

Life Inside the Spectacle:

David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, and Storytelling in the Age of Entertainment

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By

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Introduction

In 1996, David Foster Wallace released *Infinite Jest*, a 1,079 page, 388-footnote monster of a novel in which Canadian terrorists fight to gain control of a form of entertainment so pleasurable it traps the viewer in an unbreakable loop of repeated watching, literally amusing the victim to death. Wallace set the story in an American system that has annexed its northern states onto Canada in order to dump its garbage there, a political move so expensive that the government has to license the year to the highest bidder. In the midst of this entertainment-obsessed, hyper-commercialized post-America, the residents of a Boston tennis academy and a nearby halfway house struggle with family histories and addictive behaviors, trying to cope with overwhelming feelings of isolation and an inability to connect with loved ones, even as government agents and foreign spies try to locate a master copy of the tape for mass distribution.

Ten years later, George Saunders published *In Persuasion Nation*, a swift collection of quickly-paced short stories organized into four sections. Saunders arranges the stories topically around different challenges facing American society in the decade following the World Trade Center attacks of 2001, a time when political and religious fervor combined with an entertainment-based advertising complex to form overly simplistic responses to complex international situations. Saunders's short stories describe a series of alternative Americas in which either a particular trend, such as preference-based advertising, or a given cultural trope, like the television commercial vignette, becomes the central characteristic of the story's world. Within these worlds full of animatronic masks that make babies more fun to watch and television shows in which participants trick their friends into eating their own mothers, Saunders places conscientious objectors, characters who feel strong emotional connections to people around them

and must make a choice about the empathy that disrupts both their internal lives and the lives of their neighbors.

These two works both depict alternate-universe versions of the United States of America in which crass commercialism and spectacle hold significant economic and social standing at the highest levels of power. They describe dark futures defined by an overwhelming passion for the trivial and a prioritizing of the advertisement. They fix their characters' stories in fictional worlds dominated by a consumer culture that makes entertainment and advertising its highest priorities. Wallace's external plot hinges on the fear that the offer of a knowingly-fatal entertainment might kill thousands in the America he describes, even if consumption of it were voluntary. Saunders's stories feature social structures in which the viewer's pleasure and the propagation of the advertisement outweigh human emotion and health. Both works connect the struggle to connect with others and value human life properly to the overwhelming centrality of the act of consumption, and especially consumption of entertainment, in late twentieth and early twenty-first century America.

I want to argue that *Infinite Jest* and *In Persuasion Nation* represent two attempts at a particular kind of literary intervention¹ for a particular time in American history. Both of these works take on perceived problems with human relationships in the time of their writing: *Infinite Jest* challenges the isolation Wallace believed many Americans struggled with, whether because of the increased perception of life through a television screen or because of the ironic self-

¹ All fiction intervenes in its surroundings in some way. I am thinking specifically of works that attempt "intervention," that try to interrupt or redirect a cultural instinct or habit in a time when such instincts or habits go unnoticed or unchallenged.

Interventionist fiction can sometimes cross the line into propaganda, but when successful, these stories manage to work toward the prophetic role: they reveal the blind spots of the present in the ways direct address often fails to, even if in the process they raise as many questions as they answer.

distancing that he saw defining the fiction of his time. *In Persuasion Nation* confronts the potential for dehumanization in post-9/11 America, a time Saunders feared was defined by a lack of empathy and an inability to form a nuanced perception of the other. Both works connect those problems to a consumerist entertainment culture, a centralizing of the visual advertisement and the consumption of entertainment.

The main claim here is not simply that Wallace and Saunders identify problems with consumer culture through their fiction, but that they share a similar approach in addressing them. *Infinite Jest* and *In Persuasion Nation* confront the problems of isolation and dehumanization created by entertainment-based consumerism; they do so by depicting satirically exaggerated consumer societies and placing well-developed, sympathetic characters in those settings. Though they use markedly different prose styles and storytelling methods, both authors seek to demonstrate human² desires and needs in increasingly inhuman situations in an attempt to draw emotional and intellectual responses from an increasingly distant and numb audience.

Over the course of four chapters, then, I will explore the ways in which these two works stage their interventions. In the first chapter, I intend to give a framework for the concerns Wallace and Saunders express, based largely in the theoretical writings of Guy DeBord, Frederic Jameson, and Jean Baudrillard. All three theorists discuss the prevalence of spectacle in the late twentieth century, verbalizing a sense that consumption has become the dominant mode of human experience and a belief that society has become ordered around consumption -- and, more specifically, consumable entertainment -- as the basic mode of perception. These ideas connect to concerns Wallace and Saunders state with consumer culture: the former worries over the

² By human here, I primarily mean empathetic in desire and complex in history: these characters have relatable and specific wants and needs as well as past relationships and intricate memories. I also mean that these characters face believable stakes: they fear disappointing loved ones or losing scholarships, and consequences for them feel valid; if a character dies or is injured in one of these stories, that loss feels real. The stories in this sense carry a sense of real emotional risk, which I take as part of what it means to be human.

isolation that such a perspective creates, and the latter warns against the distance from empathy, compassion and generosity that such a perspective reinforces.

The second chapter will focus on Wallace's discussion of the relationship between irony and cynicism in the context of attacks on the society of the spectacle. Wallace claims that self-effacing parody no longer undermines consumerism but instead reinforces its claims of total authority. Wayne C. Booth's definitions of irony as both deeply contextual and capable of many intentions come into play here, as do Baudrillard's and Jameson's meditations on Andy Warhol and pop art. Ultimately, this chapter aims to establish that *In Persuasion Nation* and *Infinite Jest*, while set in somewhat satirical environments, are not intended as ironic statements and should be read as sincere forms of expression, and that such sincerity lies at the heart of responses to consumer culture. This chapter also introduces Wallace's naming of Saunders as a writer capable of doing the kind of storytelling that effectively evokes sincere responses.

The third chapter will focus on *Infinite Jest* as an attempt to reach readers isolated by consumer entertainment, focusing on the ways Wallace works to create a literature that forces the reader into engagement and activity. Wallace wants his readers to struggle and wrestle, to make maps and charts to keep track of all the information he gives. At the same time, Wallace locates an intimate family drama in the center of his collapsing American empire, and while the political events of the age affect them, the tensions at play are more along the lines of traditional relationship struggles than they are a quest for new world order or a desperate need to escape. Wallace invites his readers to construct a massive dystopia from the details he gives, and then relates the intimate thoughts and feelings of the characters who inhabit that universe. The result is personal connection in the most disaffected of settings.

The fourth chapter deals with *In Persuasion Nation*, a collection of stories much more direct in form but concerned with the way consumer culture affects human relationships. Saunders either places grandfathers and teenage parents in situations in which the need to advertise and entertain threatens their ability to love their families, or he forms character dramas out of the most commonly dehumanized elements of the entertainment age. Commercial products, sitcom characters and telephone salesmen each receive desires, backstories, and intelligence. In providing these, Saunders inverts cynicism: rather than calling on readers to apply their disdain for unhealthy cultural tropes to the rest of their lives, he suggests that readers ought to treat their cultural tropes with the same concern they give to friends and family.

In considering *In Persuasion Nation* and *Infinite Jest* as literature responding to isolation and dehumanization, I will include Wallace's and Saunders's own claims about what they meant for their works to accomplish. It should be noted that Wallace spoke much more extensively about his motivations in writing *Infinite Jest* - and his opinions in general - than Saunders, which at times, especially in the second chapter, means that I quote Wallace at greater length than Saunders. I have tried to give each author equal coverage on the topics at hand, but Saunders, both as a fiction writer and an interviewee, tends to get to the point more quickly.

Finally, much has already been written on Wallace's belief that earnest writing can engage readers more effectively than cynicism in an age of self-aware advertising that plays on its own hypocrisies and that *Infinite Jest* represents the culmination of that attempt. I hope that the connection to Saunders, a much different writer, as well as the context of the larger cultural struggle provided by theoretical voices, will help further the conversation in new and interesting ways. Most of all, I hope to encourage interaction with these two works of fiction as written by

humans, for humans, in an age in which healthy personal interaction becomes increasingly difficult.

Chapter 1: “Those Who Live By the Spectacle Will Die By the Spectacle:” Why Consumer Culture Makes It Hard to Be Human

"We let the marketplace and the viewers decide what goes out there. Some people love watching wrestling. It's terrible programming, but some like it. That's the marketplace."

– Mark Fowler, FCC Chairman 1981-1987

To say that *In Persuasion Nation* and *Infinite Jest* mean to interrupt or intervene in American entertainment culture implies problems with that culture that need addressing. Those issues tend to center, in the two authors' conversations and in their fiction, on the way that television and advertising trivializes human experiences by placing them in the context of shows and programs meant to sell products. While neither author attempts a purely theoretical structural analysis of television or the advertising industry, they do raise open questions about a society that places so much energy on encouraging as much consumption as possible through a medium that also encourages as much consumption - of both outside products and itself - as possible.

David Foster Wallace started writing *Infinite Jest* around 1992 and published the novel in 1996. He set the novel out in the first half of the twenty-first century, and while he in some ways wrote prophetically,³ the novel speaks very much in the milieu of the America of his time. Like the novel's tennis players, covered head to toe in merchandising, corporations of the era seemed to have reached new levels of ambition in terms of what could be used to sell a product. Spike Lee had made films for Nike. College bowl games increasingly featured product names in the title, even as companies bought stadiums for name placement. In the cartoon film *Anastasia*, the missing princess of legend wears Chanel perfume, and the lost and frightened temporary orphan

³ Just three years after the release of the novel, the Superbowl halftime show became an officially sponsored event, with a branding that changed annually.

Kevin McAllister makes a point of drinking Pepsi in *Home Alone*. The world of 1996 seemed for sale in every way possible.

At the same time, vast advances in technology had affected the entertainment industry. The emergence of the VHS player as a common household item meant that movies could be viewed in the home, again and again, for free. Video rental stores expanded a viewer's options and guaranteed a supply of entertainment material. Cable television companies had expanded their holdings as well, boasting over 100 channels of entertainment, fitted to individual tastes. These developments meant that not only did Americans know they could find entertainment anywhere, they knew said entertainment would pander to them. That expectation led to mass consumption of televised entertainment, programming that aimed to please.

Though David Foster Wallace expressed serious concerns about visual entertainment's function as a central organizing force in American life, he did not hate all entertainment or believe in rejection of Western society. His 1993 article, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," acknowledges television as a major source of enjoyment in American life. "People in the U.S.A. watch so much television because it's fun" (155), he says, and, in fact, his stated primary reason for watching television is also that he enjoys it so much. Wallace admits to liking television so much that he opts not to own one, for fear that he would never get any work done. The problem with television, he says, is not that it is inherently evil, but that it is "Too Much Fun."⁴

⁴ I should note here that Wallace openly disliked the tendency of "junior advertising executives, aspiring filmmakers, and graduate-school poets" (157) to talk so much about how the terrible effects of television while still watching large amounts of it, who more or less hypocritically "somehow *need* to hate their six hours a day." For what it's worth, I also enjoy television, and think in the Internet age it at times provides a common ground for niche storytelling that it may have lacked at the height of the network programming model.

Wallace discusses his concerns with mass entertainment most explicitly in terms of television, focusing on the way extended viewing of television isolates the viewer. Wallace calls into question the quantity of consumption television enjoys, saying that were television considered a “special treat,” it might not be harmful, but that “one can only guess what volume of gin or poundage of Toblerone six hours of special treat a day would convert to” (163). The problem is not that television is fun, he says, but that it is too good at what it does. What it does best is “ensuring prodigious amounts of watching” (163). It makes the act of disengaged observation a daily habit.

That isolation is compounded by television’s dependence as a medium on viewer passivity; it trains the viewer to watch action from the outside. Wallace alleges that “television’s biggest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding” (163). He distinguishes television from voyeurism, because “television is performance, spectacle” (153), not a sneaking glance at someone who is unaware of being watched but an extreme invitation to watch at all times. Wallace notes that the American hero is the one who can comport himself with “watchableness,” who can look completely natural in front of a camera (154). It is this divide between camera-ready “imagos” and the actual discomfort of human relationships that gives television its isolating power, he says, especially for shy and anxious people, because it allows a sense of human interaction without requiring the mortification of enduring the gaze of others. The more a person watches, the more he becomes of the potential of being watched, driving him further away from the risk inherent in social contact.

Television thus addicts the isolated by further removing him from dialogue with others, then offering a temporary relief from the loneliness that it has in fact reinforced (163), a cycle that does not make television a pure social evil, just far too successful in its attempts to maintain

maximum viewership (186). Wallace does not blame television entirely for this distance, but he fears that mass entertainment represents an ultimate blind spot that Americans have developed in an age dominated by visual media, a love of watching that prevents people from communicating with each other directly.

Wallace's concerns about the isolation of the spectator are evocative of earlier and broader concerns about the rise of a society organized around visual consumption, specifically in terms of the rise of late capitalism.⁵ Guy DeBord describes the late capitalist process of commodification as the re-orientation of all human experience around the consumable, observable, packaged image, a type of value formation he refers to as the "spectacle." *The Society of the Spectacle* introduces the idea that the traditional Marxist concept of the worker struggling for control of the means of production in a purely industrial sense no longer adequately represents the nature of capitalist oppression on a global scale. The spectacle has replaced the base-superstructure model as a new way of organizing human experience into a "world vision which has become objectified" (5). The spectacle is a way of organizing perception to make the consumption of product seem essential to human life.

By spectacle, DeBord does not simply mean football games and car commercials. The spectacle, he says, has more to do with the way we approach time and human relationships than with descriptions of specific forms of entertainment per se. The spectacle has completed the work of commodification by rendering experience itself a consumable, marketable item that can be purchased, whether in turning famous actors into "stars," time into units of leisure or work, or

⁵ Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* describes late capitalism as a system defined by international structures of commerce and media connectedness, a collapse of the cultural into the economic whereby "the base...generates its superstructure with a new kind of dynamic" (xxi), one which cannot be quantified into simple elements of hegemony and propaganda.

In other words, if the Industrial Revolution worked to establish a system that reinforced and propagated the production of goods, then the post-Industrial capitalist system works to ensure a production of *needs*. In short, the system needs people to want things, so it organizes reality around the construction of those wants into absolute human desires.

travel into tourism. The society of the spectacle thus makes a man's life into a production he generates, an abstraction he forms and looks at from outside, a dissociation that leads to the way he sees other lives as well.

