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**IN ON THE JOKE: HOW *INFINITE JEST* REPRESENTS
ENTERTAINMENT ADDICTION**

BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

Entertainment and mass media are proven to be an addictive aspect of our everyday lives. David Foster Wallace was very concerned with media's dangerous potential, and his 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* explores this along with other aspects of addiction in detail. The aim of this thesis is to investigate how entertainment addiction is represented in David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* for the purpose of understanding how addiction is woven into its narrative and form, and whether or not it stands above the postmodern aura of irony it engages with and critiques.

The thesis consists of four parts: an introduction, two main chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction establishes different aspects of addiction in *Infinite Jest* to be expanded on later. The first main chapter examines Wallace's goals for his own fiction through his essay "E Unibus Pluram", the accompanying interview, as well as previous research on the topics of addiction, irony, and the role of the reader in *Infinite Jest*. The second main chapter analyzes how entertainment and media addiction are represented in the novel and how the narrative is connected to the process of reading. The conclusion provides a summary and a brief assessment on the effectiveness of the methods used in writing the novel.

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INTRODUCTION

David Foster Wallace (1993: 163) defines an addictive activity as when “... one’s relationship to it lies on that downward-sloping continuum between liking it a little too much and really needing it”. The word *addiction* is often associated with drugs, gambling, and alcohol abuse, though these days screen addiction and social media addiction have also become a part of our everyday vocabulary. To admit to being an addict is to admit you are not in control, an exceedingly hard thing to accept in a world, where everyone is expected to exercise control in all aspects of life. There are, of course, relatively harmless addictions, like addictions to work or exercise, which are generally accepted, encouraged, and often even relied upon to just to get by. Addiction, however, is a broad term generally defined as compulsive behavior with negative effects, such as withdrawal symptoms. Measuring these negative effects through self-reflection is difficult. This gray area leads to an all too common mindset to which even some long-term drug addicts subscribe—you are not addicted and could quit if you wanted to, you act as you do, because you choose to. David Foster Wallace explores this illusion of control in his novel *Infinite Jest* in great detail.

While *Infinite Jest* does delve deep into drug and alcohol dependency, it simultaneously explores the nature of addiction in its other forms. These include entertainment addiction, benign addictions to escape more serious ones, and obsession among others. David Foster Wallace makes perceptive observations on the addictive effect of media, which, by extension, also apply to social media, even though the release of *Infinite Jest* predates the rise of social media by a decade. He describes a need to be entertained that goes well beyond what is good for oneself. Media that is designed to make the consumer crave for more and advertisement that is so ingrained into everyday lives that it no longer tries to mask itself.

Another interesting manifestation of addiction in *Infinite Jest* is the relationship young tennis talents have with the sport. The young athletes at *Infinite Jest*'s Enfield Tennis Academy shape their lives around tennis, with their ultimate aspiration being to be good enough to compete in the "Show", the aptly named highest division of professional tennis, in which the athletes are more like entertainers, than competitors. *Infinite Jest* asks, whether the addiction and sacrifices made for sports are really worth the entertainer endgame for the young athletes, a relevant question in today's consumerist society.

Furthermore, *Infinite Jest* seeks to critique the irony in contemporary consumerist society and entertainment, as well as highlight how postmodern irony itself can be addictive. In order to achieve this, Wallace weaves together the narratives of the novel with the narrative of the reader, having a certain goal in mind as to what the reader should draw from, and pay attention to in this process. The question of whether or not he has been successful in staying above the postmodern irony he engages with has lent itself extensive academic debate, which will be expanded upon further on. The novel is so lengthy, difficult, and detailed that the reader has to develop a certain addiction to reading it in order to get through it. The form of the book in itself being a commentary on what it is about is a topic worth researching on its own.

These aspects of addiction in *Infinite Jest* are the primary focus of this BA thesis. The secondary and related focus is a certain self-reflection on your role as a reader that the novel evokes. The aim of my thesis is to study the academic discourse around media addiction in *Infinite Jest*, point out ways, in which addiction manifests itself in the narrative of the book as well as in the relationship it seeks to establish with the reader, and assess, whether or not the methods used by Wallace to achieve this elevate the novel above the postmodern irony it seeks to critique.

