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REPRESENTING ENTERTAINMENT(S) IN *INFINITE JEST*

PHILIP SAYERS

The title of David Foster Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* refers, amongst other things, to several films of the same title directed by one of the novel's characters, James O. Incandenza (also known as Himself and the Mad Stork), the last of which provides what Wallace refers to (using, not untypically, a term taken from the realm of cinema) as the novel's "*MacGuffin*" (Lipsky 157). Incandenza's final *Infinite Jest*, referred to throughout the novel and henceforth in this paper simply as "the Entertainment" (*Infinite Jest* 90) is, however, "not just a *MacGuffin*" (Lipsky 157). It is a film apparently so compelling, so entertaining, that anyone who catches as much as a glimpse of it becomes utterly entranced, unable to engage in any activity other than watching the film, over and over, until death. As such, it is also "kind of a metaphorical device" (Lipsky 157), through which Wallace explores the role of film and television in contemporary US culture.

Wallace uses the term "entertainment" throughout the novel, and elsewhere in his writing (e.g., *Supposedly Fun Thing* 148), as a synonym for movies and television shows. This paper, then, explores first Wallace's representation of entertainment in general, and second his representations of specific "entertainments."

In his short 1975 essay "Upon Leaving the Movie Theater," Roland Barthes writes about the cinema in a manner strikingly reminiscent of the Entertainment in *Infinite Jest*. He compares the movie-going experience to hypnosis, and he describes the spectator as glued by the nose to the screen, "riveted to the representation" (3). Essay and novel are both concerned with the question of how to "loosen the glue's grip" (3), and both present film as conducive

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of sleep: Barthes writes of "spectators slip[ping] into their seat as they slip into a bed, coat and feet on the seat in front of them" (2). This description is echoed in the way Wallace describes the viewing habits of the Canadian/Saudi medical attaché who becomes the Entertainment's first victim. For him, watching a selection of entertainment cartridges is a method of relaxation after a long and stressful day of dealing with the maxillofacial yeast of the Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment: "at the day's end, he needs unwinding in the very worst way" (*Infinite Jest* 34). "Worst," here, presumably means most effective, but the choice of word implies that the attaché's methods of relaxation are bad for him. Indeed they are. After Wallace explicitly compares entertainment with drugs and alcohol ("the medical attaché partakes of neither kif nor distilled spirits" [34]), the soon-to-be-victim settles down to watch the lethal Entertainment. His usual routine is to eat dinner "before the viewer in his special electronic recliner," which, when his entertainments have had their soporific effect, tilts backwards so that he "is permitted to ease effortlessly from unwound spectation into a fully relaxed night's sleep, still right there in the recumbent recliner" (34).

The torpor-inducing effect of the Entertainment is far more potent than that of the attaché's usual selection of cartridges, but, for Barthes and for Wallace, even normal entertainment (as opposed to *the* Entertainment) brings about sleep. Entertainment, for Wallace, lies on one side of a "continuum," at the other side of which is art (Lipsky 80): whereas entertainment's "chief job is to make you so riveted by it that you can't tear your eyes away, so the advertisers can advertise" (Lipsky 79) and it "gives you a certain kind of pleasure that I would argue is fairly *passive*" (80), art "requires you to *work*" (174). Wallace portrays entertainment in terms that recall Barthes's descriptions of his visits to the cinema, and Wallace's own essay on David Lynch: "a commercial movie doesn't try to wake people up but rather to make their sleep so comfortable and their dreams so pleasant that they will fork over money to experience it" (*Supposedly Fun Thing* 170).

He also frequently compares it to candy—"Real pleasurable, but it dudn't [sic] have any calories in it" (Lipsky 79)—in that both are "treats that are basically fine and fun in small amounts but bad for us in large amounts and *really* bad for us if consumed in the massive regular amounts reserved for nutritive staples" (*Supposedly Fun Thing* 37). This analogy has slightly different implications than Wallace's other favorite point of comparison, drugs and alcohol, in that candy is something associated with childhood. Childhood can, for Wallace, be a time of "total, entranced, uncritical absorption into this fantasy world of TV" (Lipsky 149). For Barthes, drawing on Lacan, childhood is characterized not only by rapt spectation but also by narcissistic (mis)identification: "I glue my nose, to the point of disjointing it, on the mirror of the screen, to the imaginary other with which I identify myself narcissistically (reportedly, the spectators who insist on sitting closest to the screen are children and cinephiles)" (3).

