TV and Social Media

It was helpful to read David Foster Wallace, because he explicitly criticizes the trite and undiscerning criticism of TV as an instrument of "cultural degradation". As I said, I want to refrain from making the cultural degradation argument as well. I believe that the problems that arise in our use of social media are rooted in a discrepancy between the platform's possibilities and our placing of it. It seems that Wallace has a similar criticism of TV; he talks about the "toxic illusions" (A supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again,26) one necessarily buys into while engaged with TV. Here, we can characterize an illusion as a discrepancy between reality and appearance. Wallace finds danger in our engagement with television, because there is a discrepancy between what the platform can offer us and where we position it in our lives. Today, the same is true for social media, only exaggerated by certain features enjoyed by social media and not TV (such as active engagement, content by people we have personal relationships, and the lack of logistic limitations). In this way, Wallace's criticism of TV still stands, but is less relevant today because we do not put TV in the same place that we used to put it in at the time of his writing. However, it is still very relevant criticism towards social media, which today serves the same central position that TV did in Wallace's time. Therefore, the criticism must be renewed for this platform, which is a more vibrant, alive-and-there, and personalized television.

First, he talks about the second-order look TV gives to the viewer:

"How human beings who absorb such high doses [of watching] understand themselves will naturally change, become vastly more spectatorial, self-conscious. Because the practice of 'watching' is expansive. Exponential. We spend enough time watching, pretty soon we start watching ourselves watching. Pretty soon we start to 'feel' ourselves feeling, yearn to experience 'experiences'" (35).

Wallace describes a second-order look at one's self that comes with consistent and frequent engagement with watching events without being participants in them. I would like to pay attention especially to the *yearning to experience 'experiences'* that he expects the viewer would eventually get. Today, a common criticism of social media users (most frequently Instagram users) get is that they do certain things mainly in order to put them on Instagram. For example, the criticism goes, the user who goes on a hike in the mountains makes her priority to take pictures that show her adventurousness most clearly and aesthetically. To do so, she takes notice of her environment only insofar as how it might serve as her background in pictures. It is not atypical for people to bring company to their interesting experiences as "photographer", where the company knows that his responsibility will be to take dozens of pictures in different places and with different poses. The peaks of these adventures are when the adventurer finds a place so intriguing that she deems it a "profile picture spot". It is expected that a lot of time will be spent there. This is common to such an extent that the expectation is that the poster captions the photo as: "PC: John Harvard", giving John *picture credits* for his troubles. In the end, the Instagram profile is *the* place where experiences belong. Users can enumerate noteworthy experiences of their (and others') lives through well-edited aesthetically pleasing Instagram profiles. A sunrise at the beach becomes an occasion for a "no-filter" photo, and if one goes to Paris, he *must* get his picture taken in front of the Eifel Tower. When a moment that could be captured beautifully is not, it is a missed opportunity.

In an unexpected way, the yearning to experience an experience is one of the large effects created by social media. As Wallace suggests, intense watching creates a self-consciousness and a second order looking at one's self. The user who has internalized the idea that "the most significant quality of truly alive persons is *watchableness"* (26) inadvertently questions if he is matching his peers in experience-gathering. If anything, the desire is furthered by an instinct for competition with peers. It is easier for the user to find himself inadequate when the people that seem to have a more real life are people he personally knows and is surrounded by, as opposed to this exotic species called *celebrities* that live in a different world.

Secondly, he talks about the illusions that TV provides. The first and most clear is that the content presented in television is not real people in real life situations. Furthermore, the characters and situations would cease to exist without the attention of the viewer. The actor becomes the character only in virtue of the audience that believes in this transformation. However, the audience does believe in the transformation. Or, rather, it *suspends its disbelief*; it "chooses to ignore" the realities (24). It chooses to regard the TV show as a reality for the duration of the episode. Therefore, even though the TV show does not intend to be a reality, (and is often self-aware and self-referential) the suspension of disbelief gives it a realistic characteristic. Even if the viewer consciously knows that he is watching a manufactured world, he is still affected by it in a real way. He somehow believes that he is "feeding on unself-conscious human activity", untainted by the Sartrian gaze that a real-life interaction causes (25).

Of course, it is true that this illusory nature is indispensable for all types of media, but to varying degrees of convincingness. The book and the newspaper also steal us from the physical world and depend on our willingness to believe in their reality, but they have fewer of the features that keep us engaged in moments of external distractions. They do not have electronically lit screens with bright colors that biologically attract our attention more than plain paper. Similarly, they do not have unending and constantly changing contents. You do not *miss* a book if you do not read it by a certain time, and even with newspapers, you can always read an earlier day's paper. On the other hand, you *can miss* TV. Whereas the paper is updated daily, television programs begin, happen, and end in real time. Therefore, engagement with television is time sensitive; it allows for the *fear of missing out.* However, TV has logistic limitations; there are certain places where you can watch television, and it is practically not portable. It can capture you and keep you inside even against distractions while you are home, but at least you are outside of its reach when you are outside (Screens in restaurants, bars and cafes never have the same engagement, because they are mostly outside of the viewer's control). Social media is currently the most convincing illusory medium, because it transcends both limitations. It is portable like the book, and shiny and FOMO-providing like the television. It can tempt the user anywhere, since it is portable, regardless of who he is with. It can tempt the user at any time, since its content is constantly updated, regardless of what the physical experience of the user in the moment is. Finally, it also has the added benefit that the content it provides is about people that the user is presumably concerned about. The experience is personalized to include the intimate connections the user has. The user can even actively engage with the platform, rather than being a passive recipient, like the consumer of the book, paper, radio and television. Therefore, all of Wallace's criticism that rises from the illusory nature of content-providing media stands, and if anything, is exacerbated in social media.

If this much is convincing, I will continue to talk about the relationship between television and social media. It seems to me that we can look at the experience of social media in two separate modes: As the viewer and the poster. The experience of the viewers looks comparable to the experience of the television viewer, with a couple of new features that help further Wallace's points (of which there are many interesting ones that I can explore if I continue in this direction, such as the oxymoron of "acting natural"). On the other hand, the modality of the poster is unique to social media and has its own challenges and possibilities. Maybe it makes sense to look at criticism towards TV as partially applicable to social media, insofar as a considerable part of the platform consists of passive engagement similar to that with TV. It seems that in the places where TV and social media coincide, the criticism on TV applies to social media as well, and the places of divergence do not respond to the criticism against social media that that of TV can provide. My larger hypothesis is that the criticism against television was called for, and now it must be renewed for the new platform that has the central place in our culture that TV used to.