In the first chapter I will examine the secondary literature on the topic of addiction in David Foster Wallace's work and *Infinite Jest*. Through this, I will lay the foundation to understand the different levels on which *Infinite Jest* engages with addiction, irony, and the role of the reader in the process of reading. I will also analyze David Foster Wallace's own essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", which has been regarded as integral to understanding Wallace's approach to writing, audiences, and entertainment addiction. In the second chapter I will focus on how addiction is layered into different aspects of *Infinite Jest* and how it helps and asks the reader to understand it. Then I will conclude the study with my findings on what *Infinite Jest* has to say about addiction, irony and consumption, and comment on its effectiveness.

1. CRITICAL RESPONSE TO DAVID FOSTER WALLACE AND *INFINITE JEST*

1.1 Context and academic discourse around David Foster Wallace

David Foster Wallace was a writer, whose work has been classified as postmodern, even though he himself disagreed with this label and any other attempts to categorize him (Shapiro 2020). He is best known for writing *Infinite Jest* (1996), a remarkably lengthy encyclopedic novel that has had lasting impact on the American literary landscape. His works continue to be a subject of academic research to this day and *Infinite Jest* has also garnered a sizeable cult following online. *Infinite Jest* shares key themes with many of his published essays, such as loneliness, depression, irony, consumerism, and, most importantly for this thesis, addiction. Wallace had been an addict himself in his teenage years and twenties, with marijuana as his substance of choice. He suffered from depression for most of his life, starting at about age ten by his own admission (Short 2017: 43). He eventually took his own life in 2008.

Wallace's work started to spark academic interest in the mid-1990s, even before the release of *Infinite Jest*, but really took off with its publication and accompanying widespread critical acclaim, though the discourse around *Infinite Jest* itself would mature only in the 2000s (Kelly 2010: 48). This development was largely enabled by Wallace's own 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" and an accompanying interview given to Larry McCaffery. The academic study of Wallace and his works has been comprehensive. For the purposes of this thesis I have selected a number of studies on the topic of addiction, irony, and the function of Wallace's writing in specific relation to *Infinite Jest*, as well as the essay and interview mentioned above.

Adam S. Miller (2016: 17) has regarded addiction as one of the most consistent themes in David Foster Wallace's works. The characters in *Infinite Jest* are all addicted to one thing or another (Freudenthal 2010: 191). Addiction in *Infinite Jest* can be interpreted in a myriad of ways, as the following chapters will demonstrate. Nevertheless, Wallace had a clear agenda when it came to representing addiction in his work, which he articulates in his essay "E Unibus Pluram". A large number of the studies on *Infinite Jest* rely on, or use the essay as a reference point. I will thus explore Wallace's ideas before specific scholarly interpretations with the intention of providing context for previous critical reception to Wallace as well as this thesis.

1.2 David Foster Wallace's ideas on entertainment in "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" and interview given to Larry McCaffery in 1993

David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", first published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (1993), and his interview with McCaffery have provided the tools for understanding Wallace's work for numerous critics and researchers (Kelly 2010: 49). They are also from the time period, where Wallace was in the process of writing *Infinite Jest*, and by no coincidence, articulate the same ideas on consumption, as the novel does in its fictional narratives. It can be said that with this essay and interview, Wallace has given readers the basic tools for dissecting *Infinite Jest*.

The 40-page essay discusses at length the essence of entertainment addiction in American culture. According to Wallace (1993: 163), television's greatest appeal is that it engages without demanding. He mentions TV addiction being malignant: it 1) "causes real problems for the addict," and 2) "offers itself as a relief from the very problems it causes" (ibid.).

Wallace offers multiple perspectives on how this addiction may develop, one of them being loneliness. By statistics available in 1993, an average American watched six hours of TV every day (Wallace 1993: 152). He specifies how TV shows offer a cast of familiar characters, who start to seem just like friends, showing how TV can become a very addictive substitute for a social life (Wallace 1993: 154). As Wallace (1993: 163) puts it, spending six hours a day sitting and watching a screen is “...when you come right down to it, not good for us.” The resulting obvious physical problems of inhibited blood supply, a strain on the eyes, as well as the apparent psychological reliance prove this point.