Here Barthes draws an analogy between the relationship of the spectator to the image onscreen and the relationship of the infant to his reflection in the mirror, as explained by Lacan through his concept of the *stade du miroir* (an analogy earlier made explicit: "I am locked in on the image as though I were caught in the famous dual relationship which establishes the imaginary" [3]). This would figure the spectator not so much as a child but as an infant: although Lacan later expanded the idea to the status of general structural relationship of human life, the *stade du miroir* was, in his seminal 1949 paper "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," a phase that took place in an infant aged between six and eighteen months (Lacan 1285-86). In *Infinite Jest*, as mentioned above, it is narcissistic identification with an infant that seems to provide one of the keys to the power of the Entertainment: as Joelle says, "I don't think there's much doubt the lens [used to film the Entertainment] was supposed to reproduce an infantile visual field. That's what you could feel was driving the scene" (940). James Incandenza, appearing post mortem to Don Gately, confirms that the viewer (or at least one viewer in particular) is meant to identify with the infant, sharing his or her emotional, as well as optical, point of view: the film is described as a "magically entertaining toy to dangle at the infant still somewhere alive" in Hal (839). Again, we see a degree of ambivalence in Wallace's writing: infancy and childhood represent narcissistic susceptibility to the fatal Entertainment, yet they also represent something of humanity, "since to be human...is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile" (695). These pejorative words come from the cold and mechanical Hal; the novel seems to suggest to the reader that Hal is right about what it means to be human, but perhaps wrong to believe that this is necessarily a bad thing (certainly the infantile internal self is preferable to "the hip empty mask, anhedonia" [695]).

Whereas entertainment (epitomized by *the* Entertainment—which is "what entertainment ultimately leads to" [Lipsky 79]) gives a passive pleasure that Wallace associates with substances and infancy (bringing these threads together, Hugh/Helen Steeply, the American agent attempting to track down, in female disguise, the Entertainment, describes one victim as resembling "some drug-addicted newborn" [507]), art on the other hand is active and engaging. Wallace in the David Lynch essay: "An art film's point is usually more intellectual or aesthetic [than that of a commercial movie], and you usually have to do some interpretive work to get it" (*Supposedly Fun Thing* 170). The same is true of other forms of art, including, most significantly, literature. Certainly *Infinite Jest* requires some interpretive work, as well as the plain old effort involved in devoting oneself to finishing a book that concludes at page 1079, after close to 100 pages of notes and errata—not to mention reading it, as Wallace hopes, twice; he states in a radio interview:

> The really hard and really scary thing was trying to make it fun enough so somebody would want to [read it twice], and also— and how to have it be fun without have it be reductive or pandering or get co-opted by the very principles of commercialism and, you know, "like me, like me, like me" that...the book is partly about. (qtd. in Silverblatt, n.p.)

Wallace here explains the double bind in which he finds himself, stuck between a rock (entertainment, "commercialism") and a hard place (art, demanding too much of the reader without sufficient reward). Some kind of balance must be achieved: as Wallace tells Lipsky, "we're not equipped to work all the time. And there's times when, for instance for me, commercial fiction or television is perfectly appropriate" (174). Both film and literature are subject to the entertainment/art continuum, and excess in either direction can be dangerous; in *Infinite Jest*, when, in the 1998 of the novel's alternate future, America is faced with a lack of new television to watch, "domestic-crime rates, as well as out-and-out suicides, topped out at figures that cast a serious pall over the penultimate year of the millennium" (415). Once again, then, we have ambivalence; speaking about *Infinite Jest*, Wallace exclaims: "God, if the book comes off as some kind of indictment of entertainment, then it fails" (Lipsky 80-81).

Although, as I have mentioned, both literature and film are subject to his entertainment/art continuum, Wallace is clearly aware of important differences, not only between literature and filmed entertainment (TV or movies), but also between filmed entertainment and other forms of art:

> But I think what we need is seriously engaged art, that can teach again that we're smart. And that there's stuff that TV and movies—although they're great at certain things—cannot give us. But that have to create the motivations for us to want to do the extra work, you know, to get these other kinds of art. And I think you can see it in the visual arts, I think you can see it in music... (Lipsky 71)

Wallace's point is that this "seriously engaged art" will, as long as it is sufficiently engag*ing* to keep the reader's attention, teach us not only that "we're smart" (unlike TV, which teaches "the insidious...meta-lesson that you're dumb" [Lipsky 71]), but also that filmed entertainment has different properties than those of other media. It would therefore also suggest that the "seriously engaged art" would not itself be in the form of movies or television. Wallace's tentative manifesto comes in the context of a discussion of the relationship between books and television, and Lipsky focuses on the differences between TV and the novel, but Wallace, through his comparison with the visual arts and music, suggests that "seriously engaged art" may not be the exclusive domain of literature. Given Wallace's tendency to distinguish

between (commercial) "movies" and (art) "film," however, it seems possible that the "stuff that TV and movies...cannot give us"—such as, for example, the lesson "that we're smart"—might just as conceivably be given to us by an art film as by an avant-garde novel.

My interpretation so far has tended to emphasize that which is shared between film and literature more than that which distinguishes them, arguing like W. J. T. Mitchell in his essay "Ekphrasis and the Other" that, in many ways, there is "no essential difference between texts and images" (*Picture Theory* 160). Both can serve the function either of entertainment or of art. Wallace's argument here does however concede that there are certain things that certain media "cannot give us." Similarly, Mitchell continues: "there are important differences between visual and verbal media at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions" (161). This would allow one to make an argument in favor of the idea of medium specificity, an idea for which Lipsky a little earlier voices his support: "*the best thing is to show what TV can't, to use the ways books are better than TV*" (71).

