is supported by "Melies's fiberglass lap" "between empty Cukor and frightening Murnau" (*IJ* 219). Sitting in the "director's lap" as it were, Wallace writes that "Joelle van Dyne is excruciatingly alive and *encaged*" (*IJ* 222, italics added). In using three essential film makers of the early twentieth century and sandwiching Joelle intentionally between them, Wallace prepares the reader for the sense of *envelopment* and/or the televisual prison Joelle will soon find herself in. This idea of the TV absorbing Joelle is initially buttressed by Wallace's clarification that "the lurid chairs' directors are larger than life" and because of this, "Joelle's feet dangle well off the floor [...] legs swinging like a child's, always feeling like a child in Molly's chairs" (*IJ* 219-20). By highlighting the size and disproportionality between Joelle and these three *giant* film makers and the way they "carry" her, Wallace recalls the way Joelle is, specifically, in and entangled by Incandenza's "Entertainment," but also how she is herself, more generally, supported and later *engulfed* by the forces of film which surround her. Additionally, by connecting Joelle with the swinging legs of a

child, Wallace reaffirms his and Barthes' association between children and the "fantasy world of TV" (Lipsky 149). All signs, in other words: the chairs in the mold of film-directors, their relative size, Joelle's sitting *on* Melies, and the reference to children -- all point to Joelle's assimilation into some screen-type, spectative space. Naturally, as if her actions were orchestrated by a film maker and later watched through the lens of a camera, Wallace writes that Joelle is thereafter "other-directed" (*IJ* 220/21, italics added) and "obliquely *looked* at" (*IJ* 220), and then, while

listening to bits of conversation she *reels*⁵² in out of the overall voices' noise but seeing no one really else, the absolute end of her life and beauty running in a kind of stuttered old *hand-held 16mm* before her eyes, *projected* against the white *screen* on her side. (*IJ* 220-21, italics added)

In this example, is Joelle being filmed literally or is this a figurative memory? Either way, her life is presented as though it were a movie, which, as Sayers argues, "strongly associate[s]" the passage with "ekphrasis"⁵³ (Sayers 360). This is to say, Wallace uses allusive words like "reels," "16mm" and "projected," with their inferences to film, to "frame the following two pages as an entertainment" (Sayers 360), which, in practical terms, essentially means that Joelle *is* the entertainment. Ekphrasistically, Wallace *verbally* represents the *visual* representation of her life (Sayers 352). As such, Joelle's life is/becomes *watchable*, which puts her, like the others, "inside the set" (*SFT* 74). Adding to this, Wallace calls Joelle's suicide an act of "enormous conceit and self-involvement" (*IJ* 220).⁵⁴ The fact that Joelle's narcissism closely parallels the

⁵² This term *reels* and its use in queuing to the reader that characters are inhabiting some televisual sphere is also used in "Little Expressionless Animals" between Julie and Faye when they discuss the latter's justifications for becoming a lesbian, e.g., Faye "*reels* into lesbianism, from the pain" (*GCH* 33).

⁵³ In defining 'ekphrasis,' Sayers says, "the primary sense of the term might best be expressed by James Heffernan's definition: 'verbal representation of a visual representation'" (Sayers 352).

⁵⁴ Also, repeated just two pages later on p. 222 -- Joelle will *perform* "what will be that most self-involved of acts."

aforementioned narcissism of children looking in mirrors and of viewers looking at the TV means that Wallace implicitly illustrates some important connection between the dynamics of entertainment and solipsism. The words "parallel" and "connection," however, might be, in this example, too understated. Joelle, after all, *watches* the *projection* of "the absolute end of her life and beauty running [...] before her [own] eyes" (IJ 221). If her suicide is figured then, as a *performative* act, which Wallace's word choice suggests, then Joelle is simultaneously, both a cast member *and* an audience member, and as a result, the narcissism of her suicide is the narcissism of the spectator/spectator-turned-spectacle; these two forms of conceit are not parallel but are in fact, one in the same thing, or rather, two different sides of the same frame, what Wallace calls, "two, one upside-down in a convex lens" (IJ 220).

If we recall Wallace's belief in the two-way "permeability" of "mass-entertainment screens" (SFT 50), Joelle playing both sides of the frame, as both a cast and audience member, is not surprising. These examples however, still only answer one part of the two-part question of how Wallace illustrates televisual assimilation. As discussed, Joelle has certainly "crept inside television's boundaries" (SFT 32), but how has the TV become her "own interior" (SFT 32)? When Joelle is sitting in Melie's lap feeling "excruciatingly alive and encaged" (IJ 222), the cage is, superficially, meant to mean Joelle's depressive/suicidal circumstance, a sort of "cage of the self" (IJ 777) or in the context of AA and her addiction, the "Disease's cage" (IJ 355). She feels like she has nowhere to go. However, in the context of media and entertainment, Wallace uses the "cage" as a stand-in for the TV (or at least something televisual) to illustrate the tyranny of being watched. Like the mirrors of MGE, as Joelle prepares to kill herself, Wallace