DeBord's theory thus connects the rise of the spectacle directly to the rise of a deep existential isolation. Wallace's description of television as a "feedback loop" that feeds off of the isolation it creates echoes DeBord here. DeBord says the spectacle is "a circular production of isolation" (28) because the technology creates a demand for itself by the very means of isolation that it creates. Whether in the separation of communities into the nuclear family unit in a tract home or the relegation of harvest and hunt into the labeled aisles of the grocery store, the spectacle creates obstacles to human interaction and then offers simulacra of that interaction to replace that need, much as Wallace says that television does. "The spectacle is not a collection of images," he says, "but a social relation among people, *mediated by images*" (4) [emphasis mine]. As the world "can no longer be grasped directly" (18), it must be read and experienced through mediated forms of experience, which is "separation perfected within the interior of man" (20). As man develops new ways to organize his life into product, he finds himself increasingly distanced from emotional access to his experiences, increasingly distanced from the lives of those around him. "Separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle" (25), DeBord says, and its purpose is to create in man a desire to regain the immediate and unmediated so that he can fulfill that desire through purchased mediations.

Just as Wallace's description of television does not account for the only isolation that occurs in consumer culture, the images of the spectacle are not simply visual pictures, but functional divisions of time and experience. DeBord makes much of the shift from cyclical time, which downplayed linearity and history, to pseudo-cyclical time, which purports a historical

narrative but effectively stresses the nature of time as a consumable resource. By removing man from immersion in time and forcing him to interact with it through constructs such as the five-day work-week or the two-week vacation, the spectacle organizes the experience of work and play into consumable units. Time thus becomes the individual's property to buy and sell: his overtime is worth extra wages, his leisure time is his paid reward for hard labor, his tourism is his purchased immigration and cultural exposure. "The more his life is now his product, the more he is separated from his life" (33), DeBord says, and that distance from lived time both defines and extends the society of the spectacle into all areas of life.

This production of needs includes not only entertainment and time, but material objects as well. It includes the work of forming what were previously not considered purchasable items, such as health or art, into forms that fit the market model of buying and selling. In *The System of Objects*, one of his earlier works, Jean Baudrillard says that "[I]t has to be made clear from the outset that consumption is an active form of relationship (not only to objects, but also to society and the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system (25)."⁶ Through this process of objectification, rocks and trees become gravel and lumber and the morning meal becomes "Raisin Bran: part of a complete breakfast," even as desired experiences such as wonder or acceptance become "camping" or "hipness." The world, even human perception itself, becomes a series of marketable, purchasable items, and the late capitalist system works to reinforce and maintain that perspective.

Ultimately, that process of objectification leads to a complete consumer system that holds internally but fails to transcend: "The shop window, the advertisement, the manufacturer and the brand name... impose a coherent, collective vision, as though they were almost an indissociable

⁶ Baudrillard would later complicate and qualify many of these early statements, relocating them into his less discursive theories of simulation and hyper-reality.

totality, a series” (27). Because it objectifies experience completely, this system of objects leads to a heightened sense of alienation: “the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects.” Baudrillard thus directly connects the process of commodification to loneliness.

This reading of consumer culture suggests that the isolation that Wallace locates in television extends outward to the whole of society, and that television as a medium helps reinforce that sense of closed access to an outside world. In *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, Baudrillard argues explicitly for this sense of what Jameson calls “total flow,” saying that when we listen to the radio or watch television “[w]hat we consume is not a particular spectacle of image in itself, but the potential succession of all possible spectacles- and the certainty that the law of succession and the segmenting of the schedules will mean that there is no danger of anything emerging within them that is not one spectacle or sign among others” (122).⁷ A news broadcast proclaiming the assassination of a terrorist is followed by a Pepsodent commercial, which is followed by an announcement of a church meeting downtown, which is sure to be followed by a game show later. All experience can thus be formatted, fit into manageable chunks, in a “miraculous transition from Vietnam to variety” (122). Like the Entertainment of *Infinite Jest*, total flow promises endless enjoyment at the cost of engagement in the moment.

Mass visual entertainment, then, as both an image-based medium a promoter of products, represents the ultimate representation and enactment of this sense of spectacle. It constitutes both symptom and disease. When Wallace describes television as isolating, he echoes more

⁷ In “Simulacra and Simulation,” Baudrillard actually states that the development of “reality” television (in the Loud Family broadcasts of the 1970s) has abolished the society of the spectacle, because it has pulled experience inside the medium, thereby eliminating reality: “there is no longer a medium in the literal sense: it is now intangible, diffused, and diffracted in the real, and one can no longer even say that the medium is altered by it” (30).

systematic views of the role of entertainment in organizing human behavior. DeBord notes that the celebrity is the human rewarded for being watchable, for converting herself into a product (60). The watching of television in itself serves as the ultimate example of Americans' embrace of time as a commodity, of experience as an act of consumption, as "the time-saving constantly sought by modern society, whether in the speed of vehicles or in the use of dried soups, is concretely translated for the population of the United States in the fact that the mere contemplation of television occupies it for an average of three to six hours a day" (153).

Americans work and work, he says, to save this now-objectified time, and then spend it all on the act of watching others. Television is the spectacle incarnate, and it serves as a key component in cutting people off from both each other and themselves.

The point here is not that visual entertainment represents a Mason-order worldwide conspiracy of social control, or even that a Group or Board stands behind Television Programming to trick people into becoming slaves to the corporate machine, or that Wallace fully buys into late capitalist theory. Watching television, as Wallace points out, is voluntary activity: "nobody is holding any weapons on us forcing us to spend amounts of time second only to sleep doing something that is, when you get down to it, not good for us" (163). Television and advertisements do, however, operate within a much larger system of commodification, and that slow process of changing experience into objects does connect to Wallace's fears about isolation.

Concerning consumerism as a whole, Wallace states in a 2006 interview with Ostep Karmodi for the *New York Review of Books* that America used to offset its greed with a suspicion of the bourgeoisie, and that sometime in the late twentieth century "half of that conflict really sort of disappeared, and there's now a celebration of commercialism and consumerism and marketing that is not really balanced by any kind of shame or embarrassment or reticence," that

“everything becomes about money and selling and buying and display” (n. pag.). He calls the current age “a very frightening time to live in America,” as the emphasis on corporate success has overshadowed the concern for the individual human to the point that making moral choices becomes increasingly difficult. His voice here expresses the concerns that George Saunders addresses in his own work.

George Saunders wrote *In Persuasion Nation* in 2006, a more politically charged time than *Infinite Jest*'s pre-9/11 pseudo-innocence. Fear and distrust of the outsider had gained a powerful voice in the rise of hyper-politicized cable news programming and the Shock and Awe campaigns of George W. Bush's War on Terror. The nature of commercial culture, however, had not changed, meaning that singing competitions (now more patriotic than before) and *The Price Is Right* still dominated television ratings, but these diversions now joined with war rhetoric to form a voice of entertainment with a hawkish edge.

Saunders also suggests that entertainment culture causes problems with human relationships, but his concerns focus more on an ability to respect and value others, especially in the context of complex political and social situations. In an interview with *Identity Theory*, Saunders expresses concern about the American ability to think and emote with nuance. He suggests that this decline in the American conversation developed over the course of the ten years following the O.J. Simpson trial and the Monica Lewinsky scandal, as news programming sought profits more and more intently:

In my view the whole O.J. and Monica thing was a kind of prep—a stupidity prep. And we said, "Oh, that's important? It's interesting? I can really lower myself to worry about the sperm-covered dress and not have to stop myself and I can actually pretend that's serious cultural stuff?" All right, so then you lower

yourself into that vat. And then 9/11 comes. And we are totally ready to be fed this bullshit and I don't think it's a coincidence. So a lot of that stuff was coming out in this book. And some of the reviews are, "Oh, it's a poke at advertising." Which to me—that's not enough . . . I think culturally we somehow stupefied [or stupidized] ourselves and now we are paying the price. (n.pag.)

Saunders fears that the superficiality of the pandering to the viewer that characterizes television and advertising culture has translated itself into cultural responses to the more complicated aspects of human life.

These fears have direct connections to the role that entertainment plays as part of an economic system. In "The Braindead Megaphone," Saunders places an emphasis on television's connection to the corporate need to make as much as money as possible on the distribution of that information:

Our braindeadness has to do, I think, with commerce: the shift that has taken place within our major news organizations toward to corporate model, and away from the public-interest model...In surrendering our mass storytelling function to entities whose first priority is profit, we make a dangerous concession: "Tell us," we say in effect, "as much truth as you can, *while still making money*." (12-13)

Saunders' analysis of economy as central to media processes is much more stratified than Baudrillard's or Jameson's, but he still locates the central issue in television's role in American culture as an economic one. He connects the stories that television tells to a collective decision to profit-making as the first priority in our base modes of communication.

Television, after all, is business, aiming for the highest profit margin, and the market forces that drive its programming form a practically derived cultural identity: humans make

television that other humans want to see, and in fact produce exactly the kind of television that audiences watch most, depending precisely on a ratings system that measures the number of humans watching at any given time. Television networks, as corporations funded by other corporations, produce and air the programming that the highest number of people will watch, in a sort of implied democracy of broadcasting. Television thus serves as a kind of cultural mirror, reflecting audience desires.

Wallace, in “E. Unibus Pluram,” makes a helpful distinction about this point in his discussion of television as a “low” form, one that places the audience’s pleased response above other questions of craft or honesty:

TV is not low because it is vulgar or prurient or stupid. It is often all these things, but this is a logical function of its need to please Audience. And I’m not saying that television is vulgar and dumb because the people who compose Audience are vulgar and dumb. Television is the way it is simply because people tend to be really similar in their vulgar and prurient and stupid interests and wildly different in their refined and moral and intelligent interests. It’s all about syncretic diversity: neither medium nor viewers are responsible for quality. (162-163)

In other words, the networks’ pandering to the lowest common denominator works because we tend to hold the same kinds of base desires and split out into various sub-desires when we seek beauty. One finds glory in butterfly migrations, the other in Russian ballet, but both turn their necks when they pass the wreck on the highway. The problem is not that Americans are dumb and lazy, or even that network executives are particularly evil, but that the whole enterprise is set around promoting and producing the easiest material to swallow, that which will grab the most attention in the shortest amount of time.

The issue at hand, then, is not so much that television is evil because images are evil; it is that television poses a major problem because of how effective and pervasive its images are in the context of a culture given wholly over to consumption in the form of the image. Because it operates as a dominant voice in society, mass entertainment forms the nature of group dialogue. Because it forms that dialogue in the unhealthy terms of prizing that which comes easily and rejecting that which does not please immediately, television as proponent of consumer culture makes more difficult mental or emotional postures such as logical construction or empathy that much harder.

Saunders discusses these problems in “The Braindead Megaphone,” the title piece in his non-fiction collection. Television, and specifically broadcast news, Saunders says, is like a man who brings a megaphone to a crowded party and continually makes inane claims about the party, such as “We’re eating more cheese cubes-- and loving it!” (3). Over time, the volume of the megaphone will come to dominate the course of conversation at the party, and because the megaphone cannot deliver complex messages, the party’s conversation dips in quality. Saunders also compares the national news media’s depiction of the War on Terror to the idea of a neighbor shouting information about the outside world to a room without windows. He says that “mass media’s job is to provide this simulacra of the world upon which we build our ideas,” but that the other term for this process is “story-telling,” and that the problem is not so much that the “Megaphone Guy” is telling us stories, but that he tells them poorly (10). The Megaphone has combined fear as a basis for interaction with others with a concern for the trivial, he says, and that constant drone has led to a lack of imagination in the American thought life, a tendency to sort out issues like foreign invasions and criminal justice with the same logic that drives the choice of one American Idol contestant or toothpaste brand over the other.

Saunders's concerns about the megaphone echo, in some ways, those of Neil Postman. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman makes a sustained argument against the replacement of written word with the image-based television in American life, saying that America has become a society of viewers. In doing so, he applies Marshall McLuhan's concept that "the medium is the message" to television. His intended exploration of the ways in which "forms of public discourse regulate and even dictate what kind of content can issue from such forms" (6) describes television's communicable limits. He asserts that "truth . . . is a product of a conversation man has with himself about and through the techniques of communication he has invented" (24) and that television is particularly limited in the kinds of truth it can tell because it relates those truths in images, not words. Because television uses quick cuts from picture to picture to make its points, it cannot maintain the depth of lengthy rational argument that print can. Just as smoke signals cannot communicate complex philosophical ideas, television's pictorial representations cannot sustain the kind of cultural conversation that print culture enjoys.

Postman makes some valuable claims about the way television operates in American society. He notes that the "news of the day" concept depends on a system of dissemination that can conceptualize it, a concept which Jean Baudrillard will later refer to as the media "non-event" (7). He provides the helpful concept that television organizes human thought in certain patterns and structures, and that those organizing methods are weaker than the ones offered by literacy, particularly in the places where reading requires a particular type of mental engagement that television does not (25). Most importantly, he establishes that television has "gradually *become* our culture . . . so familiar and so thoroughly integrated. . . that we no longer hear its faint hissing in the background" (79). He makes the case that television is both ubiquitous and central in American life, a point that many depictions of American culture assume.

The ubiquity and centrality of pandering entertainment forms the danger here, not simply the development of television as a useful technology. Late in Postman's argument, he makes an important distinction: "What I am claiming here is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for all experience" (87). That distinction connects back to late capitalist concerns as well, though Postman does not mean it in those terms. The organization of the American attention around that which sells the most and that which is most entertaining causes these problems, not simply the prevalence of television as a physical object in American life.

Practically, however, these theories of television coincide with an openly observable reality: television programming tends toward crass, cheap, or shallow material, at least in the shows that receive the highest ratings. Commercials depict men who sacrifice their wives to beer in the fridge, sitcoms recycle plots and innuendos from season to season, and dating shows make human love into a bizarre competition full of predetermined twists. Postman's base claim, after all, is that because of a "television-based epistemology . . . we are getting sillier by the minute" (24), and evidence seems to suggest that he is right.

This determination to prioritize the most pleasurable images as part of a system intent on selling as much as possible makes concern the thoughts and desires of others harder to embrace. It leads, because humans share common low interests, to a valuation of the easy and cheap over the complex and discrete. When called on to flex muscles of emotional intelligence, then, the society of the spectacle has a more difficult time doing the heavy lifting of sorting out healthy responses from impulse and gratification.

Saunders, in a *New Yorker* interview, maintains an active antagonism towards capitalism as a structure, but points toward an even more nuanced position, one he will call for more explicitly as his fictional universe expands:

I stand by the notion that capitalism can be an aggressive and brutal machine, rolling over everything in its path. I guess I'd like that idea to exist right beside the possibly more gentle feeling of this book. The idea is maybe that, even within the domain of that big machine, there is joy and justice and contentment—sometimes you can find yourself between the wheels, intact. (n. pag.)

It is that place between the wheels that Wallace and Saunders seem intent on exploring, even as they point to advertisements and entertainments that make surviving under the treads difficult: Wallace pursues the question of how to reclaim human experience while Saunders reaches for an operative sense of human dignity and worth.

Wallace and Saunders write as fiction authors, not political activists or even literary theorists. I am not claiming that they wrote *Infinite Jest* and *In Persuasion Nation* with political or theoretical agendas, but that they did express an awareness of visual entertainment in particular and consumer culture in general as potentially negative, and that their concerns with specific problems that system of consumption raise figures openly in these fictional works.