The medium specificity thesis is defined by Noël Carroll as the "idea... that each art form, in virtue of its medium, has its own exclusive domain of development" (5). Those who subscribe to it tend to "believe that the proper direction of their art form will be involved in the isolation and definition of the quidity [sic] of the...medium" (6)—that is, more or less what Lipsky suggests. It is, however, important to note that Lipsky's proposal as to what the novelist should do rests on a characterization of the novel that defines it against television, and in so doing posits a relationship of rivalry between the two media. Wallace is more circumspect, with regard both to the nature of the relationship between TV and novel ("We sit around and bitch about how TV has ruined the audience for reading—when really all it's done is given us the really precious gift of making our job harder" [Lipsky 71]) and to the question of medium specificity in general:

> For me a fair amount of aesthetic experience is—is erotic. And I think a certain amount of it has to do with this weird kind of intimacy with the person who made it.
>
> *No other medium gives that to you?*
>
> Yeah—although you feel a kind of weird intimacy with actors in drama, although it's a bit different. *That's* more I think an enabling of the fantasy that you are them, or getting you to desire them as a body or something. It's interesting: I've never read really good essays about the different kinds of seduction in different kinds of art. (Lipsky 72)

The beginnings of such a "really good essay" might be found in the work of Roland Barthes, who, as well as writing about the reader's erotic relationship with the text, characterizes the basis of the hypnotic power of film in "Upon Leaving the Movie Theater" as "a distance...not an intellectual one...[but] an

amorous distance" (4). The quotation above also connects with Barthes's essay in Wallace's description of the intimacy of filmic spectation: both the "fantasy that you are them" and the "getting you to desire them as a body" are straight out of Lacan, or perhaps more accurately, not *straight* out of Lacan, but from Lacan via those film theorists, from Christian Metz ("film is like the mirror" [45]) to Barthes himself, who have adapted Lacan's ideas and applied them to film. Wallace suggests that these forms of narcissistic (mis)identification (*méconnaissance*) and desire are more appropriate to the moving image (and perhaps theatre also, given his use of the word "drama") than to literature. He also implies, however, that the effect of these reactions—a "kind of weird intimacy"—is essentially the same as the intimate effect engendered by other types of aesthetic experience: it is just the means that are different. This would suggest a convergent model for the different media, wherein the differences "at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory* 161) do not give rise to diverging goals (as in the medium specificity thesis) but rather to different techniques for the achievement of a similar set of goals, a "kind of weird intimacy" numbering among them.

A further goal that certain films and certain novels may, for Wallace, have in common is to reverse the sleep-inducing effect of the Entertainment: "if the writer does his job right, what he basically does is remind the reader of how smart the reader is. Is to *wake the reader up* to stuff the reader's been aware of all the time" (Lipsky 41, my italics). Similarly, he writes elsewhere that the essential aim of art film is "to '*wake the audience up*' or render us more 'conscious'" (*Supposedly Fun Thing* 169, my italics). In this respect, the endeavors of Wallace's ideal novelist and of the art-film director bear a great deal of resemblance to the project of ideological critique. Barthes, when considering the problem of how to achieve separation from the filmic image, considers ideological critique a possible solution: "going [to the cinema] armed with the discourse of counter-ideology" (4) may wake us from the cinematic dream, or even prevent us from falling asleep in the first place. As well as using Lacanian ideas to draw an analogy between the movie-going experience and the *stade du miroir*, Barthes uses quasi-Althusserian terminology to compare the "filmgoer" to the "historical subject" and, correspondingly, the cinema to "ideological discourse." Althusser, who himself draws on Lacan's idea of "the *function of méconnaissance*" (1290) to explain the process of ideological interpellation and recognition, aims, through the process of ideological critique, to achieve "*knowledge* of the mechanism of this recognition" (Althusser 47). This knowledge can potentially help one to achieve some kind of separation from the sleep-inducing (metaphorically speaking) ideological discourse.

Wallace too (not to mention many of his characters in *Infinite Jest*) seeks knowledge of the mechanism of the Entertainment. As we have seen, he does so via analogy and comparison: with sleep, candy, infancy, literature and

ideology. He also does so via the technique of ekphrasis, and it is this that the second half of the paper will explore.