emphasizes her reflection shining "in all four *mirrors* of her little room's walls" (*IJ* 223, italics added). That Joelle, in such reflections, is described as a "yarn-haired [...] grotesque *clown*" (*IJ* 223, italics added) confirms that "this cage" is, like E.T.A., a "show," what Wallace explicitly names later, as an "*unfree* show" (*IJ* 223, italics added); "unfree" meaning of course, that there is some price to be paid for becoming a spectacle. All of this is to say that the cage is a confining *exterior* for Joelle and for others, but it also, accordingly, becomes something of an *interior*, changing the way Wallace's characters see the external world. Wallace writes that "what looks like the cage's exit is actually the bars of the cage [...] the entrance says *EXIT*. There isn't an exit. The ultimate annular fusion: that of exhibit and its cage [...] it is the cage that has entered *her*, somehow" (*IJ* 222). In this way, Joelle herself becomes a camera lens and her transformation into a kind *image* -- her own absorption of "the cage" -- has consequences for how she then views the environment around her. The spectator turned spectacle in other words -- in this case, Joelle -- begins to see the world *televisually*. As Wallace aligns the reader's visual perspective with hers, Joelle is, as before, "other-directed" (*IJ* 221, italics added), but this time, she is not an actress, but rather some "perceptual engine" (*IJ* 221). Once again invoking children, Wallace writes that Joelle's "wet veil blurs things like Jim had designed his neonatal lens to blur things in imitation of a neonatal retina, everything recognizable and yet without outline. A blur that's more deforming than fuzzy" (*IJ* 222). As such, when Joelle walks the town, she watches the "murky-colored people" and "everything [is] milky and halated⁵⁵ through her veil's damp linen" (*IJ* 221). As Sayers points out, "Joelle's eyes are figured as the lens of a camera,

⁵⁵ Recall Hal's nickname, "Halation." Also, importantly, the Entertainment is said to have had a "milky blur" (*IJ* 939) and was also filmed with a "milky filter" (*IJ* 851).

her veil a filter over it," which, as he later argues, "serves the function of protecting her from being seen -- like the camera, her vision is one way only" (Sayers 361). As Joelle interiorizes the television then and the "business of its production" (*SFT* 32) -- i.e., the filming of a camera -- things become for her, 2-D; on the street she passes Les Assassins' M. Fortier, but he seems, as is expected, only the "*figure* [of] a man in a wheelchair" (*IJ* 224, italics added). His face, to Joelle is "*artistically* reddened with some terrible joy" and he does not seem like a "live" person, but more so a "humanoid figure of something that's [no] better than *cardboard*" (*IJ* 224, italics added).

Chapter IV.

Consequences of Assimilation

Once Wallace's characters are absorbed, either literally or figuratively, by the televisual world(s) in which they find themselves, they are portrayed by Wallace as correspondingly diminished. As the body and the self become objects of spectation or when they are otherwise *viewed* by something like the mechanical and camera-like lens of Joelle's retinas and thus exploited by the spectative aesthetics to which they have been conditioned, the physicality of Wallace's characters is reduced in such a way that it mimics media's flattened dimensionality. The soma is in some sense, severed, or like M. Fortier, the figure becomes inanimate and flattened into something like cardboard. The body and the self either become impressionistic, or like Joelle, what was or is human, is replaced by something like a machine. Considering of course, the relational capacity of both machines and two-dimensional, inanimate figures, this degeneration of the body and the self has negative consequences for Wallace's characters and their ability to form relationships with one another.

The Self and the Body

Inanimate and 2-D

In referring to *Infinite Jest* and the novel's "Entertainment," Wilson Kaiser says that Wallace's sense of television "expresses the totalized amniotic world" and that it

subsequently requires "an involved approach, a commitment to experiential *embeddedness*" (57, italics added). He refers to Wallace's point that TV is like a "womb with a view" (*GCH* 317) and while these prenatal allusions express the sense of televisual envelopment that pervades Wallace's fiction, they still imply life and birth, even renewal. Inside paradigms of spectation however, Wallace's characters are, like photos, inanimate and lifeless. Like Hal, who "shift[s] from [...] [being] a human specimen [...] to something 'like an animal'" (Kaiser 57), Fogle too, assumes a "spineless" (*TPK* 223) "pose of passive reception"⁵⁶ (*SFT* 41), where "experience [...] travels through neural and physiological networks that are *no longer human*" (Kaiser 58, italics added). Wallace writes that Fogle sits in front of the TV like a pile of clothes, "all slumped" and "slouched way down" (*TPK* 221), "like something without bones" (*TPK* 223) in a "slumped [and] boneless way" (*TPK* 225). Fogle is, in this manner, disemboweled when he is under the power of, what Wallace calls, the "hypnotic show" (*TPK* 223). As the structure of Fogle's body collapses into the empty skin of some malleable costume, he exhibits, under the influence of the television, a kind of half-life. We might say that he is, in this case, *deflated* and while other characters are not "strip[ped] [...] of their humanity" (Kaiser 57) in quite the same way, they are in a similar fashion, reduced to two-dimensional images, something wholly imitative and impressionistic. When Dee, for example, is despondently sitting in front of the television the night she is supposedly alone at MGE, she is both watching and being watched. As expected, Wallace puts several layers of televisual frames to work, each one removed from the other. Like Fogle staring at himself being stared at through the lens of a telescope (on the TV), the optical cavity