What the theoretical work discussed here amounts to for the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is the concept that American life is now organized as a series of acts of consumption, and that mass entertainment helps both reinforce and participate in that organizational structure. It also suggests that American life is ordered around entertainment as a specific kind of consumption, a society of the spectacle that works hard to earn its six hours a day of televised media.

That experience leads to a need for intervention. Saunders explains his writing about the human struggle in American culture to *The New York Times Magazine*, describing his desire to account for “not the endless cycle of meaningless activity but the endless cycle of meaningful activity”:

I saw the peculiar way America creeps up on you if you don't have anything... It's never rude. It's just, Yes, you do have to work 14 hours. And yes, you do have to ride the bus home. You're now the father of two and you will work in that cubicle or you will be dishonored. Suddenly the universe was laden with moral import, and I could intensely feel the limits of my own power. We didn't have the money, and I could see that in order for me to get this much money, I would have to work for this many more years. It was all laid out in front of me, and suddenly absurdism wasn't an intellectual abstraction, it was actually realism. You could see the way that wealth was begetting wealth, wealth was begetting comfort — and that the cumulative effect of an absence of wealth was the erosion of grace. (n.pag.)

Saunders is concerned with the way the work that organizing life around product affects a man's perspective of others; Wallace fears that becoming a permanent spectator means increased removal from interaction and engagement. Both write fiction that responds to perceived need created by a collective commitment to entertainment and promotion of the product.

Chapter 2: “She Wishes He Would Just Play:” Cynical Irony as the Right Answer for the Wrong Time

“We already “know” U.S. culture is materialistic. This diagnosis can be done in about two lines. It doesn’t engage anybody.” –David Foster Wallace

Because of their isolating and dehumanizing effects, the forms of entertainment that dominate consumer culture demand a response. *Infinite Jest* and *In Persuasion Nation* appear to consider mockery of television and consumer culture as an initial approach of critique. Both works utilize satire in the description of the worlds their characters inhabit. From *Jest*’s annual re-sculpting of the Statue of Liberty to hold her licensed product to Chief Wayne and Buddy, the respective Native American caricature and family dog who has turned into a puppet in Saunders’s “Brad Carrigan, American,” these authors’ stories tend toward the absurd, with a penchant for mimicking the banal and shallow elements of American advertising and television. Those jokes seem central to the works’ critique of the society of the spectacle, and they help give life to the fiction.

Wallace, however, verbalizes concerns about the ability of parody to actually confront the problems of consumer culture. He raises important questions about the nature of satirical parody in “E. Unibus Pluram.” In a section of the essay, titled “I Do Have a Thesis,” Wallace makes his primary point clear: “I’m going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fictionists they pose terrifically vexing problems” (171). Wallace’s claims throughout that essay loop around this main idea, landing multiple times on the concept. American marketing culture, Wallace says, so effectively absorbs attempts to mimic or out-manuever it through cleverness and self-effacing irony that fiction authors only reinforce its power when they

write works dependent on the type of cynical irony that he feels characterizes much contemporary art.⁸

Many others have covered Wallace's claims about sincerity and irony already. Adam Kelly, in "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," explains as much: "That Wallace from early on characterized his artistic project as a response to the contemporary prevalence of irony in American literature and culture is well-established, and there is no need to reconstruct the argument of 'E. Unibus Pluram' here" (133).⁹ I do, however, hope to locate those stated concerns about the emotional distance that a certain type of postmodern irony can create within the contexts of (1) previous responses to irony as it relates to consumerism and (2) establishing a common ground between Wallace and Saunders in their literary responses to the problems posed by spectacle.

Wallace: The Irony Increases the Isolation

Though a key part of *Infinite Jest*'s identity lies in descriptions of the United States in cartoonish terms, Wallace's contentions with irony as a default posture are extensive; they feature predominantly in a number of interviews. "Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy," he tells Larry McCaffery in an interview for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* that ran just before the release of "E. Unibus Pluram": "postmodern irony's become our environment" (16). Elsewhere he tells Ostap Karmodi that "at least here in America, we're in a time that's very, very cynical" (n. pag.), which affects authors' ability to tell stories about virtuous characters without including some kind of punch line or qualifier. He also says that "one consequence of what American scholars call a

⁸ Wallace cites Alf's commands to watch more television and get fat, as well as Pepsi's commercials that admit they mean to sell a product. I would add Sprite's Obey Your Thirst campaign, which offered parodies of "cool" advertising campaigns and then offered Sprite as an alternative to manipulative marketing.

⁹ Kelly goes on to place Wallace in dialogue with Derrida in an engaging read on sincerity as gift.

post-modern era is that everyone has seen so many performances, that American viewers and American readers, we simply assume now that everything is a performance and it's strategic and it's tactical" (n. pag.). Americans have a hard time believing sincere heroes and plotlines anymore, he argues, and that edge makes heartfelt storytelling difficult.

Wallace's close identification of irony with cynicism depends on the political history surrounding the rise of what he identifies as "postmodern irony," a particular type of self-distancing that relies on mockery of strong emotions and constant self-correction. Cynical irony undermines or lessens the impact of personal expression as a defense mechanism, like the dancer who stops to make fun of her own dancing before anyone else can. This position assumes a particular definition of irony, one that requires a brief consideration of the term's use by other theorists.

The articulation of irony as a feature of human communication stretches back at least as far as Socrates, and it is often framed as a powerful tool. In its broadest form, it simply registers as language that must be read in a different light than it is given, statements that need to be read against outside knowledge for full comprehension. As Wayne C. Booth says, "Some statements cannot be understood without rejecting what they seem to say" (1). Booth identifies stable ironies, claims in which the intention is clearly meant to be read against the statement. Sarcasm operates in these terms, as do faux-essays such as Swift's "Modest Proposal." Stable ironies are grounded by stable intention.

Booth defends this intentionality in ironic forms as potentially community-building, saying that "even the most simple-minded irony, when it succeeds, reveals in both participants a kind of meeting with other minds that contradicts a great deal that gets said about who we are and whether we can know each other" (13). The work of interpretation that goes into

deciphering irony, especially in communities that can enjoy a shared reading of it, means that “often the predominant emotion when reading stable ironies is that of joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits” (28). Irony can form a point of connection.

Linda Hutcheon, in a different context, seconds this conception of irony as a meeting-ground for likeminded members of a discourse. “Irony may be the only way we can be serious today” (39), she says, because “we cannot ignore the discourses that precede and contextualize everything we say and do, and it is through ironic parody that we signal our awareness of this inescapable fact.” Because irony builds on communal understandings of cultural expectation and familiarity, it allows for a point of meeting between two speakers otherwise cut off in the present age.

Not all ironies work toward community growth, however. Booth describes a type of non-committal irony, one that expends all its energy in an effort to make its intentions indiscernible. He separates the notion of stable irony from that of unstable irony, which is irony for irony's sake. “Even an artist who works hard to improve the quality of each half-perception is inevitably constrained from anything like the perfection of ducks or rabbits that he could achieve if his intention were not to be an illusionist” (128), he says, meaning that the careful maintenance of an aloof and impenetrable irony of ironies can prevent the ironist from pursuing a legitimate end. For irony to function dialogically, it has to fix itself, has to risk an intentional meaning: “To do one thing well is to rule out the possibility of doing some other things” (128). A determination to remain indeterminate limits the ironist's ability to make strong choices about his speech, for any exposed intention diffuses the suspension of meaning.

In his assertion that the postmodern obsession with ambiguity means that “our chief pleasure now becomes our awareness of the duplicity” (128), Booth approaches Wallace's

concerns. Like naive cynicism, which rejects goodness without understanding it, there is such a thing as insincere irony, a joke that mumbles the punch line out of fear that no one will laugh. When irony commits to a meaning, it serves as a shared space between two willing participants, as well as a potential “victim”. When it acts self-reflexively or as a means of warding off criticism, it furthers isolation and defers emotional risk.

Wallace and Booth both echo Kierkegaard,¹⁰ who views irony as a potential source of humility but calls the pursuit of unstable irony an “infinite absolute negativity,” “a divine madness which rages like a Tamerlane and leaves not one stone standing upon another in its wake” (278). Kierkegaard also connects total irony with a negative freedom from the consequences of the statement’s intention:

If I am conscious when I speak that what I say is my meaning, and that what is said is an adequate expression for my meaning,... then I am bound by what is said, that is, I am here positively free... I am bound in relation to myself and cannot detach myself whenever I choose. If, on the other hand, what is said is not my meaning, or the opposite of my meaning, then I am free both in relation to others and in relation to myself. (265)

This lack of responsibility for statements because they aren’t meant forms an emphasis on “negative freedom,” a freedom “from” instead of a positive freedom “to.”¹¹

¹⁰ I was alerted to this reading of Kierkegaard by Brad Frazier in his article “Kierkegaard on the Problems of Pure Irony.” Frazier connects Kierkegaard’s ideas of irony to issues of community and social relations, as well as theological concerns of God’s relationship to irony. He uses contemporary examples of the ways a person might fulfill multiple societal expectations without actually risking anything emotionally, thus remaining impenetrably aloof.

¹¹ Interestingly enough, an American and Canadian spy have a lengthy conversation about this distinction in freedom on hillside in Arizona in *Infinite Jest*. The American argues that an overprotective government renders choice inoperable, denying human free will. The Canadian terrorist asserts that Americans might be free from constraint, but because their desires bind them, they are slaves to their own whims (317).

That freedom, however, results in isolation, according to Kierkegaard. “The more the ironist succeeds in deceiving and the better his falsification progresses, so much the greater is his satisfaction. But he experiences this satisfaction in solitude, and his concern is precisely that no one notices his deception” (266). Just as acceptance of the spectacle makes a man’s life his product, total negative irony completely detaches a man from his life. As a result, “the whole of existence has become alien to the ironic subject, that he in turn has become estranged from existence” (276). Such ironic distance becomes totalizing in its own way, leading to a full-on pursuit of independence that trumps all other concerns and deepening the very loneliness that Wallace wants to undercut. The pure ironist and the pure consumerist maintain very similar postures.

Wallace, then, is operating with a particular notion of irony, the unstable deferment of intention, not the intentional double-meaning meant to create a connection between two participants. Such irony connects directly to cynicism because the two share a refusal to commit, a determination to avoid “leaving oneself open to others ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability” (181), which is how Wallace describes the commercials that mark themselves out as openly selling a product in the crassest terms possible. This cynical irony operates on the level of the racist joke in the badly-drawn cartoon sitcom, acceptable because the audience “knows” the speaker doesn’t “mean” it but not connected to a larger concern for social justice or even character development. It appears in the self-identification of clichés in television and the movies, a character freezing the frame and dissecting the scene at hand for obvious places the audience can criticize. It’s the taxi splashing water on the couple kissing in the rain, the poet writing lazy rhymes about ugly subjects and calling them subversive.

Wallace says this “numb blank bored demeanor” that “my best friend calls the ‘girl-who’s-dancing-with-you-but-would-obviously-rather-be-dancing-with-somebody-else’ expression” (181) is what his generation considers “hip.” That posture of indifference, though it serves as a seemingly plausible defense against the consumer culture’s call for a wild-eyed embrace of all things materialistic, doesn’t challenge consumer culture because cynical irony has already been internalized by television programming and commercial culture. Self-effacement and a refusal to risk sincere emotional moments or a straightforward meaning only serve to increase the isolation and lack of human connection that led to the resistance of marketing culture in the first place. It also, ultimately, ties Wallace’s concerns with irony and human engagement to the ability of the commercial world to capitalize on human emotion, whether ironically or not.

For Wallace, fiction steeped in self-conscious irony, only strengthens the feedback loop of isolation. It reinforces the consumerists’ claim that feelings of remorse, courage, or love are for suckers, and that it is better to be in on the joke than at the “victim” point of the ironic triangle. Postmodern irony is like a military coup that has become oppressive, Wallace says. Irony as a totalized system “tyrannizes us” because it refuses to allow questions of meaning or deeper context. It makes that implicit claim that “anyone with the heretical gall to ask an ironist what he actually stands for ends up looking like a hysteric or a prig” (184). Attempts at making reconnections to “authentic” human experiences thus require an extra mediation, another level of interference that says: under this expression of affection or urgency is probably a bucket of water waiting to fall.

Wallace sees the fictional solution to the grip of irony as a group of “anti-rebels” who dare to “endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in

U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue” (193).

Wallace wants, in other words writers to attempt to write with sincerity, with open-faced commitment.¹² If *Infinite Jest* merely mocks the jingoism of American politics and writes up funny parodies of American television programming without offering a deeper emotional context, than it fails as a reaching out to disconnected readers. The satirical nature of the novel in these terms needs to operate as background, not base content.

A Word on Distrust (Why Irony?)

These forms of irony, to be fair, have their roots in much earlier responses to image-based consumerism. Detached cynicism appears as an apt response to consumer culture, because television and the process of commodification it represents and enacts have always repurposed expressions of anger, loneliness, or rejection as further extensions of the system they critique. As Jameson says, “The totalizing account of the postmodern always included a space for various forms of oppositional culture” (159). In other words, the system will absorb critique and repackage it as marketable material, making straightforward resistance ineffective.

Jameson furthers this concern with a rejoinder: the problem with straightforward resistance in late capitalism is not that it simply provides rebellion as another posture or identity available for purchase, but that it feeds on the presence of containable negative energy as a means of sustaining interest and tension in the system itself. Jameson, openly repurposing Baudrillard, says that “conscious ideologies of revolt, revolution and even negative critique are – far from merely being “co-opted” by the system – an integral and functional part of the system’s

¹² Baudrillard, it should be noted, doesn’t buy it: “in the field of functional relations, cynicism and sincerity alternate without contradicting each other...it is, in fact, the lost ghost of sincerity which haunts all this contact-based friendliness, these perpetual ‘live link-ups,’ this aping and forcing of dialogue at all costs (Consumer 173).” At the same time, however, he connects this privileging of sincerity to “a fear of being had, of being duped and manipulated by signs.”

overall strategies” (203). Because they treat the system as whole and total, thereby reaffirming its hold, active attempts at fighting back at the voice of advertising only strengthen it.

Wallace himself acknowledges this process of systemizing voices of change in his lamentation over the “crank-turners” who take original theories and creative approaches to literature and repeat and mimic them until they become useless. Wallace tells Larry McCaffery that “[a]cademic and commercial culture have somehow become these gigantic mechanisms of commodification that drain the weight and color out of even the most radical new advances” (7), as evidenced by Ph.D. dissertations that read “like de Man and Foucault in the mouth of a dull child.” Part of the difficulty of attempting new and engaging work, he admits, lies in the inevitable parceling out of it into tiny marketable pieces, sound bites and out-of-context quotes that only deepen whatever hole the author or theorist was trying to fill. Such fear of feeding into a system that co-opts and repackages originality as new product can lead to a kind of self-protective backpedaling, a self-sabotage that prevents others from damaging the work by destroying it first.

