

Narrative Structure in the 24th Endnote of *Infinite Jest*

Alfred North Whitehead, co-author of *Principia Mathematica*, once said, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” In his 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace, who studied mathematical philosophy alongside English at Amherst, prefers endnotes. But Wallace’s “Note and Errata” are not simply reserved for brief asides, minor corrections, and tangential philosophizing; they contain narrative as well (Wallace 983). Indeed: although the 24th endnote, titled “JAMES O. INCANDENZA: A FILMOGRAPHY,” consists entirely of a small note about the archival process followed by a list of James’s seventy-eight known films, there is narrative present. The endnote tells the story of James Incandenza’s gradual progression towards madness. Moreover, the 24th endnote of *Infinite Jest* exhibits a paradox: the individual works of James Incandenza appear to challenge and at times reject narrative structure; however, the filmography itself exhibits narrative progression.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle claims that “the most important things with which tragedy enthralls [us] are parts of plot—reversals and recognitions,” which occur near the end of a narrative work (96). The films of James Incandenza often present a different argument—that there exists enough shared context between the film and its audience that reversals and recognitions, based on this context, can serve as a premise. For example, James’s twenty-sixth film, *The Joke*, is described as having “video cameras in theater record the ‘film’’s audience and project the resultant raster onto screen—the theater audience watching itself watch itself get the obvious ‘joke’ and become increasingly hostile supposedly compromises the involuted ‘antinarrative’ flow” (Wallace 988–989). The audience is presented with an immediate reversal and recognition: that they, themselves, are not just the audience of a film (as most would expect upon entering a theatre),

but that they are the actors and the actors are them. Here, the reversal is not a culmination of the piece—it is the premise. The plot, not having been scripted prior to the release of the film, is purely determined by the characters—they are not merely included for the “sake of their actions,” as Aristotle posits (95).

When narrative works do appear in James Incandenza’s filmography, they are often parodies that critique the narrative of a specific genre or style. The reversals and recognitions of characters as well as the logical flow of events—while certainly present in these parodies—are pushed to the point of absurdism. Take James’s fourteenth and forty-fifth films, *Death in Scarsdale* and *Blood Sister: One Tough Nun*. In *Death in Scarsdale*, a world-famous dermatological endocrinologist becomes obsessed with one of his patients, and develops the condition of his patient, excessive perspiration (Wallace 987). The reversal of roles is so blunt and obvious that it seems silly and unbelievable. *Blood Sister* is described as a “Parody of [the] revenge/recidivism action genre” in which a nun’s failure to reform a juvenile delinquent leads her to a destructive rampage. The actions of the nun are random and far too extreme, especially for what one would expect from a nun. While the film does have a plot, the events do not follow naturally and plausibly from one another, as Aristotle suggests (96–97). James is clearly aware that his films toy with commonly-held notions of narrative. The title James’s fifty-ninth film (*At Least) Three Cheers for Cause and Effect* indicates that James realizes that events, especially those in stories, should follow logically from one another (Wallace 991). James’s sixty-third film *The Night Wears a Sombrero* makes use of “Oedipally aggravated gunslingers” (992). Since the story of Oedipus is such a classical example of a story having an immaculate plot, one in which there is an unexpected reversal and recognition that makes perfect sense in retrospect, it would be difficult to reference it while remaining oblivious to how one’s own plots are so unusual.

Despite James's films individual criticism of narrative's necessity, the structure of James's filmography presents a clear narrative. The backbone of any narrative are the narrative moments, which are points of action and change. The 24th endnote has these. The beginning of the story presented in the endnote establishes James as a documentary filmmaker interested in light, mirrors, and tennis. The middle of the story involves James's movement into fictional experimental films, and contains narrative events such as the introduction of *Subsidized Time*, James's meeting of his favorite actress 'Madame Psychosis', and James establishing his indie film company Poor Yorick Entertainment. The climax involves James's poorly-reviewed film *Accomplice!*. The end includes multiple uncompleted and unreleased films due, explicitly or implicitly, to James's hospitalization followed by the description of *Infinite Jest (V)*, James's mysterious but highly entertaining final film.