⁵⁶ A "passive" "pose," recalls our earlier point regarding Barthes' sense of posture and immobility.

resembles the look of a mirror, reflected in another mirror. Julie, in this scene, "looks through the remote viewer" and says, "it's mean to *watch* her like this" (*GCH* 9, italics added). After, Faye replies with a smile as she herself, "*watches* the viewer" (*GCH* 9, italics added). Wallace is careful to emphasize the screen of the viewer, who is *in* it and the voyeuristic qualities of those watching what is *framed*. As such, Dee is, as has been argued, not only absorbed, and framed by the TV screen/viewer, but she becomes because of Faye's spectative gaze, a two-dimensional, later-day version of the cartoon Faye watched as a child. Dee becomes an impression, a caricature. She is no longer seen as a live person, but is instead, something hollow and compressed. Dee's body loses most its form and she becomes, in the same way as M. Fortier, flat like cardboard and like 'halated' Hal, she is now, to Julie and Faye, nothing more than "EM-propelled analog waves and ion streams and rear screen chemical reactions throwing off phosphenes in grids and dots (*SFT* 24). As Adam Miller argues, her "body gets gradually reduced to a head and the head gets gradually reduced to a pair of eyes" (31) until there is essentially nothing left, and as Depci comments, insofar as "visual images [are] treated like real human beings," real human beings are then "seen like visual objects [and] Dee herself becomes a visual object [...] as Julie and Faye [watch] her through the remote viewer" (329). There is, in other words, an inverse correlation between Wallace's characters personifying the TV and their own transformation into a TV-like impression.

Impressionistic

The way Wallace illustrates his characters' experience and their subsequent, dimensional reduction when being watched, not only elicits questions regarding the larger implications of "watchableness" (*SFT* 26) and what it means to prepare a "special

watchable self" (*SFT* 23) -- what Miller calls, a "self that is suited to the glass" (33) -- but it brings to mind Wallace's own life and how he was concerned with the "imaging effects" (Moran 62) of spectation as he became an increasingly popular literary celebrity. Mike Miley quotes Stuart Ewan who says that many popular figures like Wallace "become uncomfortable in their own skins as they, in the *eyes of others* ["Audience"], become *frozen images*; as their face and bodies and mannerisms become icons; always the personage, never the person" (Ewan 101, italics added). Wallace's most popular "beholden [...] and mediated image" (Miley 193) is of course the familiar "iconic bandana photo" (Miley 205), which graces the back cover of most of his books, one that Miley argues is "crucial to Wallace's persona in more ways than just publicity" (Miley 205). Wallace, in other words, struggles in real life with the same televisual principles found in his fiction. He struggles with the economics of representation, the intrinsic "anti-individualizing effects of the literary marketplace," and how both take "away agency from the author" (Moran 61). Like Fogle, LaMont Chu or Dee, Wallace wrestles with life under the lens and how it "involves [the] forfeiture of all authority to *image*" (Miley 198, italics added). Perhaps this is why Julie adopts a "sort of disguise" (*GCH* 29-32) as she walks with Faye in L.A.? In the same way Wallace uses clothing, particularly his bandana, in order to *appear* ordinary, Julie too, uses clothing to shape her own public persona. Under the dehumanizing spotlight of the *Jeopardy!* show and in order to retain some personal agency, she must, like Wallace, try to "cultivate normality" (Lipsky 67),⁵⁷ and in the "banal" (Burn 39) suburbs of California, what is more stereotypically "normal"

⁵⁷ Lipsky, to his credit, points out the futility in trying to replace one public image with another, especially one as elusive as "normality." Lipsky says, "Normality can't be cultivated, in the same way, as David points out in his books, that you can't try to be sincere. You either are sincere or not: It needs to be affectless" (Lipsky 67).

than the uniform of an unassuming, beach-going, white American male? Not too much, which is why Wallace gives her "a mustache and a hat, Bermuda shorts, a Hawaiian shirt and a Nikon" (*GCH* 32). Julie, like Wallace, tries to fashion something other than the "People cover" (*GCH* 29) image of herself that has been thrust onto her by fame and stardom. All of this is to say that both Wallace and Wallace's characters feel the weight and diminishing force of being caught inside the "framed glass" (*SFT* 23). Characters, become like Fogle, an inanimate sack of empty air, or like Dee and M. Fortier, something two-dimensional, or like Wallace and Julie, they become impressionistic, something crafted and cultivated, but ultimately confused.