Jameson encapsulates that cynicism in his warning about beauty in the context of late capitalism:

In a previous era, art was a realm beyond commodification, in which a certain freedom was still available;...surely what characterizes postmodernity in the cultural area is the supersession of everything outside the commercial culture, its absorption of all forms of art high and low, along with image production itself. The image is the commodity today, and that is why it is vain to expect a negation of the logic of commodity production from it, and that is why, finally, all beauty

today is meretricious and the appeal to it by contemporary pseudo-aestheticism is an ideological maneuver and not a creative resource. (135)

Jameson thus claims that art can no longer effectively confront or critique capitalist forms because those forms have consumed it, making art a product that the system generates as another means of moving numbers.

Elsewhere, Jameson says that because of this inevitable co-opting of beauty into the commercial system, “Contemporary or postmodern art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past” (7). Jameson alleges that attempts to use classical forms of beauty to speak back to the consumer system will no longer serve as interruptions, for they have already been consumed in the forms of the art market and home décor.

Jameson also introduces the concept of pop art as another potential response to consumer culture, a complete embrace of the objectification of both the image and artwork that succeeds only as much as it fails, and vice versa: “Andy Warhol’s work in fact turns centrally around commodification, and the great billboard images of the Coca-Cola bottle or the Campbell’s soup can, which explicitly foreground the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capital, ought to be powerful and critical political statements” (9). Jameson says that they are not, however, at least not in any effective way, because they accomplish a totalization of their own. They are not representations but mediations, meaning that “they now come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system” (162).¹³ In other words, their self-awareness makes them incapable of reflecting outward, and they only deepen the sense that all reality is a system of objects to be used.

¹³ Jameson uses the terms “flatness,” “depthlessness,” and “superficiality” (162).

Baudrillard, in *The Consumer Society*, says that the pop art of the Warhol era demeans transcendence while failing to truly liberate art from its pedestal: “when they try to desacralize their practice, society sacralises them all the more” (20). The flatness of the art produces the “cool smile” without undermining the value exchange at play in the art market, and thus fails on both counts. Wallace’s concern is that our collective intellectual and artistic face has gotten stuck that way, caught somewhere between smirk and grimace. In his call for art that evokes genuine response founded on characters of depth, he inadvertently suggests that the depth of the human personality offers a potential point of departure from pop art’s lack of dimension and aesthetic art’s easy slip into commodification.

Inside Infinite Jest

These concerns about irony and cynicism cut deep into the heart of *Infinite Jest*, even into the hearts of the characters themselves. The narrator, in his reflection on types of depression, isolates Hal’s loneliness, which he describes as the ironic detachment that defines Hal and his friends. He then connects that posture to a consumption of art culture:

The U.S. arts are our guide to inclusion. A how-to. We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony at a young age where the face is fictile enough to assume the shape of whatever it wears. And then it’s stuck there, the weary cynicism that saves us from gooey sentiment and unsophisticated naïveté.

Sentiment equals naïveté on this continent . . .

. . . Hal, who’s empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic. (694)

This tension between a fear of sentimentality and an inability to communicate earnestly pervades both the external debates of *Infinite Jest*'s characters and their internal tensions, becoming one of the central driving forces in the narrative.

One of the major distinctions used within the novel to narrate this division between the compromised intimacy of genuine engagement and the aloof, protected out-of-the-frame intelligence of ironic self-distancing is the concept of "play."¹⁴ Characters in the novel are distinguished as playing (engaged) or not playing (disengaged). Though the term makes the most sense in the context of Enfield Tennis Academy, where nationally ranked junior tennis players compete for top positions as they process adolescence, the term shows up throughout the text. Manically depressed Kate Gompert, for instance, when telling an ER doctor why she ingested over 150 Parnate, Lithonate, and Zoloft capsules, explains, "I didn't want to especially hurt myself...I don't hate myself. I just wanted out. I didn't want to play anymore is all" (72). The doctor makes a special note of the word "play," and circles it.

One of the major thematic events of *Infinite Jest* surrounds a group of 12-year-old playing Eschaton, a bizarre mix of advanced calculus, cold war theory, horseshoes, and the board game Risk set up on a tennis court, described as "the most complicated children's game anybody around E.T.A.'d ever heard of" (322). For these children, play is a deadly serious activity: each group of players represents a strategic alliance of countries on the brink of nuclear war, and each tennis ball in the team's arsenal a nuclear warhead. The complexities of the set-up for play this intense means that only five or so games can be staged every year, and when little Evan Ingersoll violates the boundaries of play by pelting Ann Kittenplan with a tennis ball, thus convoluting the

¹⁴ While play carries connotations of disengagement and deferral of meaning, in *Infinite Jest* the term serves as a contrast between active engagement in an activity or relationship and rote performance or insincere mimicry of actual human interaction.

lines between the “map” of the tennis court and the players who operate outside the map, genuine violence ensues. Play matters here, and it represents immersion, full engagement.

The game of tennis, a form of organized play, represents a potential point of transcendence in the decidedly banal United States of *Infinite Jest*. Coach Schitt, the drill instructor for the tennis academy, articulates tennis as a transcending the self through the pressing of that self to the edges of established limits, an immersion in the whole of a game. Tennis represents selflessness, an abandonment of the position of safe control into a deeper control that comes from full engagement with “life’s endless war against the self you cannot live without” (84). In a slightly more practical exposition of the idea, Schitt chastens the older players for complaining about the cold, specifically on the grounds that they are therefore thinking about a separate happy self, locked outside the immediate moment by a location elsewhere, off the field of play. “Occur,” he says. “Be *here*. Not in bed or shower or over baconshteam, in the mind. Be *here* in total.” He finishes the speech with a single word on a single line of print: “Play” (461). He calls for immersion in the game.

Hal Incandenza, the novel’s most active narrator, struggles throughout *Infinite Jest* to learn to play, to connect to the people in his life. He begins the novel disinterested and dependent on both marijuana and his intellect. He “performs” to an almost pitiful degree, comparing the pleasure of LSD to the few moments when he senses his mother’s pleasure. In one scene, he tells his brother about studying psychology books and memorizing expressions of psychological growth until he can fake the kind of epiphany he needs to please his grief counselor. Hal performs but rarely connects. Aubrey DeLint, one of Hal’s prorectors at the academy, says of Hal’s tennis game that “some days you can almost see Hal like flit in and out of a match, like some part of him leaves and hovers and then comes back” (682). When the

aforementioned Eschaton game erupts in violence, demanding intervention, Hal is so high that he can only watch, “paralyzed with absorption, (340)” as children under his care injure each other.

Hal himself seems to connect a concept of play to the desire to connect that he struggles with internally. Early in the novel, Hal narrates a dream, one in which he must start a tennis match on an impossibly complex court, with “lines going every which way” that “run oblique or meet and form relationships and boxes and rivers and tributaries and systems inside systems” (67). He describes the court in terms reminiscent of the postmodern inability to sort through a seemingly endless number of angles that can be taken in regard to any given situation, making action or commitment difficult: “The whole thing is almost too involved to take in all at once. It’s simply huge.” As Hal’s mother watches, Hal responds to the whisper of the umpire to “Please Play,” but does so half-heartedly. “Even the ‘we’ is theory” (68), he says. Throughout the work, Hal moves from trying to stay outside to trying to enter, his ability or inability to do so defining his character. “I never get quite to see the distant opponent, for all the apparatus of the game,” he says.

Some characters do play. “Schacht and his opponent play” (270), a kind of positive evaluation of Ted Schacht’s character, who in terms of tennis ranking is a loser and who rarely wins the matches he plays, but who eagerly wants to practice dentistry, is generally kind to people, and is well-liked by his friends. Schacht, like Mario Incandenza, Hal’s severely handicapped but mentally alert and emotionally engaged older half-brother¹⁵, takes events and people at face-value. Schacht and Mario are two of several average characters that, in a world of geniuses and prodigies, seem the better for their limitations, more grounded and thus more engaged. Schacht may never win, but he *plays*.

¹⁵ Mario, a rare pure heart in a novel populated by self-destructive addicts, is described as loving Hal so much “it makes his heart beat hard” (650)

The question of engagement or distance thus serves as a defining descriptor for the novel's characters. In the world of *Infinite Jest*, the struggle to make sincere moves belongs to the most intelligent, those least likely to be duped or tricked. They also maintain the half-present aloofness that Wallace fears defines the voices of his literary generation.

The Way Out: David Lynch?

Wallace locates his call for sincerity in fiction in the context of respect for the reader. In a *Salon* interview, Wallace identifies two mindsets common of contemporary authors, one that thinks the reader is stupid and the other that caters to his worst whims:

The project that's worth trying is to do stuff that has some of the richness and challenge and emotional and intellectual difficulty of avant-garde literary stuff, stuff that makes the reader confront things rather than ignore them, but to do that in such a way that it's also pleasurable to read. The reader feels like someone is talking to him rather than striking a number of poses (n. pag.).

Wallace here centers an attempt to communicate with the reader as essential for the kind of fiction he is calling for.

Paradoxically, though, Wallace's most carefully documented positive example of un-ironic fiction is the work of aloof and disconcerting filmmaker David Lynch, who, "at age 50, is a better, more complex, more interesting director than any of the hip young "rebels" making violently ironic films for New Line and Miramax today" (165), Wallace claims, because his "violence always tries to mean something" (165). That meaning, Wallace argues, is sometimes inscrutable, but Lynch is actually enacting the inverse of ironic distance: part of what makes Lynch's work so compelling -- and frightening -- is that it feels so intimate, so closely tied to Lynch himself, that it cuts past the normal defenses the mind puts up to structured plot and

familiar dialogue. Far from trying to hide himself from audiences, Lynch is trying to get in their heads (171).

Wallace says that Lynch's eschewing of Hollywood form is not ironic cleverness, though, because for all the heaviness of the images, they have a "remarkable unself-consciousness" (298). Lynch, not so much a pure artist in Wallace's rendering as he is a genius child, just wants to make what he sees in his mind happen on screen, and he doesn't question himself about it: "nobody analyzes or metacriticizes or hermeneuticizes or anything" (299). According to Wallace, what makes Lynch powerful is his Expressionism: images "deployed in an old-fashioned, pre-postmodern way, i.e. nakedly, *sincerely*, without postmodernism's abstraction or irony" (198). Wallace argues that Lynch's commitment to vision makes him revolutionary, and that his most vocal critics are ultimately those who cannot accept his refusal to trust his instincts.¹⁶

Wallace thus reveals himself to be something of a pragmatist when it comes to philosophies of art. Lynch's work might have some shortcomings, one of which is its ability to cut past logic and mental resistance just like spectacle does; another is its dependence on the acknowledgment of past forms, which could read as Jameson's pastiche that eclipses parody. For Wallace, however, *Blue Velvet* "rang cherries" (201). It achieved what he describes to McCaffery as "the click," the thing that happens when literature or art connects on a deep emotional level. Wallace appears set on pursuing that click in his own writing.

Enter George Saunders: "The Person I'm Highest on Right Now"

¹⁶ Near the end of his discussion on Lynch, Wallace points out two potential pitfalls of Lynch's approach to art. One is a "self-consciousness of form where everything gets very mannered and refers cutely to itself" (199). The other is self-involvement, art that refuses to communicate, that's too caught up in its own internal claims to reach out to the audience.

That click seems to have something to do with the way a person relates to the work on an emotional, even spiritual level. Wallace tells Laura Miller in a *Salon* interview that human connection is the most important work that fiction can do: “I feel unalone – intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I’m in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness in fiction and poetry in a way that I don’t with other art” (n. pag.). When asked who does that for him, Wallace gives a long list that includes the Donne and Hopkins, Schopenhauer and Kant, and O’Connor and McCarthy, among others.

When pressed to name contemporary authors, however, Wallace says that “the person I’m highest on right now is George Saunders, whose book ‘Civilwarland in Bad Decline’ just came out, and is well worth a great deal of attention” (n.pag.) He names Saunders as one of the authors working hard against cynicism in his work

Saunders, for his part, describes American irony as “our cleverness, our glibness, our rapid-fire delivery, our rejection of gentility, our denial of tradition, and our blunt realism” (“The New Mecca” 52). He suggests that it may be part of the American difficulty in understanding the conflict in the Middle East, as many Americans have a hard time believing in simple, unaffected responses to external stimuli such as violent foreign invasions.

In an interview with *Identity Theory*, Saunders recounts a recent Nike commercial:

It doesn’t ever say the word Nike. And never says the word soccer. And has all these really charged political things. Very compelling. And in some ways it’s a little minimalist masterpiece. And the only things that I guess are off is—what—it’s meant to sell something and it’s sort of a committee effort. That’s the difference between it and *The Dubliners*, I suppose [laughs]. But the thing is, when I was younger I had this kind of vaguely paranoid vision, which was, the

Man is doing this to us. Now I am much more a fan of that Pogo thing—”we have met the enemy [and he is us]“—the people who are doing that stuff are brilliant.

(n. pag.)

The commercial’s ulterior motive undermines its beauty to a degree, he suggests, but the moving part of the advertisement still creates an emotional reaction, one that is not simply, “Buy shoes.” He suggests that the awareness that the compelling short film is selling shoes probably does affect a person’s ability to speak honestly through art, but his concern comes from less of a posture of anti-corporation fist-shaking than it does a general feeling that groups of people make collective choices, and those choices change their responses to beauty.

Saunders seems intent on finding compelling work and foregrounding it in the conversation, even as clever takedowns of ironic commercials present themselves in conversation. The interviewer brings up a cell phone advertisement in which “an older CEO” type tells a young person to “Stick it to The Man.” The CEO then admits that he himself is The Man, as if to bring home Wallace’s point that the television takes the joke and improves upon it, furthering its authority. Saunders agrees but moves on to another commercial about a young couple growing up and describes how it almost moves him to tears, even as he laments that the phone plan, of course, had little to do with creating that relationship (n. pag). He seems more interested in the moving moments, even if they are compromised by commerce, than the crass, self-aware ones, at least in the moment of the interview.

Saunders, in fact, spends a great deal less time editorializing about sincere fiction than Wallace does, though characters in his stories wrestle hard with complicated issues in the midst of fairly satirical settings, which my fourth chapter explores in depth. However, in an article originally written for *GQ* about the city of Dubai, he does wrestle with his own tendency toward

ironic distancing. In the first hotel he stays in during his visit to the country known for its capitalistic decadence, he looks for contradictions in the décor that he can mock. “Though my first response to elaborate Theming is often irony,” he says, “what I found during my stay at the Medinat is that irony is actually my first response to tepid, lame Theming. In the belly of radical Theming, my first response was to want to stay here forever . . . because the truth is, it’s beautiful (24). Saunders goes on to question just what is “unreal” about the flowing fountains and lush architecture he sees; he cannot find in what immediate sense Dubai is fabricated.