Establishing a definition of ekphrasis is a notoriously difficult task; as Ryan Welsh writes, "Few pieces of media jargon have as long a history or as considerable an evolution" (n.p.). Today, the primary sense of the term might best be expressed by James Heffernan's definition: "verbal representation of a visual representation" (3). A narrower definition might specify the "verbal representation" as poetry and the "visual representation" as a painting, sculpture, or comparable *objet d'art* (as in the ur-example, Homer's description of the shield of Achilles). A broader definition, such as those of Siglind Bruhn or Claus Clüver, might open up both categories—the object and its representation—regarding as necessary only the process of "transmedialization" (Bruhn 51). This would include transfers such as music to poetry, painting to song, dance to sculpture or—most importantly for our purposes—film to novel, as well as the reverse of all of these. For this paper, however, I propose to use Clüver's definition: "*Ekphrasis is the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system*" (26). As he points out, this conception of ekphrasis, as well as allowing for the verbal representation of nonvisual works such as music (whilst limiting the target medium to the verbal), "makes explicit the fact that these non-verbal texts may exist only in their verbalization" (26). This is particularly relevant to *Infinite Jest*, wherein the films described by Wallace for the most part exist only as fictional, verbal entities (at least at the time of the novel's writing).

There is relatively little writing about ekphrasis that focuses specifically on filmic ekphrasis (that is, the verbal description of films, as opposed to the description of visual representations in film, which is one of the foci of Laura M. Sager Eidt's 2008 book *Writing and Filming the Painting*). As François Jost points out, "scholars tend to reflect more on the transformation of written texts into images than on the converse transformation" (71). Two of the most important recent essays on the subject refer to the ekphrasis of film in passing. Mitchell writes: "I have not mentioned the verbal representation of other kinds of visual representation such as...movies...each of which carries its own peculiar sort of textuality into the heart of the visual image" (*Picture Theory* 181). Similarly, Clüver mentions briefly some of the

> peculiar instances of the ancient and common practice of inserting ekphrastic passages into various kinds of narrative, of assigning verbally represented real or fictitious sculptures or sonatas and also dances and *films (as in Manuel Puig's* Kiss of the Spider Woman*)* a whole range of functions in epics, novels or short stories. (31, my italics)

Infinite Jest is certainly one such instance, and the verbally represented films therein certainly, as discussed in the previous section, serve a whole range of functions. This section focuses on one specific function of the way in which Wallace verbally represents films: namely, how the act of ekphrasis questions the relationship between film and novel.

A conventional ekphrasis of the Entertainment is arguably impossible, for, as Remy Marathe (a member of separationist Québécois terrorist cell the A.F.R.—*Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollent*, or the Wheelchair Assassins—with questionable loyalties who seeks the Entertainment) asks, "Who can know what is on them [cartridges containing the Entertainment]? Who can study the Entertainment while detached?" (*Infinite Jest* 489). Watching the cartridge renders the viewer incapable of speaking for any purposes other than to beg for more viewings, and therefore certainly incapable of the process of transmedialization. We know as much because the US government has lost "several U.S.O. test-subjects, volunteers from the federal and military penal systems...in attempts to produce a description of the cartridge's contents"; one volunteer managed a brief ekphrasis of the opening moments, before his "mental and spiritual energies abruptly declined to a point where even near-lethal voltages through the electrodes couldn't divert his attention from the Entertainment" (549).

The ekphrasis of the Entertainment that the US government seeks would be a "safe" form of the cartridge, one that presumably would not have its hypnotic effects. This difference in power between original representation (the Entertainment) and its re-representation (the ekphrasis) is a more pronounced version of the common belief that films are capable of provoking far more intense reactions in their audiences than written words are in theirs. Bruce Morrissette quotes an article written in the 1950s by Walter Pitkin of Columbia University, which claimed that "movies are '10 to 100 times more effective per unit of time' than printed matter," or even, elsewhere in the article, "1,000,000,000 times more effective than the printed" (26). Such a figure would cast no small doubt over the worth of the work of those writers engaged in the ekphrasis of film. Though they are of course (as Morrissette points out) completely "unscientific and unsupported," Pitkin's "findings" are worthy of consideration, not only because they bear "witness to a widely shared intuitive conviction" (26), but also because the case of the Entertainment, fictional as it may be, seems to sustain them.

They might in part be explained by the fact that the filmic image (or, more to the point, the filmic stream of images and sounds), unlike the arbitrary sign-system of language, seems to be so natural. For Mitchell, "The image is the sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as (or, for the believer, actually achieving) natural immediacy and presence" (*Iconology* 43). Given the way that film, more than the still image, takes in (with the uncoded appearance

of photography) both movement and sound, it is reasonable to suggest that the potential believer might be even more easily taken in by the deceptive cinematic sign. Roland Barthes further explains the link between film's facade of "natural immediacy and presence" and the belief in its relative power over the written word: "I am riveted to the representation, and it is this bond which is the basis of the naturalness (pseudo-nature) of the filmed/represented scene (a bond made out of the ingredients of technique)" (3). For Barthes, it is not the "naturalness" that gives rise to the riveting power of film, but rather the "ingredients of technique," used to mask over the coded and arbitrary elements of film, that create the bond with the spectator; only then does the "pseudo-nature" of the cinema come into existence. Barthes and Mitchell both seek to reveal that which is not natural about film. Wallace, via ekphrasis, to some extent does the same, as we shall now see.