Fragmented Machine

This diminishing of the body and of the self however, also has, as is evident with Joelle and her camera-lens eyes, a *mechanical* quality to it, in which characters begin to mimic or embody the destabilizing technology of entertainment under which they find themselves constantly inundated. Ana Chapman argues that Wallace animates in the body, the "(ab)use of contemporary technology and entertainment" and as such, his sense of the "corporeal becomes an entity of *disconnected* parts" (96, italics added). The body under televisual spectation is, in other words, experienced as both highly fragmented and if not bionic, then something non-physical. The internal-self or the body in this case, manifests the mechanical quality of the external world-turned-TV-set. This is why when DeLint discusses the paradigm of sports and entertainment with Steeply, saying of the "The Show" (*IJ* 661), "it's the machine they're all dying to throw themselves into" (*IJ* 66), he adds elsewhere that those who "win their way to the top and stay there [...] seem to be just grim machines" (*IJ* 438). Like liquid taking the form of the container into which it is

poured, the E.T.A. tennis players take the form of the exploitive system from which they will/do procure their fame. This is to say that when characters are assimilated into Wallace's "technologically constituted space[s]" (IJ 232) -- when they are inside "the set" -- they are not only split, somatically, like the different components of say, a robot, but they are, as a result, technologically inscribed. Technologically inscribed means that Wallace's spectators are reconfigured *by* the external domains of entertainment which they inhabit, *into* objective, mediagenic products. While not the perfect example, if we think of this in terms of Shelley's infamous Frankenstein, it is not necessarily because he is an assemblage of body parts and subhuman that he then becomes an object of entertainment. It is instead, in the world of Wallace, vice versa. Frankenstein is a spectacle and is *therefore* disconnected, and resembles, like John Wayne, who is "aimed like a fucking missile at the Show" (IJ 662), something "less alive than undead" (IJ 263).

Like a computer or software program, the body as an object of entertainment, becomes as Chapman argues, "an *open system* that is exposed to changes from the outer world" (97) wherein Wallace's characters -- specifically, their physical bodies -- begin to parallel the "non-linear, chaotic" (Chapman 97), "*mechanistic* materialism (Burn 45, italics added) of, what Steinhilber calls, "digitization and (bio) capitalism" (105). Media technology, in other words, unsettles the "basis of the natural body" (Chapman 97). Wallace illustrates this through an overt focus, not on corporeal totality, but instead on the body's separate parts. In the very first sentence of *Infinite Jest* Hal notices he is "surrounded by heads and bodies." As the head is separated *from* the body, Hal's vision of the corporeal is neither coherent, nor cohesive as he continues to assert to the "administrative heads" (IJ 8), "I'm not a machine" (IJ 12). Chapman argues that from the

very beginning of the novel there is a "clear intentionality on Wallace's part [...] for readers to become aware of this dismembering process of the body" (98) in the face of entertainment's exploitative agenda. While we cannot yet, as readers, connect the dots between Hal, E.T.A., its tennis players, and the pressures of "the Show" (*IJ* 661), and do not yet know what (or why) the body's integrity is being challenged, we can in fact, recognize that Wallace opens his most important work, focusing on physical fragmentation. During his interview, Hal *watches "faces [...]* resolve into place above summer-weight sportcoats" (*IJ* 3, italics added). The "faces" here act like independent parts. They act as if they are separate and autonomous from the body, the whole of which is represented as a sort of "assemblage [...] a [piece of] machinery with different sections of independent movement and action results" (Chapman 98). Paying attention again to windows and frames and the fact that Wallace sees in them some analogy to television, we can infer, through several examples, that this physical fragmentation is the result of television's mechanistic objectification of the body. In thinking of Hal and the novel's opening sentence, Kate Gombert later in the novel, outside Ennet House,⁵⁸

looks at the images of passersby in the darkened shop windows [and] they become (pedestrians and undead stem-artists) *just heads* that seem to float across each window unconnected to anything. As in *disconnected floating heads*. In doorways by shops are incomplete persons in wheelchairs with creative receptacles where limbs should be. (*IJ* 699, italics added)

While we can make this same point by connecting Hal's vision of the physical to his own involvement with "the Show" (*IJ* 662), in the case of Gombert, Wallace's use of both windows and doorways to frame the "incomplete" body, indicates, in a much more obvious manner, the way Wallace deliberately links entertainment with some idea of