Wallace (1993:155) underlines a clear motivation behind this prolonged watching: “Television, nevertheless, is just plain pleasurable...”. He compares mass entertainment to alcohol or candy, which are fun and fine in smaller doses, but would be disastrous if consumed as a physical equivalent of six hours of TV time a day (Wallace 1993: 163). Wallace (1993: 165) observes that television reassures viewers on their way of life. Commercials blatantly advertising that you should give in and indulge, eat a lot of food and sit down and watch TV solidify the idea that what the consumer is doing is ok, which is reminiscent of addictive cycles (ibid.). While the audience is convinced they crave novelty, in reality they want what they are trained to want, the same kind of reassurance (ibid.).

Wallace’s rhetoric concerning entertainment relies on the many ironic components surrounding mass media. Television, according to Wallace (1993: 161), is “made for irony”. Irony invites you to be in on the joke, to feel as if you are above what you are consuming (Wallace 1993: 159). To counteract this, media needs to make them feel as if the consumers have some sort of a higher understanding of the product they consume, hence the prevalence of ironic

self-referencing (*ibid.*). This essentially means that the irony people believe they are in on is actually a function of its form.

One of the broader points on mass media consumerism that Wallace (1993: 161) makes is that the products advertised as things that help you express your individuality are marketed to masses, because masses buy them. Wallace (1993: 178) mentions a well-known Pepsi ad that quite successfully gets viewers to believe they are in on the joke. The ad simultaneously makes fun of itself, advertising and consumers through very obvious use of irony, so that everyone can feel like they are personally in on, and above it (Wallace 1993: 179). An ad like this covers all its bases and is immune to critique, since it has already critiqued itself and made sure that viewers thought so too. Understanding how important it was for Wallace that audiences to comprehend this meta-level of irony can help to understand, what he expected out of the reader. His analysis of this ad also exemplifies the problems Wallace saw with postmodern irony.

Wallace (1993: 166) argues that postmodernism is not a consequence of evolving art, but “of facts about the new importance of mass commercial culture” and points out that Americans are not united by emotion, but by images, fueled by simultaneous consumption. Wallace (*ibid.*) brings this up as a reason for why pop culture references work so well in postmodern fiction. According to Wallace (1993: 168), this post-war U.S pop-culture had become “high-art viable as a collection of symbols and myth”. This evolved into image-fiction (Wallace 1993: 171), an attempt to break down borders between entertainment and its audience, something that would try to criticize TV (among other mass media) and its collective influence, but would ultimately not serve this purpose, because TV had already beaten this movement to this function of critique (Wallace 1993: 173). The problem he sees with postmodernist fiction is that it is unable the

shake the aura of irony, a staple of television. He concludes the essay noting that there might not be real room for original footing in postmodern fiction (Wallace 1993: 193).

Wallace was very aware of how he engages with the reader. In the interview to McCaffery (McCaffery 1993) he admitted finding himself trying to be clever for the sake of being clever, trying to prove that he is a good writer that readers should like. However, he (ibid.) believes that there is no escape from this altogether, because a writer has to prove they can write so that the reader would trust them. According to Wallace (ibid.) the reader has the power over the writer's success, leading to a certain hostility towards the reader. This manifests itself in "bludgeoning the reader with data" or setting up expectations and delivering something completely different (ibid.). This aspect of Wallace's writing in *Infinite Jest* has been criticized Mary K. Holland (2018: 130): "novel's explosion of voices and of jargon also threatens to collapse under the weight of its collective uselessness...". She (ibid.) identifies the excessive use of tennis, and drug jargon, as well as repeated AA clichés as examples of this.

1.3 Previous academic research on addiction in *Infinite Jest*

Adam Kelly (2010: 47-56) divided critical responses to Wallace into three waves. Beyond identifying waves in critical reception, Kelly (2010) introduced two helpful phrases relevant to this thesis: *Wallace studies* as a general term for studies concerning David Foster Wallace, and the *essay-interview nexus*, as a collective term for anything concerning the ideas Wallace expressed in his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram" and the accompanying interview.