Saunders identifies a tension between the epiphany he experiences on a monumental water-slide that reveals to him that “consumerism is what we are,” a semi-ironically rendered “realization” that all men in the “world Culture o’Enjoyment” (22) could become brothers at peace, and the sobering reality that to lack money and power in that world is terror and bondage, evidenced by the feeling he endures when his credit card fails, due to an accounting error, to pay for his room. His conclusion, after recognizing the untenable conditions of Dubai’s workers (and the fact that they claim to love those positions) while also experiencing the chastising of a security guard who assumes he has come to write about the city’s dark side for his American newspaper, is that the situation is “complicated” (33). That struggle emerges most powerfully in his private pool, when he experiences a true moment of near-nirvana at the sight of the moon above him, and “all irony vanishes” (45), but he is quickly brought back to earth by his realization that not everyone can share his joy, especially not the prostitutes and night laborers at work underneath him.

Saunders’s complicated and confusing second conclusion, reached on his flight home, is that “it’s a big world, and I really like it” (55). He closes with a piece of advice for himself: “Don’t be afraid to be confused,” he says. “Try to remain permanently confused. Anything is

possible. Stay open, forever, so open it hurts, and then open up some more, until the day you die, world without end, amen” (55). Saunders seems to be calling himself into a quest for openness, for a resistance to the wickedness of the world not quite so dependent on rejection.

Moreover, he describes himself and Wallace as working together on the problem of cynicism in fiction. In an interview with *The New York Times Magazine*, Saunders says that he and Wallace are “like two teams of miners, digging at the same spot but from different directions” (n. pag.). Saunders says that he and Wallace and Jonathan Franzen would meet in New York and talk about the issue at hand:

The thing on the table was emotional fiction. How do we make it? How do we get there? Is there something yet to be discovered? These were about the possibly contrasting desire to: (1) write stories that had some sort of moral heft and/or were not just technical exercises or cerebral games; while (2) not being cheesy or sentimental or reactionary.

The fact that both authors identify the need to create meaningful fiction connects their works, at the very least, in a shared intention to make work that challenged their world without depending purely on snark and parody, as playful as some of their fictional landscapes may be.

The question then becomes how to create sincere literature in an age when serious readers find sincerity hard to believe. That question seems critical to attempts to undercut the distance and cynicism American readers struggle with. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis’s demon chastises his understudy for allowing the human under his corruptive influence to truly enjoy a good book -- for actual delight, not just to make clever commentary -- and a long walk outside. Real pleasures, the demon says, instead of leading to a self-detachment that can “feel” without ever having to “act,” allow a man to sense a greater weight of the world around him and to feel a

connection to himself that makes it easier for the divine to reach him (“Letter 13”). Wallace and Saunders, if sometimes suspicious of enjoyment, still call for that deeper sense of connectedness, and have stated an attempt to create it in their fiction.

Kierkegaard, in turn, speaks of mastered irony, of the poet who includes irony in his work as a revealing self-awareness, so that “the wild infinity wherein it storms consumingly forth has been restrained” (338). The alternative, however, is a total irony in which that infinite negation takes hold: “finally, the ironic nothingness is that deathly stillness in which irony returns to “haunt and jest” (275). The openness and vulnerability in fiction writing that Wallace and Saunders call for is the antidote to the antidote, the limit set on an infinite jest.

Chapter 3

She Wishes He Would Just Play: *Infinite Jest* and the Infinite Feedback Loop

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

– David Foster Wallace

For the project of an author so concerned with instigating human connection and challenging the dissociation that defines the hyper-mediated Western world, *Infinite Jest* makes easy access surprisingly difficult. It offers few handles for the beginning reader. The first page gives no indication of direction besides a circle slightly darkened on one side, the unexplained time marker “YEAR OF GLAD,” and an unidentified first-person narrator who gives dense descriptions of a University Administration room “wood-walled, Remington-hung, double-windowed against the November heat, insulated from Administrative sounds by the reception area outside” (3) along with a few unfamiliar character names.

Those first six lines, thick and tough, then give way to an open one-line declaration: “I am in here.” Thus opens a series of intricately connected narratives, beginning with Hal Incandenza’s articulate inner monologue, exploring the most intimate emotions and complicated histories of a huge set of characters. Amongst a bewildering context of terroristic plots, complex government structures, detailed footnotes explaining the chemical makeup of designer drugs, and the occasional descriptions of a video so satisfying the viewer watches and again, ad infinitum, to the point of death, Hal and the Incandenza family’s impossibly wide network of friends, enemies, and neighbors attempt to tell their stories.

Hal's claim that "I am in here" represents a kind of opening promise the novel makes, a claim that the content merits the form given, and, more importantly, that the form and content are worth pursuing. *Infinite Jest* encases, at its core, a human consciousness, a personal and even embarrassingly open emotional center. That the language and structure of the novel makes that center difficult to reach is, ironically, part of Wallace's attempt at reaching out for deeper human engagement. Wallace's response to the indifference of the age of cynical advertising produces a work relentlessly intense, a novel that begs the reader to care enough to work at reading it, even as spectacle begs of viewers not to care.

I want to argue in this chapter that *Infinite Jest* makes its play for engaged and enraptured attention in two ways: in structuring the novel in a challenging way, Wallace requires a personal investment in the text that makes the characters' emotional revelations powerful and intimate. Secondly, by placing those characters in a dystopia that encases the worst fears about the American consumer society, then focusing on their personal lives and inner fears, Wallace suggests that human life maintains its tense struggle between beauty and pain, even in the darkest of timelines. In other words, *Infinite Jest* breaks the feedback loop of isolation in two ways: on the linguistic and structural level, by forcing engagement with a text, and on the thematic level, by providing a world so complete that characters can struggle for intimacy within it.

Infinite Jest makes its readers work, an attribute that Wallace finds part of the line that separates the primarily commercial from the primarily artistic. "Serious art," he says, "which is not primarily about getting money out of you, is more apt to make you uncomfortable, or to force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort" (McCaffery 1). *Infinite Jest* operates on the

assumption that the best way to counter the effects of television, a medium that “engages without demanding,” is to offer a medium that does engage readers in a demanding way.¹⁷

Some of that challenge comes from the sheer density of language featured in the novel. On the literal page, the words tend to pile one on top of the other, such as in the period-sparse recounting of drug addicts scheming across town, trying to get a fix (129), a story packed tight with misspellings and local language. Narrations may ask a reader to follow a story in which a character “scored a bookbag off a foran slope studn type kid on the Redline platform” as well as use context to make sense of personal descriptions like “Dr. Wo nods in a special subservant manner he uses for non slopes who hes’ realy polite with but hes’ a dictater to his slopes when we see him with his subservant slopes” (132) The statements carry meaning, but they don’t communicate directly.

Later, Hal’s father Jim recalls his father’s neurotic drunken tennis lessons as a steady stream of unbroken language, all in unmediated direct address, with a total of four paragraph breaks over eleven pages. Jim’s father speaks plainly, rambling through explanations of how to hold a flask. “Heft it,” he says. “Get to know it. It’s an object. A vessel. It’s a two-pint flask full of amber liquid. Actually more like half-full, it seems. So it seems” (161); it builds to a stunning height of “God I’m I’m so *sorry*. Jim. You don’t deserve to see me like this. I’m so scared, Jim. I’m so scared of dying without ever being really *seen*” (168), but only after weaving across a dozen pieces of personal history first.

At the same time, *Infinite Jest* rewards close readings of that language. Many of the toughest words occur in the most relaxed sentence forms: “in Bruce Green’s system binocular nystagmus and a wallowing depression even while the coke-high’s still on that accounts for the

¹⁷ Wallace tries to temper some of that difficulty by saying that the book “makes at least an in-good-faith attempt to be fun and riveting enough on a page-by-page level so I don’t feel like I’m hitting the reader with a mallet” (*Salon*).

tendency toward fits of weeping with his nystagmic face hidden in the crook of his big right arm” (1037). Buried in a list of negative responses to organic cocaine, the line depends on an atypical medical term that never gets fully defined, even in context. The point, however, is that by reading with an interest to discover the meaning of the term, a new piece of Bruce Green’s personality emerges, a sympathetic detail that makes his bravery later in the novel more meaningful. The close reading required by unfamiliar terms gives the unexpected prize of a new connection to the characters of the halfway house.

Some of the juxtapositions in language seem planted just for the pleasure of discovery, such as Michael Pemulis’s footnoted advanced calculus lesson that offers nothing to the plot except silliness of diction: “the EV Theorem itself has a proof that’s just about the biggest Unit-twisting bitch in the whole of applied differentiation” (1023). Many of the long twisting narrative passages, like the opening scene in the University meeting room, are broken up bright, clear, emotional claims, as in Hal’s “My chest bumps like a dryer with shoes in it” (5). Mere skimming of the text to figure out the next plot point would miss the intricacies of the language.

Infinite Jest seems to openly resist light skimming, partially because of its shifting perspectives, a feature Wallace himself admits to Laura Miller: “It’s a weird book. It doesn’t move the way normal books do. It’s got a whole bunch of characters” (*Salon*). That mass of characters rapidly expands from Hal’s opening monologue to include the rest of the Incandenza family, the entire tennis academy that Hal’s father opened and that Hal attends, the whole residency of the halfway house down the hill from the academy, a half-dozen drug addicts roaming the Boston streets, another half-dozen spies fighting for control of the Entertainment, and Joelle VanDyne, Hal’s brother Orin’s former lover who also appeared as the only human presence in “*Infinite Jest*.” The narratives jump from character to character without major

announcement, sometimes moving from place to place fluidly, such as when Don Gately drives by the Antioi Brothers's store and notes its presence shortly before the focus shifts to the store's interior. The book often moves rapidly from internal monologue to internal monologue without warning.

First person narrations from characters account for only a few of the various narrative perspectives at play in *Infinite Jest*, however. Newspaper articles, television transcripts, lists of fictional headlines from semi-accurate historical films, journal entries, direct address memories, and patient intake documents all serve to move the reader forward into the Boston of the novel. A world slowly emerges from these passages, a slowly unfolding network of connections and crossed lines. The breakup of forms creates a variety of cadences and voices throughout the work, but ultimately serves to support the integrity of Wallace's world. The level of detail at times staggers, but tangents touch at unexpected places¹⁸, reinforcing the notion that a center somewhere holds the material together.

In other words, the novel does have an intentional structure. Though time jumps confusingly from The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment to the Year of Dairy Products From the American Heartland, the half-moons represent chapter breaks, and the footnotes appear deliberately ordered to increase during certain passages and decrease during others; the placement of line breaks and the changes in perspective establish rhythms in the reading that match the intensity of the story arc, giving at the least the semblance of creative control to the sprawling story.

That web of perspectives and personalities brings a sense of participation to *Infinite Jest*.

Frank Cioffi, in "An Anguish Become Thing: Narrative as Performance in David Foster

¹⁸ Mario Incandenza listens with rapt attention to Madame Psychosis's radio show, unaware that she dated his brother as Joelle van Dyne; conflicted Canadian terrorist Marathe has a drunken moment of truth at a bar with Kate Gompert, one of the halfway house residents.

Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," says that, similar to the personal involvement that live theatre creates, "the reader's active involvement, the reader's performance of the novel, causes him to mingle the activity of narrative enjoyment and engagement – that feeling of being "stitched in" to a narrative with other activities" (168). Those activities for Cioffi include finding the meaning of obscure words, flipping back and forth between the footnotes and the main text, and working to piece together the hints at overall plot scattered throughout the work. In this way, *Infinite Jest* provides a counter to the pandering of commercial entertainment, a joint effort that involves both author and audience.

This approach raises some questions about effectiveness, if not care for the reader. Wallace openly admits two tendencies toward fault in his writing, both emerging from the desire to please he fears he's learned from television: one is a "grossly sentimental affection for gags" (3) that devolves into gimmicky attention-getting; the other expresses itself as an anti-sympathy for his readership, which expresses itself in "sentences that are syntactically not incorrect but still a real bitch to read. Or bludgeoning the reader with data. Or devoting a lot of energy to creating expectations and then taking pleasure in disappointing them" (McCaffery 3).

Lines such as this one from Jim Incandenza's conversation with his son Hal early in the text, might raise questions about whether or not those tendencies have taken over the novel at points:

Your quote-unquote 'complimentary' Dunlop widebody tennis racquets' super-secret-formulaic composition materials of high-modulus-graphite-reinforced polycarbonate polybutylene resin are organochemically identical I say again *identical* to the gyroscopic balance sensor and *mise-en-scene* appropriation card and priapistic-entertainment cartridge implanted in your very own towering

father's anaplastic cerebrum after his cruel series of detoxifications and convolution-smoothings and gastrectomy and prostatectomy and pancreatectomy and phalluctomy . . . (31)

Hal's father actually reveals several important plot points here, and the over-the-top nature of the line helps characterize the man's impossible to satisfy need to be understood, but the syntax does seem punishing, even for a depressed genius like Jim. The list of Jim Incandenza's films (985-99), which again provides multiple points of reference from which major plot points will emerge, looks suspiciously like a data dump, though it does come with a formatting guide for interpreting the citations.

More importantly, *Infinite Jest* defies the typical expectations of plot resolution. The novel ends not with a completed explanation of the situation Hal described at the beginning¹⁹ but in a hazy memory of Don Gately's, finally waking up "flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out" (981). Dreams touch dreams, but the details of the moments between Hal's breakdown near the end of the novel and his confused state at the beginning remain a blank. The reader does not receive the usual payoff of immediate and complete conflict resolution, at least not initially.

The defining issue for *Infinite Jest* thus becomes whether it operates as a kind of joke, a solipsistic cataloguing of names and details in the most frustrating and confusing ways possible just to promise at an ending that fails to arrive or a center that never existed, a slow build that fails to climax, with its final point that the climax never comes, that to hope for a clear ending is trite and common. If *Infinite Jest* merely mocks readers for hoping to find a consistent through line of plot or makes a Beckett-esque poke at traditional understandings of meaning, then it

¹⁹ Hal Incandenza in the opening monologue: "I think of John N.R. Wayne, who would have won the year's What-aBurger, standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (17).

seems cruel: after so much investment, a nihilistic denial of intention would leave the audience more isolated than ever.

Infinite Jest's reward for engagement, its revelation, occurs at the experiential level, however, not in the resolution of plot. The work does not attempt to move from the reader from start to finish, as many novels do, but from outside the world in, from distance to immediacy. The payoff is not a sudden understanding of who mailed the beta cartridges containing the Entertainment to all those foreign medical attachés, though the answers are there if a person digs far enough²⁰, but immersion in a world and inclusion in the lives of deeply felt characters.

Critical responses to *Infinite Jest* wrestle with this question at length. Ciaffi, for instance, opens his argument about the narrative structures of the text and how they force the reader to actively create the world in which the novel takes place with an open confession: "As I read on, I realized that this novel was having a curious impact on me, was penetrating my consciousness in a way that struck me as unusual" (162). Ciaffi calls *Infinite Jest* a "disruptive text," one that interrupts the reader's consciousness. He analyzes prose style narrative choice like a critic, but as he continues, he concludes that "the novel's odd devices...are inextricably woven into the texture of the novel itself" (169). By the time he reaches his conclusion, he describes feeling "violated, to an extent, and addicted, along with the characters" (177). Though disturbing, the extended engagement required to complete the novel drew him into the work with frightening intensity. He finds the work troubling, but sincere, and the process pulls him out of his academic objectivity into compelling claims of experience.