⁵⁸ which, not coincidentally, neighbors E.T.A

somatic severance. Wallace of course, takes this connection between the soma and spectation to gross proportions in his writing of James Incandenza's film, "Cage-III -- Free Show," which is essentially a film of a carnival sideshow where

spectators watch performers undergo unspeakable degradations so grotesquely compelling that the spectators' eyes become larger and larger until the spectators themselves are transformed into gigantic eyeballs in chairs, while on the other side of the sideshow tent [...] figure[s] [...] invite fairgoers to an exhibition in which, if the fairgoers consent to undergo unspeakable degradations, they can witness ordinary persons gradually turn into gigantic eyeballs. (*IJ* 100)

While this example provocatively implies that spectators submit themselves, advertently, *to* entertainment, it drives home the point that Wallace foregoes an undivided body for a grotesquely fractional one, in which one single and separate part of the whole not only mimics the non-linear, asymmetric, lopsided ideals of televisual aesthetics, but also, that that part of the body then becomes, in its own prominence, a "transmission vehicle for generated entertainment" (Chapman 100).

In arguing that Wallace makes disconnected limbs, each one unto itself,⁵⁹ into "*vehicle[s]* for generated entertainment" (100, italics added) Chapman uncovers the second important part to this equation of Wallace's representation of the body under spectation: the fact that it is both disconnected *and* mechanical. Chapman's use of the word "vehicle" helps because the body not only serves as a metaphorical "vehicle," in the sense that Wallace uses it as a channel⁶⁰ or instrument of entertainment, but a physical motor vehicle, while made up of parts, is also entirely automatic and like Wallace's body, a machine. When Hal protests that he is in fact, "not a machine" (*IJ* 12) as he stands in

⁵⁹ For another good example of one 'Limb' being a source of entertainment, look at Orin Incandenza's "Leg" (*IJ* 66).

⁶⁰ Double entendre, i.e., television "channel."

front of the "administrative heads" (*IJ* 8) and the "eight eyes [...] that stare at" him (*IJ* 12), he later betrays his own assurances, saying his "chest bumps like a *dryer* with shoes in it" (*IJ* 5, italics added). This is because Hal is part of E.T.A, wherein its tennis players -- because they are part of the televisual complex of sports-entertainment -- are encouraged to see their bodies as something hard and impersonal and if not domestic appliances, then something reflecting the media technology with which they are dominated. Appropriately enough, when Hal and his friends are sitting *assimilated*, in the campus' dark, TV-box-like V.R. rooms,⁶¹ they are warned to practice their moves until the

accretive weight of the reps sinks the movements themselves down under your like consciousness [...] through repetition they sink and soak into the hardware, the C.P.S. The machine-language. [...] The machine-language of the muscles. [...] Wait until it soaks into the hardware and then see the way [...] the mechanics are wired in. Hardwired in [...] you might as well be machines. [...] You're just going through the motions [...] Wiring them into the motherboard. (*IJ* 117-18)

In the same way Wallace's public image is used by the literary marketplace for economic purposes, bodies are similarly conceived, within the sphere of E.T.A. and "the Show," as exploitable material objects *in service to* a (albeit different type of) marketplace. This is to say that in becoming products of entertainment the students, as Chapman argues, become "*mechanized* for the recreation of others" (105, italics added). For Wallace, this "recreation" *is* television, or more broadly, the act of *watching* and the "motherboard" (*IJ* 118) is the "maze of external sociological powers, which exist for the pursuit of entertainment and pleasure" (Chapman 105). This means, as we have come to conclude,

⁶¹ These are the same V.R. rooms referenced in earlier examples.

that we can verify the TV-assimilation of Wallace's characters by the way their bodies are not only piecemealed and mechanized, but also by the way they are *controlled*.

Programming & Control

Previously, we looked at Joelle, who in becoming herself a machine -- in her case, a camera -- she became a "perceptual engine" (*IJ* 221). As Wallace writes, "her legs [were] on *autopilot*" (*IJ* 221, italics added). The key inference in the word "autopilot," is not only its reference to mechanization, but also control. An autopilot involves a user and someone to actively manipulate the automatic steering mechanism of said machine. With this in mind, Wallace, in instances already shown, *overtly* describes Hal and the E.T.A. players as machines, while in other examples, rather than using plain words -- e.g., "you might as well be machines" (*IJ* 117) -- Wallace instead treats his characters like robots, who need to be *programmed* with dictates and directives. Hal, for instance, narrates his brother's film "*TENNIS AND THE FERAL PRODIGY*" (*IJ* 172) as though there were in the mix, some Joelle-like autopilot. Hal gives directions to his student tennis players as if he were talking to an operator learning how to work a new device. The film and its narration are structured like a "manual," as though some consumer were trying to put together an appliance or piece of furniture and Hal, there to help, goes from point to point saying, "Here is how [...]," "Here is how [...]" (*IJ* 173-176). Hal's instructions range from fundamental things like, "here is how to sweat" (*IJ* 174) to other directions that again emphasize separate limbs, the lopsided body,⁶² mechanical control,