Aristotle describes a beginning of a tragedy as "that which itself does not of necessity follow something else, but after which there naturally is, or comes into being, something else," and the story of James Incandenza's filmography starts with a proper beginning (96). James begins his foray into filmmaking with films that are experimentations in cinematography as well as commercial, low-concept documentaries. His second-ever film, *Kinds of Light*, is only 3 min. long, is silent, and has no cast. It makes no attempt at telling a story; instead it consists of light of different sources reflected off an unpolished tin plate (Wallace 986). Other similar films include actors billed as "narrators," but their function is to explain technical material, not to orate a narrative. These films, such as *Annular Amplified Light: Some Reflections* and *The Machine in the Ghost: Annular Holography for Fun and Prophet*, still make use of the non-plot parts of Aristotelian tragedy. The films are certainly concerned with spectacle as their primary goal is to experiment with or show-off how various technologies and techniques create interesting images.

More subtly, the films employ clever and engaging choices of diction. Their titles pun on “reflections” and “prophet,” and the play on the phrase “the ghost in the machine.” James’s first documentary and fourth film *Tennis, Everyone?* is produced as a “Public relations/advertorial product for the United States Tennis Association in conjunction with Wilson Sporting Goods, Inc.” (986). It appears to be a standard documentary, a work that is primarily commercial and secondarily artistic. Other early Incandenza documentaries (*‘There are No Losers Here.’* and *Union of Nurses in Berkeley*) follow a similar pattern. The second part of Aristotle’s definition of a “beginning” is that it is that from which something else follows. James still makes documentaries later in his career, and light and filmographic representation are persistent themes of his work. James documentaries do, however, evolve past their commercial roots. James’s twenty-third film, *Homo Duplex*, is a parody of “poststructural antidocumentaries” that consists of “interviews with fourteen Americans who are named John Wayne but are not the legendary 20th-century film actor John Wayne” (988). James’s documentaries have become artistic endeavors. Similarly, James’s obsession with light is still present in his later work, but is the focus of fictional films such as *The Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass* (film thirty-three) and *Valuable Coupon Has Been Removed* (film fifty-one).

Aristotle describes the middle of tragedies as concerning the non-random movement from one thing to another thing in a natural way (96–97). Although this description is vague, it does require that events in a story have lasting consequence, that they are not included simply to be forgotten about. The major moments in James Incandenza’s filmographic-life have persistent impact. One such event is the introduction of Subsidized Time. In the abstract that appears before the list of films, the archival editor says that “Incandenza eschewed both L. of C. registration and formal dating until the advent of Subsidized Time” (Wallace 985). While

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James's Incandenza's filmography is organized in chronological order (it would be much harder to tell a dramatic story if it were organized any other way), the first thirty-two films are dated only as "B.S." meaning "before subsidization." In between James's third attempt at filming *Infinite Jest* and *The Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass*, the switch to Subsidized Time is made leading to dating *The Man* as being released in The Year of the Whopper. After this point—the national decision to allow companies to subsidize calendar years which, whether or not he was in support of, clearly affected James—all of his films are presented alongside their release dates. It eventually becomes clear that James's continuous failed attempts at filming the mysterious *Infinite Jest* are either caused by or are causes of other events in his filmography. For example, after the production of *Infinite Jest (IV)*, James changes the corporate name of the independent production company from Latrodectus Mactans Productions (the primary name used for films twelve through forty-six) to Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited (the primary name used for films forty-seven through seventy-eight). This narrative progression also gives credence to the partitioning of James's production companies by name: Heliotrope Films for commercial documentaries and demonstrative videos; Latrodectus Mactans Productions for narrative fiction films; Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited for potentially-autobiographic films. This correlation between company name and type of content produced ensures that the "characters" of James's various production companies are consistent and appropriate throughout the narrative, one of Aristotle's requirements for the characters in a tragedy (102). Establishing a consistency of character is important since consistent characters are necessary for a logical plot. Finally, another important event in James Incandenza's filmography is the introduction of the actress referred to as 'Madame Psychosis'. The first appearance of 'Madame Psychosis' is in the unreleased *Infinite Jest (IV)*. After that, she becomes a regular—

often playing the role of the concept of Death (e.g. in *Low-Temperature Civics*) or an instance of it (e.g. as a cadaver in *(The) Desire to Desire*).