This response demonstrates the potential at least for engagement in the text itself, a drawing out through close study. Timothy Jacobs' comparison of Wallace's structural methods with Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry finds strong internal cohesion within *Infinite Jest* and

²⁰ It's probably Orin.

credits that cohesion with “the sense that they have actually participated jointly in the game, instead of being on the receiving end of a barrage of authorial poses” (226). He connects the difficulty of the novel with a willingness on Wallace’s part to forego the easy payoff for himself of providing exact narrative steps for the reader, instead providing an interactive text prone to discovery and invention. For Jacobs, the work does engage,²¹ and his involvement with the text creates that engagement. Ciaffi and Jacobs both find anti-spectacle in *Infinite Jest*’s difficulty.

The dig of *Infinite Jest* leads to characters, not content, and that process challenges the internal logic of long-term objectification, which refigures human experience in terms of purchases. If the spectacle, as Jameson says in “Transformations of the Image,” means that humans now live with “bombardments of up to a thousand images a day” until they “begin to live a very different relationship to space and time, to existential experience as well as cultural consumption” (111), then *Infinite Jest* suggests another form of organizational thought, an alternate perspective in which even formulas and lists serve to reveal personal details about human beings; instead of men orbiting their objects, the clutter of *Infinite Jest* circles its men and women.

The relationship between spectacle and isolation in *Infinite Jest* emerges more explicitly in the relationship between setting and character. The world that these characters inhabit enacts an extreme form of an entertainment-oriented society, one in which the desire for consumption rules with such strength that the country’s leadership has given Canada the Northeastern states so that they can catapult the country’s garbage into the Great Concavity. The areas near the Concavity have become radioactively fertile, producing giant feral infants and oversized rodents that occasionally attack nearby towns. The American attitude toward the ecological damage

²¹ Ciaffi and Aubry also compare the reading experience of *Infinite Jest* to a form of addiction, a startling assessment of the text’s effect. They do so somewhat playfully, but the charge still seems extreme given the destructive nature of addiction in the novel.

caused by the American dumping system remains characteristically flippant and disinterested, as evidenced by the mostly ironic annual viewing of Mario Incandenza's filmed puppet show recounting the events leading up to the euphemistically titled "Interdependence Day." The American hunger for waste spreads out even into the defacement (and partial erasure) of the American landscape.

The America of Interdependence operates on terms equally shrewd and silly, troublingly unaware of the way its pettiness affects its former neighbors. The O.N.A.N. symbol, "a snarling full-front eagle with a broom and can of disinfectant in one claw and a Maple Leaf in the other and wearing a sombrero and appearing to have about half-eaten a swatch of star-studded cloth" (153), captures the absurdity of the American swallowing of its continental kin, as does its symbolic leader, Johnny Gentle, "the first U.S. President ever to swing his microphone around by the cord during his Inauguration speech. Whose new white-suited Office of Unspecified Services' retinue required Inauguration-attendees to scrub and mask and then walk through chlorinated footbaths at public pools" (382). Johnny Gentle, the lounge singer turned national hero turned obsessive-compulsive clean freak, leads because he "wasn't going to stand here and ask us to make tough choices because he was standing here promising he was going to make them for us. Who asked us simply to sit back and enjoy the show" (383). Johnny Gentle, lead showman, represents a presidency propped up by a desire to observe.

The America of *Infinite Jest* orders itself around the pursuit of entertainment to an absurd degree. At one point, Orin Incandenza, the prodigal son who plays as a kicker for the Arizona Cardinals, must descend on bird wings with the rest of his team into the stadium as a literal manifestation of the team's avatar, a heightening of spectacle to the point of absurd simulation. *Infinite Jest* presents a society with an intricate entertainment infrastructure, deeply ordered

around technical histories of development in complex ways. The fall of network television, for one, came not from the Internet, but through cartridges that allowed people to consume entertainment without commercials.

Even television has insulated itself from outside control, which leads to a collective “passion for standing live to witness things,” a statement that comes after a long list of technological advancements unique to the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. The list includes “InterLace TelEntertainment, 932/1864 R.I.S.C. power-TPs w/ or w/o console, Pink2, post-Primestar D.S.S. dissemination,” and so on, with the result being “a floating no-space world of personal spectation. Whole new millennial era, under Gentle and Lace-Forche. Total freedom, privacy, choice” (620). The narrator describes a system that promises no interruptions in the entertainment stream, just as Baudrillard claimed.

An entire subculture of live spectation thus follows: “the Gapers’ Blocks at traffic accidents, sewer-gas explosions, muggings, purse-snatchings, the occasional W.D.V... (621)” The list continues for a page and a half, exploring the many different excuses people find to gather in groups and watch unscripted material, ending with the pond cleaning that has brought together the Boston crowd of that scene. The entertainment complex has proven too isolating, and people gather outside of their homes to do anything that will place them in proximity with others, even just corporate watching.

The great external threat to this society comes in the form of a video cartridge, a tape that commands endless watching, a literal embodiment of Jameson’s theory of video as it stands against film. Video, he says, has become the basic mode of communication, the *lingua franca* of the late twentieth century. He calls it the “privileged form” of the age (67), saying that film works like literature, he says, operating with an internal set of rules that establish closure and

containment, but video gives the *illusion* of closure, moving from dramatic scene to another dramatic scene in the form of a commercial sketch to a new presentation of information in the form of a newscast without breaking (76). Video claims to end, but never actually does.

The film of “Infinite Jest” works this way at an individualized, concrete level, a literal enactment in the specific moment of the kinds of distancing that Jameson claims happens on a broad cultural level. *Infinite Jest* takes fears about the nature of the enslaving and isolating power of entertainment and figures them actively, placing them in real time among believable characters.

Though these details perform some of the traditional function of satire, highlighting the absurdity of American entertainment programming and suggesting that an exaggerated obsession with being pleased leads to addictive behavior, the novel’s interventionist heart lies in the choice to place this extreme spectacle of a society at the novel’s background. Instead of foregrounding O.N.A.N. and the struggle to overthrow it through a terroristic entertainment, *Infinite Jest* suggests through its character narrations and emphasis on grounded, believable relational tensions that in any society, even one as destructively obsessed with self-pleasure as the novel’s, humans remain emotional creatures capable of both deep kindness and terrible cruelty, both to themselves and others.

The first point here is that *Infinite Jest* provides readers with a world to move into, a coherent universe, one with enough familiar sights and sounds to feel alive and breathable. The level of detail present in the novel makes even this outlandish Boston of digital feeds feel realistic in a sense, urbane and earthbound in its reach. The concrete nature of the Concavity, in which drug users still dry out in dumpsters and women become so strung out that they don’t even

realize they are dragging newborn babies behind them, takes the silliness of some of the novel's backdrops and refigures them as points of horror.

The second point is that for as outlandish as some of the novel's society is, the characters are developed realistically. *Infinite Jest's* main tensions deal not in the absurd society a close observer can build out of the internal references, but in an emotional connection to the characters that inhabit them. Wallace backgrounds this future America and focuses on the very real and practical problems of human characters trying to live decent lives in the midst of that dystopia.

Most of the problems deal with either family relations or navigating social realms. For a society on the brink of amusing itself to death, many of the characters demonstrate familiar or common desires and behaviors. Orin calls women "Subjects," going through them as quickly as possible, and struggles to feel deep meaning in any relationship. Michael Pemulis tries to get away with doing as many drugs as he can without facing expulsion. Even Marathe, the wheelchair-bound spy hunting down the whereabouts of the fatal Entertainment out of a desire to take down O.N.A.N., double-crosses his agency to obtain needed medical care for his wife. Most characters either fail to realize that they live in the dystopian future of mass entertainment as a ruling force or have more important matters to attend to.

The baselessness of their given culture does affect the novel's characters, but indirectly. Those side effects reveal themselves readily in the sheer number of addicts present in the novel. Aside from the street community, populated with the most obvious addicts, and the halfway house, filled with narratives about addiction recovery, the novel tells story after story about coping mechanisms. The medical attaché, the first unwitting victim of the Entertainment, is employed as a provision for the side effects of a Saudi prince's Toblerone addiction. Orin is addicted to sex, Hal to secret marijuana sessions. As it stands, many of the students as the

academy “are involved with recreational substances, is the point. Like who isn’t, at some life-stage, in the U.S.A. and Interdependent regions, in these troubled times, for the most part . . . American experience seems to suggest that people are virtually unlimited in their need to give themselves away, on various levels. Some just prefer to do it in secret” (53). Accounts of addiction in contemporary culture thus form much of the struggle that defines the characters’ story arcs. The events of the novel force many of these characters to make final decisions about whether to keep their addictions or move into the pain of waking life.

The point here lies in the commonplace nature of the struggles at hand. The characters’ struggles seem more familiar than foreign, and that makes the wildness of the landscape at hand a claim of hope about the nature of the world as a whole: if the thing that makes being a human difficult for them is the same thing that makes it hard for us, then even in the worst case scenario, the America that had fallen to its worst vices would still have in it the strange and twisted form of the human heart, a thing that could bear kindness and love.

The landscape of absurd consumerism meets the difficulty of the reading experience here, for the intensity of detail and the immersion created by the reading experience means that the intimate moments that might otherwise read as cliché or sentimental have potential to land as solid punches. The depth of character, and the rooting of character desire in familiar wants and needs, means that when the novel decides to take emotional risks, those risks stand out in the text, justified by immense amounts of contextualizing image.

Hal and Mario’s relationship bears this kind of relational weight. Hal, the brilliant skeptic, argues with “withered saurian homodontic Mario” (316), his severely handicapped half-brother, about God’s existence and the importance of prayer. Hal belittles Mario at times, but Hal also “idealizes” Mario; “he calls him Booboo but fears his opinion more than probably anybody

except their Moms's." He fears that his mother approves of Mario more than she does of him, but "when the veiled legate from the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed showed up at the E.T.A. driveway's portcullis to discuss with Mario... the openness of concealment the veil might afford him, it was Hal, even as Mario laughed and half-bowed, it was Hal, brandishing his Dunlop stick, who told the guy to go peddle his linen someplace else" (317). Hal's defense of Mario, which could read as a saccharine Lifetime-movie sibling Moment of Love, holds in the wake of the memory of Hal as the barely functional approval-obsessed genius who depends on his weed and his tennis scores to make it through the day, the Hal who found his father's head in the microwave and loafed around in lounge chairs with his buddies on his days off that has this one piece of himself that he can give away.

Mario, too, so vividly rendered as hooked to camera pole with his dinosaur-like fingers, who stays up late listening to a particular college radio station and makes puppet show movies for fun, intimately cares for Hal:

He is having a harder and harder time reading Hal's states of mind or whether he's in good spirits. This worries him. He used to be able to sort of preverbally know in his stomach generally where Hal was and what he was doing, even if Hal was far away and playing or if Mario was away, and now he can't anymore. Feel it. This worries him and feels like when you've lost something important in a dream and you can't even remember what it was but it's important. Mario loves Hal so much it makes his heart beat hard. He doesn't have to wonder if the difference now is him or his brother because Mario never changes. (590)

That vulnerability cuts deep because it risks itself in a landscape so defined by addiction and isolation. For Mario to care as much as he does in a world so brutal and uncaring stands out as powerful risk, not mawkishness.

The intervention takes place here, at the places where the text has worked past the initial defenses of traditional expectation and lazy reading, that the lists and catalogues either take on significance or don't. The novel can fail to engage the reader; Wallace didn't necessarily succeed for everyone. What's interesting about his attempt is that even after all the unfamiliar structural choices and defamiliarizing forms, Wallace works with a fairly basic approach to fiction; he centers the work around imagined human beings, not their imagined world. He makes a move to consider them and give them voice with as much intensity and earnestness as possible, trying hard not to make fun of them, even as they live and breathe and make asses of themselves in a ridiculous environment. As a result, some people, for whom the novel creates that "click," experience a particular strength of emotion, a directness of communication that they otherwise might have missed.

Near the end of *Infinite Jest*, the ghost of Hal's father reveals that he created the Entertainment as a means to reach his son, to "make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life...to bring him 'out of himself,' as they say" (839). Jim's gift became a curse, somehow, captivated to the point of complete absorption. It missed its target, and everyone else fell victim.

The usual point made here is that *Infinite Jest* itself fits this description, addicting or swallowing whole the reader, causing suffering to the uninitiated and the followers alike. *Infinite Jest*, they say, does what "Infinite Jest" the video does; it addicts, consumes, locks the reader in. I disagree; the novel probably fails for much of its intended audience, simply because something

so personal and difficult delivered in such a deliberate way can't connect with everyone. However, just as "Infinite Jest" had an audience that it might have reached, *Infinite Jest* can "click." Its idiosyncrasies and complexities make an appeal to the oversaturated spectator and the isolated cynic, asking them to apply themselves to something. It isn't a ubiquitously enslaving entertainment, but a flawed and singular attempt at making a connection. Like Hal in that boardroom or Jim in the fatal tape, someone in *Infinite Jest* is in there, suggesting that the answer for the O.N.A.N.ites²² matches the answer for the novel's isolated audience: connection, commitment, and risk.

²² The Biblical allusion here calls for a further explanation of ways in which Wallace's imaginary society orders itself around self-pleasure. It's a good pun, but also deserves more attention than I have space to give here. An exploration of onanistic tendencies in *Infinite Jest*'s world might itself prove fruitful.

Chapter 4

In Persuasion Nation and the Wide End of the Megaphone, Or, How I Learned to Start

Worrying and Love the Box of Corn Flakes

"I look forward to being shot in the head with your stories." – Stephen Colbert, *Interview with George Saunders*

If David Foster Wallace and George Saunders are miners digging for the same vein from two different directions, then Wallace represents a mostly horizontal winding, inching downward in complex spirals. Saunders, the powerful short story author, is the power driller, digging straight down to the place where he can uncover the best material. As Saunders explained to Stephen Colbert, a novel is a like a man's attempt to convince a woman that he loves her over a week-long train trip; a short story is the same profession crammed into the three minutes before she boards the train. Saunders's writing is the shotgun blast to Wallace's tactical scoping of the human heart.

In Persuasion Nation, published ten years after *Infinite Jest*, demonstrates Saunders's writing at its most directed. It seems intent, from cover to cover, on making an implicit appeal to the conscience of the reader. It suggests major problems in post-9/11 America and then demonstrates characters attempting to find decent ways to live in the midst of those problems. It depicts exaggerated forms of the worst excesses or blind spots of American life and then, rather than obsessing over the exposure itself, moves on to the difficulty of remaining human in the midst of those problems. Saunders, in other words, addresses the human by imaging human forms in even his most satirical landscapes.