⁶² *Infinite Jest* pg. 100, Wallace says, "So, most of the E.T.A. upperclassmen have these vivid shoe-and-shirt tans that give them the classic look of *bodies hastily assembled* from *different bodies' parts*, especially when you throw in the heavily muscled legs and usually shallow chests and the *two arms of different sizes*."

and lastly, entertainment's *total ownership* of the physical. Hal starts highlighting the body as though it were an "assembly of monstrous pieces" (Chapman 100), saying,

Here is how to carry a tennis ball around in your stick-hand, squeezing it over and over for long stretches of time [...] until you feel it no more than your heart squeezing blood and your *right forearm is three times the size of your left* and your arm looks from across court like a gorilla's arm or a *stevedore's arm pasted on the body of a child*. (IJ 173, italics added)

As Hal continues, he elaborates how their lopsided and disconnected bodies precipitate their becoming automatic machines -- "Here is how to avoid thinking about any of this by practicing and playing until everything runs on *autopilot* and talent's unconscious exercise becomes a way to escape yourself, a long waking dream of pure play" (IJ 173, italics added). Afterward, he comes to the apogee of media's complete and total envelopment of the body saying, "here is how to get free [...] gear from Dunlop, Inc. as long as you let them spray paint the distinctive Dunlop logo on your [...] shoulder and [...] use a Dunlop gear-bag, and *become a walking lunging sweating advertisement for Dunlop, Inc* (IJ 153).

Relationships

Degraded Interiority

Now, why is the diminishment of the body and self important? Why does it matter that Wallace reduces his characters into "spliced photo[s]," "cardboard persona[s]" (IJ 636) and/or "machines" (IJ 117)? For one thing, as we have said, it *validates* characters' "residency inside [the] aura" of television, but it also externally animates the inward state of, what Wallace sees as, television's post-modern's (il)logic in terms both the self and others. This is to say that as the body becomes a material object used for

spectative purposes, whether this means it is a 2-D abstraction or a machine, it nonetheless *reflects* a degraded interiority. So, yes, the body is *flattened* as it becomes a mere televisual representation (of reality), but this is, in some manner, simply vivifying the way "digit-ization" (Steinhilber 112) turns not only the self into an abstraction -- i.e., a number -- but also how it alienates that self from other selves. Numbers, after all, cannot have nourishing relationships with other numbers. Case in point -- E.T.A.'s students are identified by their "name and a monthly *ranking*" (*IJ* 151, italics added). As the students begin to "identify their selfhood with this ranking," they then "literally form [...] a quantified, numerical self" (Steinhilber 106) wherein they cannot help but see in their "relation to one another" (*IJ* 112) nothing more than a set of impersonal statistics. Wallace himself writes that students, given enough time, "can't help gauging their whole worth by their place in an ordinal ranking" (*IJ* 693) -- "Hey there, how are you?" *Number eight* this week, *is how I am*" (*IJ* 693, italics added). The important point in this is that *because* of this sort of objectification, E.T.A. students are not, as Schitt says, "training for citizenship" (*IJ* 82), but are training instead for the "happy pleasure of the person alone" (*IJ* 83). Within Wallace's televisual spheres then, the disconnected and mechanized body mirrors the disconnected and mechanized self and in terms of machines forming connections with other machines, we can see how such spheres make relationships hard, if not impossible to have outside say, some poor algorithmic association.

Pseudo-Relationships

The subverting effects then of being stuck "inside the set" (*SFT* 74) and of *being an image*, is that it hinders self-awareness and interpersonal communication. Outside of

E.T.A. or *Infinite Jest*, characters like Julie, Faye, Dee and Fogle all fail to communicate in direct and immediate ways, or they instead dissolve into relating to the TV as if it were something authentic or human. Wallace says that "to the extent one begins to view *pseudo-relationships* with Bud Bundy or Jane Pauley as acceptable alternatives to relationships with *real people*, one will have [...] less conscious incentive even to try to connect with real 3-D persons" (*SFT* 38, italics added). Aside from the isolation inherent in *not* connecting with others, a point we have already discussed, we see these "pseudo-relationships," what McCaffery calls "relationships with *illusions* [and] *simulations* of real people (Burn 21, italics added) most noticeably with Dee and Fogle. Fogle, for example, while "uninvolved even in the surface reality of watching Victor deny his paternity to Jeanette" (*TPK* 225), still fosters intimate assumptions about their fictional lives. He relates to Victor's own psyche, saying, "in some sense [he may] have actually 'believed' his own denials," after which he compares Victor, an imaginary character, to his own judgements of other people in the outside world -- "he seemed like *that* kind of person" (*TPK* 225). There is, in other words, a relational grasping, a wanting of connection between Fogle's real self and the selves of Victor and Jeanette, which is clear not only in these conflating judgements of his, but also in how he confuses Victor and Jeanette's scripted, dramatic, show-to-show timeline with his own actual, day-to-day, academic one. Fogle comments on how "Jeanette's son has the same [...] blood disorder that's kept putting Victor in the hospital throughout much of the *semester*" (*TPK* 225, italics added). While Fogle creates this "facsimile of a relationship" (Burn 32) with the characters of *As the World Turns*, Dee connects directly with the TV as though it were itself its own kind of personality. She is alone, which implies the television has become