The first ekphrastic passage in *Infinite Jest* comes in a section titled:

> *TENNIS AND THE FERAL PRODIGY*, NARRATED BY HAL INCANDENZA, AN 11.5-MINUTE DIGITAL ENTERTAINMENT CARTRIDGE DIRECTED, RECORDED, EDITED, AND—ACCORDING TO THE ENTRY FORM—WRITTEN BY MARIO INCANDENZA... (172)

The chapter heading goes on, detailing the prize won by the film and its date, in relation to the death of James Incandenza, the father of both Hal and possibly (see 451) Mario (two years older than Hal, a physically grotesque and mentally "refracted" [314] but sincere and kind-hearted character and an aspiring filmmaker). If what follows is an ekphrasis, then the chapter heading serves the function of giving the reader the information he might, if he lived in the world of the novel, know before watching the film. Written in a style typical of Wallace, it is a mixture of facts and suggestive interjections. The body of the chapter seems to be nothing more or less than an exact transcript of Hal's narration of the film.

As ekphrasis, it is rather lacking, in that, of the film's two tracks, one—the visual—is left out entirely. Its absence is to some degree compensated for (though to some degree also made all the more noticeable) by the distinctive style of the film's voiceover, in which most of the paragraphs begin "Here is..." or "This is..." (172-76). The lack of the image towards which the narration gestures assigns to the verbal track all descriptive and affective power; certainly the voiceover achieves things that the filmic image alone would have difficulty achieving (such as communicating that bandages around torn ankles should be wrapped "so tightly...your left leg feels like a log" [172]). Given, however, that the text of the chapter is presumably read aloud in its entirety on the film's soundtrack, the verbal representation essentially communicates nothing that the film does not, and fails to communicate a great deal that the film would seem to (not only the image track, and its editing, but also the sound

of the voice reading the script as well as other elements of the sound track). Part of the effect is, by identifying the film entirely with its narration, to make clear just how much of the filmic experience is linguistic, and hence arbitrary and coded. Another part of the passage's effect is to provide a contrast with the next ekphrastic passage, which could not be more different.

It describes another of Mario's cartridges, an untitled film that uses a cast of puppets to tell the story of how the North America that the novel's readers know has transformed into O.N.A.N. (the Organization of North American Nations, led by Johnny Gentle as dirt-phobic US President). This ekphrasis is spread out over 63 pages and interspersed with descriptions of the setting of and reactions to the cartridge's screening (here, unlike in the earlier chapter, inserted seemingly at random,[1] the film is actually being shown within the world of the novel), as well as marginally- and non-related (or at least as non-related as any threads are in the novel) events. The first few pages are particularly worthy of analysis.

> After a page and a half of scene-setting, the ekphrasis itself begins as follows: Mario's thing opens without credits, just a crudely matted imposition of fake-linotype print, a quotation from President Gentle's second Inaugural... against a full-facial still photo of a truly unmistakable personage. This is the projected face of Johnny Gentle, Famous Crooner. This is Johnny Gentle, né Joyner... (381)

Immediately, then, the film sets up a contrast between word and image. The word is written rather than (as in *Tennis and the Feral Prodigy*) spoken, and the image is still. As yet, then, the film described is barely film at all, but little more than a captioned photograph. This has the effect of aligning the passage with more traditional ekphrases of non-moving images, which, for Murray Krieger, serve to "interrupt the temporality of discourse, to freeze it during its indulgence in spatial exploration" (7). This idea draws on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocoön*, which distinguishes between the so-called sister arts, poetry and painting, as a temporal and a spatial form, respectively: "succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter" (91). The composite picture that begins Mario's film, however, is a hybrid of language and image, and so might be said to have a temporal as well as a spatial dimension. Furthermore, since the cartridge as a whole consists mostly of the moving rather than the still image, it undoubtedly has a temporal element. Thus, whether or not the ekphrasis serves to "freeze" the discourse is up for debate. One might even argue the opposite: as the passage continues from the quotation above (which ends by transitioning from ekphrastic representation of a representation—"This is the projected face"—to plain first-order representation—"This is Johnny Gentle"), Wallace spends almost two pages describing Johnny Gentle's background. There are minimal references to the progress of the film until the narrator mentions that behind Gentle is "a

diorama of the Lincoln Memorial's Lincoln" (383), thus revealing that we are once again "seeing" the film as opposed to being explained its contexts. Given the amount of background that Wallace chooses to divulge, one gets the feeling that the progress of the ekphrasis is at this stage significantly slower than that of the film. Perhaps, then, it is the digression that freezes the progress of the ekphrasis, rather than the ekphrasis freezing the advancement of time within the novel.