In Persuasion Nation is a collection of short stories, some of them previously published, but it still feels cohesive, even unified. Though the stories do not all fall within the same time

frame as *Infinite Jest*'s do, they seem to share a conceptual common ground; they feel loosely related, parts of a broad whole. Some of that cohesion comes from the consistency of language Saunders' uses. He talks in "Thank You, Esther Forbes," his essay about learning the power of the well-written sentence, that he wants to write English capable of "exploding in the brain" (25). That concentrated prose voice permeates the stories of *In Persuasion Nation*, unifying the narration.

Saunders's language deals out experience quick and straight, often most powerfully in a first person or close third point of view. For instance, a polar bear, thinking of the Eskimo throwing an axe through his head day after day in the commercial sketch they share, "remembers the enraged expression on the father Eskimo's face as he draws back the axe, the frightened yipping of the Malamute puppy, the shocked way the Eskimo kids cover their O-shaped mouths with their mittens" (173). Another narrator, killed by a tire iron, says that his death "doesn't hurt, really, but it's scary, because it's happening to me, me, me, me, the good boy in school, the boy who felt like lilacs were his special flower, the boy who, when poor Jean was going, used to sneak off to cry in the closet" (226). When Saunders wants to build momentum, he tacks on extra clauses, but he keeps them short, laying them tactically, almost like a poet.

Saunders also connects his stories with a strange pseudo-corporate brand language, a mimicry of the catchy fake terminology of advertising slogans and the hyper-positive euphemism of the business memo. "Jon" opens with a reference to a "training" video for adolescents called *It's Yours To Do With What You Like!* (23). The baby-mask product known as the "I CAN SPEAK!" comes from the KidLuv company; the salesman writing the letter references the device's "twin moving SimuLips" (4). Even in "Commcomm," seemingly set in a fairly normal small government facility, Giff participates in the "ChristLife Reenactors" (201) instead of a

passion play. The forced capital letters and re-naming of established objects with artificially appealing labels suggests the economic nature of these terms.

This universal branding style helps hold the diverse terrain together, but also generates a sense of corporate oversight to the story's landscapes, a refiguring of common items and experiences into licensable terms of ownership, a voice that objectifies in its unification. Baudrillard says in "Absolute Advertising, Ground Zero Advertising," that "today what we are experiencing is the absorption of all virtual modes of expression into that of advertising" (87).²³ He does not simply mean that attempts to sell products infiltrate films as product placement and T-shirts turn fashion into brand promotion. He means that the economic and political function in society are now the same, and that advertising forms all reality into a set of images that sell (89). The consistency of branding in these stories suggests ultimate commodification, a refiguring of the landscape into Game Boys and Baby Gaps.

This particular emphasis on corporate advertising language also creates a kind of anti-dread throughout the stories that fill *In Persuasion Nation*, a syntactic through-line of sinister gloss that gives the stories a dystopian feel even when they appear to be set in present-day American towns. Saunders's dialogue, sometimes external and sometimes delivered as inner thought, reinforces this sense of dissociation as a feeling of confusion. His dialogue tags often end in question marks, and his characters' responses seem to come from the same bank of bewildered immersion in a world that feels insane but is too total to really resist.

Saunders's ability to catch the idiosyncrasies of commercial language and exaggerate particular absurdities of advertising culture brings these stories close to satire, if not parody.

²³ See also Jameson's claim in "Transformations of the Image" that consumer culture "has expanded, becoming coterminous with market society in such a way that the cultural... is consumed throughout daily life itself, in shopping, in professional activities, in the various often televisual forms of leisure, in production for the market and in the consumption of those market products" (111).

When a main point of action in a story revolves around a group of food products defending Abraham Lincoln from a GrandeChickenBoatCombo who wants to interrupt the Gettysburg Address, a butt for the joke seems eminent. Saunders, however, states in a *New York Times Magazine* interview that in stories with bizarre landscapes²⁴ “absurdism wasn’t an intellectual abstraction, it was actually realism. You could see the way that wealth was begetting wealth, wealth was begetting comfort — and that the cumulative effect of an absence of wealth was the erosion of grace (n. pag.).” Saunders here claims that his intention isn’t so much to create a wacky satirical metaphor as it is to reflect the world as he sees it in the most accurate way possible, and the world as he sees it depends on the same kinds of banal slogans and merciless sales pitches as those of his stories.

Wallace, in fact, makes a similar claim about product placement in stories:

The world I live in consists of 250 advertisements a day and any number of unbelievably entertaining options, most of which are subsidized by corporations that want to sell me things...I use a fair amount of pop fiction, but what I mean by it is nothing different than what other people mean in writing about trees or parks and having to walk to the river to get water a hundred years ago. It’s just the texture of the world I live in. (*Salon*)

Wallace seconds Saunders concept of inane branding as part of his artistic palette drawn from the world around him.

The structure of the book divides those worlds according to a holistic topical approach.

The collection is broken into four sections, each one forwarded with a lowercase Roman numeral, a miniature outline of the continental United States, and a centered quote from a

²⁴ Saunders specifically refers to *CivilWarLand In Bad Decline* here, but the point seems to reference his older stories more generally.

different chapter of the neo-conservative *Taskbook for the New Nation*, a fictional treatise on American society written by the fictional Bernard “Ed” Alton. The quotes reference a non-existent work, but their dumb equations of prosperity with freedom, the insistence on referring to outsiders as “enemies,” and the euphemistic chapter titles²⁵ all suggest a kind of intellectual propaganda, a corrupt voice of reason that states openly the belief system that Saunders seems to worry many Americans hold, at least implicitly.

These faux-historical citations serve to introduce the four sections with four “teachings” or predictions of the near future. The first warns of those who will “assail the health of our commerce, throwing up this objection and that” (2) to the practices that advance and increase consumption, asserting that they want to hold society back from true growth. The second charges those who question “the distinction between beloved and enemy, friend and foe, neighbor and stranger” (65), saying that they will rob Americans of their ability to distinguish good and evil with their neutralizing claims that all humans share a certain kind of common ground. The third identifies those “outcasts” and “chronic complainers” whose “primary function is to object, to dissent, to find fault with our traditional mode of living” (107), and connects their fringe position as interlopers with their discontent, questioning their right to make such objections. The final entry falls back to a strange inverted relativism, suggesting that the most important truth is “preserving one’s preferred way of life,” that truth itself is “an ongoing faith in... that which one feels and knows in one’s heart to be right, all temporary and ephemeral contraindications notwithstanding” (183). The *Taskbook* drifts from principle to principle in its prioritizing and defense of the “American way” over all other needs and concerns, contradicting itself and its high moral tone in the process. Its primary goal, though never clearly stated, seems to be defending a particular sense of “American” as that which is consumptive, xenophobic,

²⁵ E.g. “Shortfalls of the Honesty Paradigm”

stubborn in the face of opposition, and confident in its conclusions, even in the face of false evidence.

The quotes chosen from the *Taskbook's* admonitions also introduce the topical ranges for the stories that follow, though not so cleanly as to make *In Persuasion Nation* its own propagandistic book of fables. Generally speaking, the first section deals with advertising and commercial culture as potentially problematic, while the second includes stories that center on the kind of paranoia that arises after communal tragedy, including a 9/11 parable in which a man's brother convinces his entire town to kill all the dogs in the area. The third deals with modes of resistance within self-standing communities established on unhealthy terms, and the fourth presents a pair of more pedestrian stories, set in the familiar territories of the childhood neighborhood of memory and a suburban government office (though the last does feature a fair number of conversations with ghosts and departures of the soul into eternity). The stories complicate, when not openly refuting by example, the claims made by the *Taskbook*.

The tension between the *Taskbook* and the stories thus cuts both ways: the *Taskbook* quotes give a general conceptual space for the stories to operate in, and the stories use the *Taskbook* as an antagonistic presence to operate against, a direction for the shotgun to aim at. The resulting dialogue gives *In Persuasion Nation* a thematic energy that frames the stories in terms of addressing issues facing a potential America that embodied Saunders's fears about the present. The *Taskbook* and the stories both predict and describe the same near-future America, just from different perspectives.

Within that structure, Saunders uses two methods of storytelling in particular to address the concerns of dehumanizing advertisement and entertainment in a society ordered around consumer need. The first section depends on this first story form, in which he takes a particular

tendency in American advertising culture that seems troubling and hyper-extends it, making it central to the social and economic life of the characters at hand. The third section deals with the second, in which he imagines established storytelling forms as human landscapes and then deals with the human consequences that arise from the resulting tension. Both represent examples of the short story as a means of addressing the human concerns present in consumer culture not by demonstrating how banal and trivial humanity has become, but by pointing out how resilient it is in the face of overwhelming corruption.

Whereas Wallace develops a single intricate world and sets it as a backdrop, Saunders builds a dozen or so topically-oriented environments and places characters with relatable responses and concerns in the midst of them. “My Flamboyant Grandson” presents an America in which the consumption of advertisements maintains an overwhelming technological presence. The narrator matter-of-factly describes the Everly Strips he must wear, scanners that keep data on their owners so that when the wearers pass by Everly Readers, they experience a parade of images:

The building-mounted miniscreens at eye level showing images reflective of the Personal Preferences we’d stated on our monthly Everly Preference Worksheets, the numbers Cybec Sudden Emergent Screens out-thrusting or down-thrusting near our faces, and in addition I could very clearly hear the sound-only messages being beamed to me and me alone via various Casio Aural Focusers” (15). The personalized messages the narrator receives are different from those of his grandson, and the two thus walk in completely different worlds. The landscape of this Manhattan is composed of layers upon layers of advertisements: even after the narrator removes his shoes, disabling the Readers, “all around and above us

were those towering walls of light, curving across building fronts, embedded in the sidewalks, custom-fitted to light poles (16). The branding of even the architecture suggests a level of oppressive ubiquity, even as the advertisements themselves feel harmless and familiar, playing off such familiar tropes as “a fake flock of geese turning into a field of Bebe logos (17).

This never-ending flow doesn't brainwash the narrator. He finds them more obnoxious than oppressive. Their ubiquity, however, as well as their layering over immediate visual experience with holograms, suggests the replacing of immediate experience with advertising images.

That prioritizing of the advertising plays out practically in “My Flamboyant Grandson” as civic requirements placed on consumers in this America: the narrator's removal of his Everly Strips produces a passive-aggressive Citizen Helper who gently questions the narrator's choice not to “Celebrate My Preferences” (17). The Helper then warns that he will “write up” the narrator if he does not make up for the advertisements he missed while his shoes were off. The Civic Helper refers the narrator to the Active Complaints Center, where he will have to “watch that corrective video called *Robust Economy, Super Moral Climate!*” (18). Later, the narrator receives a 1,000 dollar fine in the mail for removing the strips. Refusal to partake in the consumptive process is literally criminal, a rejection of national values tantamount to civil disobedience. The grandfather here is a potential consumer, and nothing more.

Part of what keeps that setting from ringing as hysterical moralizing from Saunders is the familiarity of the brand names and locations and the benignity of the punishments, the fact that the America given is exaggerated in its allegiance to the advertising image but not wholly foreign. No mind control needles or forced narcotics force consumers to their knees, just petty bureaucratic legislation. Moreover, the Broadway show sounds decent, Broadway and Forty-

Fourth still reads as a busy commercial intersection, and the advertisements are as hacky and cheap as the ones on contemporary American television: a Gene Kelly hologram hawks electronics for Frankie Z., and the cascade of advertisements on the walls includes “a rain of gold coins falling into the canoe of a naked rainforest family” and “a dying grandmother’s room filled with roses by a FedEx man who then holds up a card saying, ‘No Charge’” (17). In effect, the advertising culture of “My Flamboyant Grandson” is not so much monstrous as it is suffocating, making human expression difficult.

The complexity of character here moves the story beyond illustrative parable or mere satire. This Korean War veteran simply wants to take his grandson, who suspiciously dances and lip-synchs to Babar records, to a Broadway show, but finds when he presents his Promissory Voucher from 1-800-CULTURE that he must first deliver Proof of Purchases from Major Artistic Sponsors to a Redemption Center. He mentions that his own grandfather “constantly taunted me for having enlarged calves” (14) and that he wants his theatrical grandson to feel comfortable with himself, a believable want for a decent old man. He has a detailed history and a fully developed voice, and when he pushes the Citizen Helper down and runs down the Manhattan city sidewalk with his grandson, his choice appears brave but not overwrought.

That specificity reframes the nature of the story’s setting. When the narrator says in his final reflections that “America, to me, should be shouting all the time, a bunch of shouting voices, most of them wrong, some of them nuts, but please, not just one droning glamorous reasonable voice” (21), it stands as the understandably pensive plea of an older man who loves his boy who “looks like no one else, acts like no one else, his clothes are increasingly like plumage, late at night he choreographs using plastic Army men, he fits no mold and has no friends, but I believe in my heart that someday something beautiful may come from him” (22),

not a rant from a political organizer raging against a faceless corporation. The story serves as a character narrative first and a social critique second, a sincere exploration of personality set amongst realistically absurd marketing details, not a series of jokes about invasive advertising techniques.

The world of “Jon” plays into even more typical dystopian tropes: Jon and Carolyn are advertising testers in a youth compound; they have been kept there since they were small children, and they serve as guinea pigs for advertising techniques in whatever age group they represent as they grow. They are forbidden from sex, heavily controlled by their supervisors, and given a neutralizing drug called Aurabon when the death of a child in their ward depresses them. Their lives are not secret: they appear on “TrendSetters and TasteMakers gum cards” as celebrities, America’s bright youth who deliver unto the world the best possible advertisements and products through their service. Their culture’s celebrities are “luminaries such as actress Lucy Farrell-Garesh or Mark Belay, chairperson of Thatscool.com” (30). They receive awards for “Excellence in Assessing” in their category of White Teens (29). They have also never seen the outside world, except through the windows of their compound.

Again, the issue at hand in this first grouping of stories deals more with internal struggle than external manipulation or control. Jon and Carolyn do not wrestle against dark overlords, fleeing in the dark of night as young people in science-fiction compounds so often do. Their overseer is the fatherly Mr. Slippen, who shows genuine concern for them after Carolyn becomes pregnant, even giving them a double-sized Privacy Tarp to share as a family. Jon and Carolyn are not prisoners. If a tester decides to leave, the facility cannot legally hold them.

The problem is not that Jon and Carolyn are trapped inside the building, but that the outside world, in fact, consists entirely of internal references for them. They have been “hooking

in” to direct advertising feeds through holes in the backs of their heads, and they perceive reality entirely through internal references to commercials, a pattern that quickly turns from funny to debilitating within the narration. Jon describes sex with Carolyn as “LI 34321 for Honey Grahams, where the stream of milk and the stream of honey enjoin to make that river of sweet-tasting goodness” (26). His fears of the outside world include the hard labor of “LI 77656 for Midol, merely piling lumber as the cars rush past” (30). When Carolyn leaves to provide a better life for their child, she tells him that “[y]ou are either with me or agin me” (31), a reference to their shared awareness of a Lysol advertisement, and the allusion makes him laugh when he should be worried.