that "acceptable alternative [...] to 3-D persons" (*SFT* 38), but she also responds to it in such a literal and down-to-earth way -- "Where else would I be? "So did I," and "Safe to say not" (*GCH* 9) -- that there is, as Depci claims, "this perception of the television as a real person" (329). If her replies were sarcastic or humorously self-deprecating, rather than serious, we might give Dee the benefit of the doubt and assume some awareness on her part, but she is instead "sucked" into a world not her own, and found talking to someone who is, after all, just a "piece of furniture" (*SFT* 38). Put plainly, Wallace says it best in his review of Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky biography saying, "to make someone an icon is to make him an abstraction, and *abstractions are incapable of vital communication with living people*" (*CTL* 261, italics added). "Living" is the key term. In the same way the E.T.A. students become numbers, Fogle and Dee become abstractions and are consequently, trying to connect with other abstractions. The fact that Dee even replies to things as commercial and impersonal as the TV's advertisements -- "No, I am not hungry for a [...] Whopper" (*GCH* 9) -- means that her "whole psychology" and her "relation to [her]self, [her] loved ones, and a world or real people and real gazes" (*SFT* 53) are not only affected, but in some way, deeply askew.

Mediated Communication

While interpersonal connection disintegrates *relationally* as the TV and its characters supplant real human beings, it also breaks down *communicatively* as information is passed between Wallace's characters either laterally or second-hand, and

talk is, like the television, mediated⁶³ by walls of glass. For example, in "Little Expressionless Animals," insults are given via reflections. Faye gives Janet "the finger in the *window*," saying, "one of those for every animal question" (*GCH 7*, italics added). Janet then replies to Faye's back, and while their communication is explicit, it is mediated and indirect. In other less indignant examples and despite being lovers, Julie and Faye abstain eye contact. They talk to each other's side profiles as though they were etched graphics, storyboard cutouts, or as we have mentioned, flat as cardboard. When Julie and Faye are at the beach, Faye talks to "the *side* of Julie Smith's face" (*GCH 12*, italics added) and when the two are talking outside, past the "Pepto-Bismol" (*GCH 32*) house, Faye again "looks at the curved side of Julie's face" (*GCH 34*). If eye-contact is a sign of love or more importantly, trust, then there is here, an obvious disconnect -- "Faye looks for Julie's eyes in the *mirror*" (*GCH 41*) but cannot find them. Considering physical touch is even more intimate and one of the clearest signs of human connection, it is unfortunate that when Faye "cries, at the glass wall," Julie does not reach out to lay her hands on her; she instead "lays them flat on the clean glass" (*GCH 39*). The glass -- i.e., the TV -- in its most obstructive role, becomes the recipient of Julie's consoling gesture. It replaces Faye.

Antidote of Community

This obstruction and lack of direct connection is, in overt ways, paralleled between author and reader, or text and reader, as Wallace tries in his writing, "to prohibit

⁶³ I appreciate how Mathew Lombard interprets the term "mediated." He says, "Although in one sense all of our experiences are mediated by our intrapersonal sensory and perceptual systems, *nonmediated* here is defined as experienced without human-made technology" (94).

[her] from forgetting that she's receiving heavily mediated data" (Burn 34). Wallace's jump cut style, his narrative arrangements, interjecting headlines and other "distortions of linearity" not only resemble TV's sense of neural bombardment, its "own pace and phosphonic flutter" (Burn 34), but it mimics our current experience of the internet age as we leapfrog haphazardly and mindlessly from one link and/or post to the next. So, in mediated texts about characters struggling with TV's absorption and the consequences of that absorption on their ability to communicate, are there any examples of interpersonal connection? If there is, Wallace seems to think community and our regard for others is one solution. In the same way Wallace's readers must "fight through the mediated voice" (Burn 33) in order to conceptualize, make sense of and relate to his stories, so too, must Wallace's characters carve out clear spaces for themselves, in order to express -- outside of TV's domain and in small, finite moments -- love for each other. An example of this is between Julie and Faye in "Little Expressionless Animals." It is the narrative's one, lucid verbal admission of love, which is itself sandwiched between two televisual motifs. Julie and Faye are at the beach commenting on insects and "the *antennae* [that] never stop waving around" (*GCH* 12, italics added), antennae which are especially reminiscent of old analogue TV's or Fogle's "wire coat hanger" (*TPK* 223). Then, abruptly, and out of context, Faye says, "I love you, Julie," and Julie replies, "I love you too, Faye" (*GCH* 12). This expression is not presaged, nor does it relate to the women's previous discussion, but it is deliberate. It emerges suddenly out of the "electric signal" (*SFT* 51) of televisual imagery that precedes it -- and it is truly, sincerely and explicitly articulated -- before it is, in a flash, subsumed again by the televisual notions of the "small *antennaeless* bug" that skates "across the *glassy* surface of a tidal pool" (*GCH* 12, italics added). Whereas