Alternatively, we might see the digression not as freezing the narrative, but as causing it to skip backwards and forwards in time. *Infinite Jest* is by no means a chronologically linear novel, and its progress is therefore not identical with a linear movement forwards in time. Interestingly, when interviewed Wallace uses the analogy of music videos to explain the nonlinear manner in which he experiences life: "Does your life *approach* anything like a linear narrative?... You watch many videos? MTV videos? Lots of flash cuts in 'em. A lot of shit that looks incongruous but ends up having kind of a dream association with each other" (Lipsky 37). This works equally well as a description of this passage, and the way in which Wallace navigates seemingly "incongruous" pieces of information. As such, it would seem that novel and film (or at least music video) have the same capacity to represent Wallace's experience of life.

This would undermine the medium specificity thesis. Wallace's technique elsewhere in the passage, however, seems to support it. Particularly noticeable in this section is his use of punctuation, a tool basically unavailable to film apart from through the representation of text onscreen (though as Bruce Morrissette points out, there was a time when transitions such as dissolves and fades "were considered to play the role of punctuation or syntactical articulation in film language" [18]). Wallace strings together a series of 82 words with hyphens to create a kind of epic-length adjective to describe Johnny Gentle's phobias (*Infinite Jest* 381) and frequently makes uses of ellipses in dialogue to indicate silent, nonverbal communication, as well as the passage of time (385). He also uses parentheses as a method of expressing the dual tracks (sound and vision) of the film, as in the following example:

> A Johnny Gentle who was as of this new minute sending forth the call that "he wasn't in this for a popularity contest" (Popsicle-stick-and-felt puppets in the Address's audience assuming puzzled-looking expressions above their tiny green surgical masks). (383)

Not only the use of the present tense, but also the phrase "as of this new minute" represent and emphasize the constant present tense of film. The parentheses are, importantly, reserved for the visual rather than the verbal track. This has the effect of hierarchizing the binary opposition, making image subordinate to word.

These uses of punctuation find Wallace exploiting those things that are specific to language, following Lipsky's (later) advice, that "*the best thing is to*

show what TV can't, to use the ways books are better than TV" (71). In the rest of the passage too, Wallace shows off the abilities that the written word affords him, varying his methods of representing speech (direct, reported, or frequently via a dialogue-only play-like format) and giving the reader behind the scenes information (identifying the organ on the soundtrack as "Mrs. Clarke's Wurlitzer" [*Infinite Jest* 384]), some gentle criticism ("It's not the cartridge's strongest scene..." [384]), and descriptions of the venue of the film's showing referring to senses that lie beyond film's representational capacity ("the dining hall is warm and close and multi-odored" [391]). Wallace's descriptions of the varying reactions to the film—witness the Canadian students, "chewing stolidly, faces blurred and distant," in contrast to the Americans, amongst whom there is "much cracking wise and baritone mimicry of [the] President" (385)—emphasize not only the cultural differences between the regions of O.N.A.N., but also the film's capacity to mean different things to different spectators, therefore bringing to the reader's attention its symbolic and coded (rather than natural) nature. The passage is undoubtedly more than just an ekphrasis, and while there may (inevitably) be certain things that a verbal description of a film cannot capture, this passage shows that there are equally many—perhaps more—things that the written word can capture that film cannot.

Ekphrastic passages elsewhere in the novel often work similarly, bringing out both the differences between novel and film and the fact that the latter, like the former, operates through a set of codes rather than naturally. The description of Incandenza's nunsploitation-parody *Blood Sister* makes the reader particularly aware of the ways in which the cartridge adopts the conventions of the genre, such as in its opening, when the pre-credits action scene is frozen "in the middle of the nun's leaping kick, and its title, *Blood Sister: One Tough Nun*, gets matte-dissolved in and bleeds lurid blood-colored light down into the performance credits rolling across the screen's bottom" (701). The reader is aware that these techniques—the freezing, the bleeding of the words—are, as Wallace puts it in the David Lynch essay, "a set of allusive codes and contexts in the viewer's deep-brain core" (*Supposedly Fun Thing* 164).

This description follows Wallace's representation of the pre-credits scene, which begins, like the cartridge, "in violent medias res": "'*AIYEE!*' cries the man, rushing at the nun, wielding a power tool" (701). The two present participles here ("rushing" and "wielding") are an attempt to convey the simultaneous action onscreen that the viewer would perceive concurrently rather than serially; the complaint of *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert is highly applicable here: "I have to put the impact of an instantaneous vision into a sequence of words; their physical accumulation in the page impairs the actual flash, the sharp unity of impression" (Nabokov 97). The inadequacy of the written word is made even more noticeable by the ambiguity of the sentence:

it is not completely clear whether it is the man or the nun who is "wielding a power tool."