Saunders primarily transcends satire in these stories by placing a conscientious objector within the text itself, a person or persons for whom the absurdity carries real emotional weight. The superficial crassness of the landscape thus does not an end in itself, silliness for the sake of mocking the silly, but rather operates as a foil for the human spirit to establish itself against. These stories depend upon the human to place the inhumanity of the landscapes in context, almost as a kind of internal accountability.

Jon and Carolyn thus must make a difficult choice in a surprisingly good-natured world, a community of advertising testers whose cluelessness might simply read as comic ineptitude were it not for the death of another couple’s child early in the story. For Carolyn, who cannot hook into the anti-depressants because of her own pregnancy, the question becomes one of connection with the outside world (29). That outside world, however, poses real dangers for those so dependent on the mediation of the commercial:

Now all of the sudden here came those LIs of Flowers, due to I had seen those real-life flowers, such as big talking daisies for Polaroid (LI 10119), such as that

kid who drops a jar of applesauce but his anal mom totally melts when he hands her a sunflower (LI 22365), such as the big word PFIZER that as you pan closer is made of roses (LI 88753)...And I blinked on Pause but it did not Pause, and blinked on End but it did not End. (57)

Thus the “joke” of the commercial testers takes on its weight, as Jon and Carolyn make risky, emotionally involved decisions to pursue a life outside of the testing facility, a cripplingly unmediated experience.

Again, character here turns the “satire” on its head. Jon and Carolyn might serve as metaphors for the struggle with commercial mediation, but they work better as stupidly young lovers trying to reconnect after losing their common ground, lovers that lack language for their feelings and therefore say brave stupid things like “that night when you came to my Tarp you were like a lion taking what he wanted but now you are like some bunny wiffing his nose in fright” (38). Their hard fight just to talk meaningfully after absorbing so many vapid commercials grants the story immediacy and emotional stakes; it reframes their goofy commercial testing zone as a site of resistance, though not in the traditional political sense.

This tension between setting and character becomes more overt in the third group of stories in *In Persuasion Nation*. In the third section, Saunders concentrates this method, taking the simulated responses of a cultural form and exploding it. “In Persuasion Nation” and “Brad Carrigan, American” both imagine forms of television programming as whole worlds, real and intact. The result forces privileged forms of entertainment into direct conflict with notions of human worth and dignity.

Saunders, rather than deconstructing forms of entertainment, realizes them more fully. Instead of demonstrating the cracks and flaws in the system of total advertising or consumer-

driven entertainment, he re-imagines those systems in human terms. He humanizes the inhuman, calling for an ethical treatment of fictional worlds. Saunders expresses his concerns about the nature of televisual discourse in America not by making those tropes look stupid, but by restaging them on emotionally sensitive terms. He turns clever take-downs into platforms for emotional risk.

“In Persuasion Nation” begins with a series of short commercial vignettes, more or less imitative of traditional product sketches: one product (or proponent of a product), such as a Slap-of-Wack Bar or Timmy, who loves MacAttack Mac&Cheese, asserts dominance or superiority over another character or product. The sketches move toward the typical advertising punchline: the Slap-of-Wack bar beats up an unassuming orange, who challenges the Slap-of-Wack bar’s claims to nutritional superiority on the grounds that he is “comprised of eighty percent high-fructose corn syrup” (138), a fact that the Slap-of-Wack bar conveniently puts down with his catch phrase: “Slap it up your Wack!” The emphasis here initially rests on the absurdity and general mean-spiritedness that most commercial vignettes operate under, a reliance on either bullying humiliation or cruel indifference toward others that seems to dominate advertising culture, at least on television.

As the sketches lengthen, however, the moral stakes seem to escalate with the level of violence enacted. Timmy ignored his grandmother; the grandparents who love Doritos run over their grandson and chop him into pieces, ignoring his cries for mercy. By the time the orange/Grammy/man-briefly-involved-with-a-Ding-Dong/piles-of-mush/penisless-man coalition stands up to their oppressors, their response seems morally justified.

Saunders seems to want to get at something deeper than mere send-ups of commercial culture, though. The polar bear’s struggle with doubt, his fear that the green symbol formed

from the Slap-of-Wack bar does in fact determine the fate of their world and is in fact GOD, raise the comedy of the piece to a transcendental search for the Third Way, the light beyond blasphemy and blind adherence to a dogma that requires indefinite cruelty. The polar bear moves into heavy philosophical ground, and does so not as a joke, but with an intensity established after a long build of shorter narratives that started as creative plays on a form but end as established camps of struggle against oppression. After all of the suffering and humiliation the polar bear and his friends have endured, his discovery that “GOD is real!... And we may know Him!” (179) registers as a genuine epiphany, not just a wacky climax.

“Brad Carrigan, American” imagines a television sitcom as a living, breathing environment, with sentient characters who can remember (vaguely) the changes that writers make to their characters. Brad’s show, targeted for cancellation, has begun to change to appeal to a wider audience. Brad seems to notice the changes more than others, and he dislikes them, but such changes come with the territory of malleable character life:

Then things started getting dumber. Plus meaner. Now it’s basically all mean talk and jokes about poop and butts. He and Doris used to talk about real issues, about them, their relationships, their future hopes and plans. Once she lost her engagement ring and bought a fake so he wouldn’t notice. One he became jealous when the butcher started giving her excellent cuts of meat. (122)

Saunders could simply write the world of Buddy the dog-puppet and Chief Wayne and Doris, who ignore the dead bodies in the yard and enjoy their episodes of *FinalTwist*, a miniature parody of sequence-based reality shows that never moves past the level of satire. “The Carrigans” would read as a funny, biting takedown of the American sitcom, complete with mock

lessons such as Aunt Lydia's claim that "in many countries, this sort of meal would only be eaten by royalty" (136), except for the fact that, as Wallace notes, those sitcoms already exist.

Instead, Saunders foregrounds Brad, an empathetic, emotionally resonant character who questions the internal programming of his own show, rejecting the cruelty of *FinalTwist*. "They killed people. They tricked people into eating their own mothers" (124), Brad says, and regardless of how "interesting" or "surprising" the show is, he just can't enjoy that kind of human pain. When Brad's refusal to stop empathizing renders him *Written Out*, struggling to "retain this feeling of pity" (154), that quality of care for the other that he failed to act on for most of his written life, he has done more than illustrate the petty and even unloving nature of network television; he has become a man who wanted badly to please his wife, who wanted to keep his world decent for as long as possible. He has lifted his story out of pure satire to a depiction of genuine human struggle.

In other words, fantastic settings do not function as escapes for Saunders, but as places to work out the issues in his own world. He tells *The New Yorker* that "even though the settings and situations in the stories were sort of cartoonish and overwrought, my real beliefs and anxieties were being mapped out onto these fictive worlds more powerfully and exactly (albeit inadvertently and in a sort of fun-house manner) than they ever had in anything more "real-life" that I'd written" (n. pag.). Saunders thus achieves the initial bite of satire without giving up the passion of intimate characterization. He is generous to his characters, even loving. Saunders' concern, after all, is not so much that consumer capitalism is evil, but that it cuts us off from each other.

It is a perspective that matches his proposed solution to the problem of television at the end of "The Braindead Megaphone":

What I propose as the antidote is simply: awareness of the Megaphonic tendency, and discussion of same. Every well thought-out rebuttal to dogma, every scrap of intelligent logic, every absurdist reduction of some bullying stance is the antidote. Every request for the clarification of the vague, every poke at smug banality, every pen stroke in a document under revision is the antidote.

This battle, like any moral battle, will be won, if won, not with some easy corrective tidal wave of Total Righteousness, but with small drops of specificity and aplomb and correct logic, delivered titrationally, by many of us all at once. Turn that Megaphone down, and insist that what's said through it be as precise, intelligent, and humane as possible. (19)

Saunders works out in his stories what he hopes to see in American discourse: take the small, imagine it with compassion, word it with grace, and expect the result to lead somewhere better than it does now.

Conclusion

*“It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations” – Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn**

His first broadcast on-air after the twin towers fell, David Letterman, the late night king of sarcasm, gave a humble, direct, sincere response to the attacks, lauding Mayor Giuliani’s leadership and a small Montana town that donated to relief efforts. The following Monday, Roger Rosenblatt published an article in *Time* titled, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End.” In it, he celebrated the collapse of the “detachment and personal whimsy” (n. pag.) that had come to define popular culture over the previous thirty years. He said that the pain and poignancy of direct loss would mean the passing of an era in which “even the most serious things were not to be taken seriously” (n. pag.). He looked forward to rebuilding America with earnestness and sincerity.

The problem with Rosenblatt’s claim, as AJ Aronstein stated in an article published ten years later, is that very quickly after that requiem America faced a dramatic need for the kinds of critique and self-correction that stable ironists provide for society. “Just when we needed irony to arm ourselves against onslaught of political insanity,” he says, “it died” (n. pag.). Fortunately, Aronstein argues, stable ironies survived the crash, allowing programs like *The Colbert Report* and *Saturday Night Live* to level criticisms without fearing too strong of a backlash. The unstable irony of the refusal to acknowledge essential experiences such as love and God faded, allowing for principled stands against potentially oppressive responses to foreign attacks.

Infinite Jest and *In Persuasion Nation* appear roughly five years before and after, respectively, the September 11 attacks, and that distance seems to separate the nature of the two

works in some essential way. *Infinite Jest* imagines an America so absorbed in its own melancholy and anhedonia that it can't even muster up the strength to defend itself against an optional death-tape, a world where the corporations have won control of time itself. Wallace's main characters don't fight against O.N.A.N.; they struggle against themselves. They seek meaning and truth and a way to connect with the people around them. For them, the isolation that their society of the spectacle creates is the greatest threat they face, even as it takes physical form and threatens to undo them from within.

In Persuasion Nation deals extensively with its characters' inner struggles, but those struggles appear in the context of increasingly inhumane social structures, mad idolatries of advertising culture or the demands of undeveloped worldviews or even the seemingly unchallengeable order of reality itself. Their hearts call them to resist the totality of the systems they belong to, even as that resistance costs them their lives, their money, or their security within a given group. Whereas *Infinite Jest* figures the centrality of entertainment as a corrosive societal obsession, *In Persuasion Nation* lays out the cultural logic of that commitment to pleasure as an unhealthy way of dealing with the world.

Both works feature narratives of individuals struggling in cultures dominated by the modes of visual entertainment and corporate advertising. Both offer to address relational problems caused by those structures; one wrestles with the isolation of a nation gratifying itself into oblivion, while the other calls for kinder, saner reactions to threats against that system, for an attempt to try and understand the other before attacking it. Both attempts rest not in simple satire or stable irony but in imagining the characters that populate those absurd, inane worlds in intimate, emotional, psychologically-nuanced terms.

Neither voice, though, advocates violence against that system. The terrorists of *Infinite Jest* don't offer a solution but an ultimate enslavement. The resisters of *In Persuasion Nation* often find themselves murdered, erased, or barely in control of motor functions. Even the commercial vignette characters who rise up against their oppressors in "In Persuasion Nation" soon find themselves mentally zapped into new vignettes by the story's self-proclaimed God figure. Brutal attacks against consumer culture don't work, these stories suggest. They only make things worse.

Why, then, create works that fight isolation or a lack of empathy in the first place? Why strive for sincerity if it only leads to suffering? Near the end of *Infinite Jest*, Don Gately, a supervisor at the halfway house who has spent much of the novel recovering from a narcotics addiction, refuses pain medication after he receives a brutal injury defending a low-life resident under his care. Gately cannot move or speak, but he can hear those around his hospital bed speak to him. He reflects on the pain he feels and how different it is from the pain of addiction:

His right side is past standing, but the hurt is nothing like the Bird's hurt was. He wonders, sometimes, if that's what Ferocious Francis and the rest want him to walk toward: Abiding again between heartbeats; tries to imagine what kind of impossible leap it would take to live that way all the time, by choice, straight: in the second, the Now, walled and contained between slow heartbeats. Ferocious Francis's own sponsor, the nearly dead guy they wheel to White Flag and call Sarge, says it all the time: It's a gift, the Now: it's AA's real gift: it's no accident they call it *The Present*. (860)

According to *Infinite Jest*, vulnerability and risk may kill you or make you a fool, but they're worth the payoff, as the other alternative is spiritual obliteration. The hurt of the present moment may not dissolve the system, but it disarms it; it robs it of its ultimate threat.

In Persuasion Nation offers another answer, again and again, at the ends of each of its stories. At the conclusion of "In Persuasion Nation," long after the local GOD has dissolved the commercial rebellion against the incivility of the vignette programming, the miserable polar bear jumps off a cliff. He fears that GOD will save him and force him back into commercial slavery, but the glowing green triangle does not appear. The polar bear comes to a series of conclusions as he feels:

The green symbol may actually not be GOD at all... He may just be a very powerful faker... The real actual GOD, the polar bear realizes in his last instant of life, has been heretofore entirely unknown to him! And yet this true GOD must exist, and be knowable, since the idea of this perfect and merciful GOD is emanating, fully formed, from within him, the polar bear! (178)

The polar does not die, but bounces off the floor of his cartoon universe, fervent with hope; the divine ability to think beyond the immediate logic of the economy at hand leads him to a third way, not out of the faulty system but beyond it.

At a final level, though, Saunders's call for empathy, for reconnection, for a reach past the immediate consumption of image and sound and product, leads to intimacy, flawed and difficult and fragmented as it may be. Jon ends his story with his hopes for life with Carolyn after they leave the testing facility:

Maybe we can come to be normal, and sit on our porch at night, the porch of our own house, like at LI 87326, where the mom knits and the dad plays guitar and

the little kid works very industrious with his Speak & Spell, and when we talk, it will make total sense, and when we look at the stars and moon, if choosing to do that, we will not think of LI 44387, where the moon frowns down at this dude due to he is hiding in his barn eating Rebel CornBells instead of proclaiming his SnackLove aloud, we will not think of LI 09383, where this stork flies through some crying stars who are crying due to the baby who is getting born is the future Mountain Dew Guy, we will not think of that alien at LI 33081 descending from the sky going, Just what is this thing called a Cinnabon? (60)

Even as his speech collapses at the shock of trying to form meaning outside of the thousands of referents that form his perception of the world, the layers upon layers of processed and packaged simulations of experience, Jon wonders; he hopes: “In terms of what we will think of, I do not know. When I think of what we will think of, I draw this like total blank and get scared, so scared my Peripheral Area flares up green, like when I have drank too much soda, but tell the truth I am curious, I think I am ready to try” (61). Jon ends where Gately does, at the edge of a reach past his limits.

The claim of both of these story collections, then, at their logical, emotional ends, is the same at heart; the interventions makes the same implicit statement: immersed in a system that makes it so difficult to connect and care, they say, trying is worth the risk, trying is enough, trying is all we can do.

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