The context for the climax is established early in the endnote, in the abstract, when we learn that James Incandenza's "output increased steadily until during the last years of his life Incandenza often had several works in production at the same time" (985). It is possible that the stress of producing many films at once takes a toll on the health of James. The fifty-seventh film *Good-Looking Men in Small Clever Rooms That Utilize Every Centimeter of Available Space With Mind-Boggling Efficiency* is listed as "Unfinished due to hospitalization," which we later learn is likely due to "chemical impairment" (991, 993). Moreover, that unfinished and unreleased film follows two other unfinished films, *The Clever Little Bastard* and *The Cold Majesty of the Numb*, both of which have bitter, frustrated titles (991). The climax of the filmography is James's sixty-fourth film, *Accomplice!*, which is released then unreleased after a reviewer calls the film "the stupidest, nastiest, least subtle and worst-edited product of a pretentious and wretchedly-uneven career" (992). We know this is the climax because it is a unique event—the only time in the filmography in which a reviewer's opinion is directly quoted. The entire descriptions of James's next three films all consist entirely of the text "*Untitled. Unfinished. UNRELEASED,*" suggesting that the reception to *Accomplice!* is so jarring to James that he is unable to complete several films (992). What follows are a few potentially autobiographical films: *Insubstantial Country*, about an *après-garde* (i.e. a 'standard') filmmaker who cannot tell whether he has psychosis or if everybody else does, and *It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him*, which is likely about James's relationship with his actual son, Hal Incandenza (992–993). Next comes the disastrous production *The Film Adaptation of Peter Weiss's 'The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the*

Inmates of the Asylum at Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade.’, which is presented as an “interactive documentary” but the events of which are likely non-scripted and non-planned, especially when a chemically impaired James Incandenza throws up in the front row audience (993). If we are to read this ‘adaptation’ as an accidental disaster, fueled by James’s alcoholism, then it becomes easy to read his next three films *Too Much Fun*, *The Unfortunate Case of Me*, and *Sorry All Over the Place* as apologies for his prior actions (993). Finally, James has evolved enough to succeed in his fifth attempt at filming *Infinite Jest*. Other than involving ‘Madame Psychosis’ and being produced by Poor Yorick Entertainment, there are no other information about this film—but that is all we need. Producing the film is James Incandenza’s final action. He dies during the film’s post-production. Moreover, like a well-structured tragedy, the final films presented in the 24th endnote shed light on previous events. For example, James’s fourth-seventh film *Let There Be Lite*, labeled “documentary on genesis of low-calorie bourbon industry,” being followed by the forty-eight and fiftieth films being “*Untitled*. Unfinished. UNRELEASED” suggests that James may have been struggling with substance-abuse problems during the production of his bourbon documentary (990).

Although the individual films produced by James Incandenza range from demo videos to antinarrative documentaries to commercial entertainment, the story of James Incandenza’s filmography produces a compelling narrative. The films can be separated into a beginning, middle, and end. There are events that follow from one another, and these events shape James Incandenza, whose filmography follows a natural progression as he attempts five times to film his masterwork, *Infinite Jest*. After finally gathering the tools to successfully produce the film, he dies—a satisfying ending of which Aristotle would approve.

But this is not the end. Upon completing the story of the filmography of James O.

Incandenza in the 24th endnote, the story returns to page 64, a three-page section about James Incandenza's life at the Enfield Tennis Academy that, while far more traditional in form, is far less compelling. A discussion of the narrative structure of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* would require an essay of its own, possibly a journal of them. Is it fair to treat the 24th endnote as a microcosm of the whole novel?

Infinite Jest both relishes and reviles the paradoxical. The novel presents a postmodern critique of postmodern values.¹ Its tone veers back and forth between erratically humorous and dutifully melancholy. Irony, both dramatic and verbal, are employed liberally. In this light, it feels trivial to claim that the 24th endnote of *Infinite Jest* shows that narrative and anti-narrative can coexist. Wallace's *Infinite Jest* makes a stronger argument than this. The text, exemplified by its 24th endnote, argues for an aggressive interplay between the narrative structure of a text and its themes such that emotion triumphs.

¹ *Postmodernism* has a slew of competing meanings. Here, a *postmodern* work refers to a work of art that relies, fundamentally, on its own context—its place in history, its place literary canon, its readers, its function as a work of literature and as entertainment, and even its awareness of its own postmodernism (and its recursive awareness of that fact as well). It's the self-awareness of a postmodern text that often leads to ironic detachment.

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