The ekphrasis of *Blood Sister* is also notable for its focus on the events in the Viewing Room as well as onscreen. Hal, when the film begins, is alone: "I'm isolating. I came in here to be by myself" (*Infinite Jest* 702). His solitude is quickly disturbed by the entrance of first two students, then several more, who proffer reactions to the film as well as irreverent banter. The scene makes an interesting comparison with Karl Kroeber's comparison of the movie-going with the novel-reading experience:

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

Kroeber's claim that the novel "offers imaginative communion" mirrors the opinion of Wallace, for whom "the point of books was to combat loneliness" (Lipsky xxii). This is not to say, however, that he believed that films always serve to reinforce loneliness: this is precisely the crime of which he accuses television in "E Unibus Pluram" (*Supposedly Fun Thing* 26), but it is not necessarily his experience of all filmed entertainment or art. When Wallace visits the cinema with Lipsky to see commercial action movie *Broken Arrow* (1996), he is "a commenting and empathizing audience," only falling quiet at the film's climax (Lipsky 122-23). Afterwards, he is not silent (like Barthes, who "does not care much to talk after seeing a film" [1]) but animated and communicative. This experience of cinema, like Hal's, is not an isolating one (despite Hal's best—or worst—intentions).

Kroeber's comparison also exhibits both the "pervasive neglect" that film words, according to Kamilla Elliott, have suffered "in film history, criticism, and theory" (3) and the common critical bias for pure arts (such as literature) over hybrid arts (such as film):

> Traditionally, pure arts have been more highly valued than hybrid ones. Therefore, in the battle for representational dominance, novels and films have been pressed toward semiotic and aesthetic purity. Pure arts are not only "better": in the case of hybrid arts masquerading as pure arts, they can also claim territory which another hybrid art has abandoned in order to proclaim its own purity. They do this most commonly by using an analogical rhetoric, in which they speak of themselves in the language of the other. (5)

Wallace does use this "analogical rhetoric" throughout *Infinite Jest*. Whether or not it serves to proclaim the novel's aesthetic purity, though, is uncertain. We might look at phrases such as "The persons' lives' meanings had collapsed to

such a *narrow focus*" (548-49; my italics) or a gun that "pans coolly back and forth" (609; this has the effect of prompting the reader to see both the literal and the metaphorical meanings when words like "shot" and "shoot" are used in relation to the gun). A particularly interesting example is Wallace's two uses of a simile involving time-lapse photography (that is, a filmic technique). In both instances, the simile is used to describe films: Orin watches "clips of him[self] punting [that] unfolded like time-lapsing flowers" (298) and Mario's puppet film uses a montage of newspaper headlines "for a sort of time-lapse exposition of certain developments" (391). In the context of ekphrastic passages, these similes seem paradoxical and self-defeating: the film is described in words, which employ filmic terminology—if the ekphrases must rely on analogies drawn from the sphere of film to describe a film, surely the reader would be better off just watching the film rather than reading its description?

The similes also, I would argue, dilute rather than strengthen the novel's supposed semiotic purity. They acknowledge the influence of film on the novel, an admission that in interview and in his essays Wallace makes freely: of pop references in general (his example is *Gilligan's Island)*, Wallace says that "Me and a lot of the other young writers I know, we use these references sort of the way romantic poets use lakes and *trees*. I mean, they're just part of the mental furniture. That you carry around" (Lipsky 75). Similarly, in "E Unibus Pluram," he writes that the "use of Low references in a lot of today's High literary fiction," as well as helping to "create a mood of irony and irreverence" and "commenting" on "the vapidity of US culture," is most importantly a way of being "just plain realistic" (*Supposedly Fun Thing* 42-43). There are a great deal of pop/Low culture references in *Infinite Jest*, the majority of them being to film (Charlton Heston [205], Rita Hayworth [209], and Raquel Welch [371], for example) and television (for a whole host of references, see 834). In a novel set in an unfamiliar (though in many ways not discontinuous with early twenty-first century America) future, these references provide an important connection to the reader's own experience. Their effect does not seem to be to proclaim an exclusive basis in a single semiotic sign-type.

The novel's already-undermined aesthetic purity is further disrupted by the fact that, as well as using occasional illustrations, diagrams, and graphic signifiers (see 502, 884, 891 and 1024), Wallace has a tendency to use letters and punctuation to convey meaning not only through their arbitrary, linguistic meanings, but also through their iconic meanings—that is, their pictorial resemblances. On at least three occasions he uses a capitalized V to depict not only visual objects ("T-shirt darkly V'd" [386]; "Her arms go up in a V" [760]) but also to evoke auditory effects ("the expanding white V of utter silence in the party's wake" [219]). Elsewhere, Wallace describes the eyebrows of a cat as "\/" (62) and some spilt baking soda as "a parenthesis of bright white on the counter" (236). These unconventional, quasi-hieroglyphic uses of the characters on a keyboard exhibit language's ability to represent spatially as

well as temporally, brandishing a middle digit (a 1, presumably) at Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

These devices have the effect of undermining any claims to aesthetic purity that this or any novel might have. Wallace's use of endnotes in *Infinite Jest* and footnotes throughout much of the rest of his work also emphasizes the visual and physical nature of the texts: readers of *Infinite Jest* are frequently advised to use two, or even three, bookmarks (Kottke), such is the amount of physical manipulation the book prompts with its endnotes and unconventional calendar (there is a handy explanation on 223). It should be noted that many of the more visual qualities of his (or any) books are lost when read as (semiotically "purer") eBooks, which often cannot, technologically, deal with anything but the standard array of letters and symbols. In the eBook edition of Wallace's essay collection *Consider the Lobster* (2005), the copyright page (or screen) at the book's beginning states that "'Host' is not included in this collection because it cannot be formatted as an eBook" (*Consider the Lobster*, eBook edition, 2). "Host" is, paradoxically, an extraordinarily visual essay about radio; it is filled with intricately boxed footnotes, connected to their referents with a frequently-chaotic number of arrows, which occupy so much marginal space (top, bottom and side) that page numbers are frequently elided. Wallace's writing is, then, in many different ways, extremely visual, nonsensing any claims to semiotic purity.