with MGE's windows, the TV flickered and became clear, here it is the opposite; the TV shorts out for a moment, and Wallace throws out a small flare of expression that illuminates, if only for a short time, this episode of genuine connection, of Faye's direct profession and Julie's direct response. Elsewhere, Julie and Faye try to explain their lesbianism and their mutual attraction towards each other. Aytemis Depci says that they not only create "impressive scenarios of traumatic events" to impress an "imaginary audience," but that their fictional vignettes also "mimic the way in which TV represents [and oversimplifies] complex realities" (332). This is correct, but their communication also becomes more personal and self-revealing as these vignettes progress. Julie and Faye expose more about themselves and their personal traumatic wounds as they move from discussing situations in which they cinematically "*reel* into lesbianism" (*GCH* 33-35) to discussing more painful moments in their own past; Faye discusses her mother and Julie tells of her own abandonment. There is a move *towards* humanity and three-dimensionality, not *away* from it, and as cinematic as their conversation may seem, some genuine experience takes hold and engenders intimacy as they "real *into* [the] confusion" (*GCH* 38, italics added) of their own history and out of their theatrical and hypothetical personas. Kasia Boddy sees it as a kind of redirection. Julie and Faye turn from addressing Depci's "imaginary audience" (332) to addressing one another. Boddy says, "one story prompts another and eventually the tellers become less and less concerned about what to 'give' other people and more focused on each other. Their exchange of stories is presented as a form of love-making" (36). This "love-making" is important because it is not mediated, nor is it a representation; it is instead a clear portrayal of *real*, human contact, even if it must first materialize out of oversimplified, speculative,

televisual narratives. We know it is real because that is the nature of exposure. Opening one's past to another and being vulnerable depends on two people's sense of trust and direct connection, on there being no intermediary or obstructing agent -- no glass -- between them.

Chapter V.

Conclusion

David Foster Wallace uses television and all its representative forms: the movie theatre, windows, mirrors, screens, frames, walls of glass, and sports entertainment, in order to demonstrate how the medium not only becomes our world -- both exteriorly and interiorly -- but how it also degenerates both our physical and non-physical selves and our connection with others. Again, Wallace's argument unfurls in a somewhat orderly manner. In illustrating TV's assimilating process, Wallace brings to bear, the dimensional and environmental aspects of watching television, and how things like the "shrouding" of the theatre's darkness, the TV's ability to establish, through proximity presence, and its ability to cultivate isolation and loneliness in its viewers are all important parts of the process whereby people find themselves *inside* the TV. Once absorbed, Wallace's characters are then correspondingly reduced to abstractions: to boneless lumps of cloth, flatten images, storyboard cardboard cutouts, imitative personalities, or machines, each of which have significant effects on the body, the self and relationships. Characters find their two-dimensional selves trying to connect with other two-dimensional selves or they compare their only metric of value, i.e., their "ranking" with another's. They also struggle to communicate in direct and unmediated ways. Wallace however, seems to think there is a solution, as moments of clear expression rise out of TV's static and there are hints of connection -- of "love-making" (Boddy 36) -- that develop out of cinematic conjecture. One thinks of Julie's

straightedge, her imagination and her making "worlds out of lines" (*GCH* 10) and the acute angles that preface each of "Little Expressionless Animals[']" several sections. I agree with Severs when he says that they follow the method of "linear regression" until the final drawing, which suddenly "violate[s] [those] 'rules' of linearity to form a triangle" (158). The triangle is subtle and easily missed, but it is in its three adjoining lines that we find some representative "gesture towards connection and even three-dimensionality" (Severs 158). It is a carved-out⁶⁴ room where, as Ashbery says, "something like living occurs" (73).

⁶⁴ Look at Wallace's use of the word "carved" in *Infinite Jest* p. 662. Complimentary to the earlier example with Julie and Faye, who both "carve" out a space for themselves between televisual motifs. DeLint argues with Steeply about exposing the tennis players to media scrutiny. DeLint says to him, "you're coming into a little slice of space and/or time that's been *carved* out to protect talented kids from exactly the kind of activities [media profile] you guys come in here to do.

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