The final passage to be considered is one that, at first glance, might not appear to be ekphrastic at all. It is a passage in which Joelle, seated (not insignificantly) in a chair in the form of film director Georges Méliès at Molly Notkin's apartment, and preparing to attempt suicide via cocaine overdose, recalls the events immediately preceding the scene. It is a verbal representation of a memory rather than "*of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system*" (Clüver 26). The memory, however, is presented as if it were a film, therefore strongly associating the passage with ekphrasis. Joelle, Film & Cartridge Studies student that she is, is frequently described as experiencing life in the same way that a spectator watches a film. Here, she "reels in out of the overall voices' noise but seeing no one really else, the absolute end of her life and beauty running in a kind of stuttered old hand-held 16mm before her eyes, projected against the white screen on her side" (*Infinite Jest* 220-21). The use of the word "reels," with its connotation of reels of film, is surely no accident. This phrase frames the following two pages as an entertainment, and they play out in a constant present tense, with occasional phrases such as "an other-directed second" (221) evoking through ambiguity the language of film. Wallace aligns our visual perspective with that of Joelle: "everything milky and halated through her veil's damp linen" (221). This description recalls both the descriptions of the Entertainment (which has "a milky blur" [939] as if filmed with "a milky filter" [851]) and a nickname for Hal ("Halation," the explanation of which—"A halo-shaped exposure-pattern around light sources

seen on chemical film at low speed....That most angelic of distortions"—also recalls, in its references to angels and film, the Entertainment [97]). Joelle's eyes are figured as the lens of a camera, her veil a filter over it (which also serves the function of protecting her from being seen—like the camera, her vision is one way only).[2]

The language of film, then, is throughout *Infinite Jest*, not only in passages of explicit ekphrasis, but also in other, non-traditionally ekphrastic sections. Wallace's ekphrases draw attention both to the factors that distinguish the written word from filmed entertainment—such as film's pretense of naturalness, its ability to express image (and hence space) and sound, and corresponding inability to express, say, punctuation or the sense of smell, as well as writing's unavoidably sequential nature—and to the characteristics that the two media may or do share—such as the frequently nonlinear treatment of the passage of time, the potential for overcoming loneliness, and a basis in arbitrary, coded techniques rather than the simple recording of nature. The novel provokes questions regarding ideas of medium specificity and the relationship between the novel and film, whether it is complementary or rivalrous, or, as would seem to be the case, something more complicated.

In the first half of this paper, I argued that Wallace's presentation of film in the novel (whether as art or as entertainment) is consistently ambivalent, in aesthetic, intellectual, and moral terms. Film's relation to the novel, I maintained, seemed to be one more of similarity than difference. The second half took this argument further, analyzing areas of equivalence and disparity between the media, suggesting that their relationship might not be one simply of alliance or rivalry, but something more complicated. Perhaps most importantly, I contended that Wallace's technique and his representation of film in the novel reveal an essential element of semiotic hybridity (rather than purity) in his writing, and in writing in general. The relationship between novel and film might therefore best be characterized as intertwined.

Certainly the existence of *Infinite Jest* today in all its various forms is irreducibly hybrid, crossing the boundaries of novel and film, word and image, entertainment and art: there are many short films based on the novel (several of which were exhibited as part of Sam Ekwurtzel's project "A Failed Entertainment"), as well as paintings, graphic design projects, and music videos (The Decemberists' *Calamity Song*). Wallace's calls for a balance between leisure and work, high and low culture, and reading and spectating are arguably even more relevant today than they were in 1996, and the hybrid conception of the text for which I have argued would provide support for these calls. This paper's interpretation of the novel, then, suggests not only that *Infinite Jest* is a powerful call for balance, but also that such a call is more important than ever.

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NOTES

[1] Though only seemingly: despite reviews such as Michiko Kakutani's, describing *Infinite Jest* as merely a "compendium of whatever seems to have crossed Mr. Wallace's mind" (qtd. in Burn 27), the novel, as Wallace has made clear (Silverblatt), is deliberately and intricately structured—specifically, in the pattern of a Sierpinski Gasket.

[2] Mario Incandenza can be seen in much the same way: his head-mount camera makes the young filmmaker's field of vision almost identical with the documentaries he can frequently be found filming (*Infinite Jest* 755).

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