The waves roughly correspond to the three decades of critical reception to David Foster Wallace, first starting in the early 1990s, second in 1999, and third in 2010. The first focused on technological systems and their relation to American postmodernism (Kelly 2010: 49). The

second wave is largely influenced by the goals set out by Wallace himself (Kelly 2010: 50) and mainly deals with irony and how *Infinite Jest* was purposefully written as an example of the very problem it seeks to examine. The critical agreement is that fiction should serve as both “diagnosis and a cure”, and *Infinite Jest* generally embodies this idea (Kelly 2010: 51). The third wave (Kelly 2010: 51) started in 2010, about two years after Wallace’s death. The debate over the roles of irony and sincerity in Wallace’s fiction remained a focal point in the third wave. The third wave expands on the author-reader relationship and thoroughly explores manifestation of irony and sincerity in Wallace’s work. This thesis mainly sides with, or builds on recent studies based on the second and third waves (Bartlett 2016; Dulk 2012, 2015; Holland 2018; Kelly 2010; Miller 2016; Shapiro 2020; Short 2017; Woodend 2019), but also covers relevant observations and critiques made earlier in Wallace studies (Hayles 1999; Holland 2006).

1.3.1 Discourse on *Infinite Jest* in the context of addiction cycles and postmodern irony

Hayles (1999) is the most relevant study for understanding the theme of addiction from earlier Wallace studies. While her article primarily focused on the ownership of the self in market economies, Hayles touches on *Infinite Jest* in the context of cycles constructed for and by consumers, and a virtual environment that is compelling enough that it is almost impossible to leave it (Hayles 1999: 687). She describes the narrative of the novel as a cycle, where you could start at any point and come a full circle (Hayles 1999: 684).

Hayles (1999: 694) also briefly discusses the aspect of tennis in *Infinite Jest*, pointing out the cyclical irony of Enfield Tennis Academy training young talents to transcend themselves and their limits, but the very same limits make the game possible in the first place. The students are trained to only see the game at hand and forget about the self and outside factors. Hayles (ibid.)

observes that this is analogous to entertainment addiction. She goes on to discuss the novel's role as a piece of entertainment and the role of its reader (Hayles 1999: 694). She alludes to the notion that the process of reading the novel could itself be an addictive cycle (ibid.). Hayles (ibid.) points out that there is no climax to the story, the narrative is made of recursive loops, and suggests that the reader is perhaps supposed to break the addiction by understanding that they are being fed loops and cycles, thus becoming aware of their role as a consumer and sparking self-reflection.

After 1999, the discussion moved to Wallace's goals and intentions stated in the essay-interview nexus and how they manifest in *Infinite Jest*. Robert W. Short (2017: 12) has summarized that Wallace's goals are to manipulate his form to better engage readers, to craft texts that require participation from readers, forcing them to connect narrative loops themselves, and to provoke self-awareness.

Mary K. Holland (2006) argues that *Infinite Jest* fails to rise above the problems with irony Wallace articulates in the essay-interview nexus and break the narcissistic loop. The article, much like this thesis, first looks at the essay-interview nexus as a lens for understanding *Infinite Jest*. Holland (2006: 220) argues that even in "E Unibus Pluram", Wallace resorts to the same ironic rhetoric he criticizes by ending the essay with ironic uncertainty. According to Holland (2006: 221), Wallace's efforts to align irony with subconscious addiction in hopes that by understanding that we are surrounded by irony or addicted we may find a path out of it, fall flat, because Wallace fails to position himself outside of the very society he is critiquing. She finds it surprising that other critics have been overwhelmingly of the opinion that *Infinite Jest* is successful in what it sets out to accomplish (Holland 2006: 225). She highlights Hayles (1999) as coming close to recognizing the dilemma at the core of *Infinite Jest*: the characters trying to

break away from cycles and external forces ending up even more dependent, ultimately not being able to escape recursivity (Holland 2006: 225). According to Holland (2006: 239), all characters in *Infinite Jest* strive for “infantile narcissism”, wanting to give up responsibilities and indulge in whatever feels good, thus eroding the notion of instilling in its readers the awareness to overcome these urges.

Holland revisited the topic in 2018. She analyzes *Infinite Jest* in a more contemporary context, and acknowledges the critical response, which came after her 2006 article, and even the direct responses to it that disagree with her article, such as Dulk (2012). Nevertheless, Holland (2018: 137) still finds that *Infinite Jest* is more of a fictional construction of the same narcissistic loop, rather than a successful attempt to break out of it. She points out Wallace’s own apparent frustration with the novel in that he did not feel it completely articulated its purpose the way he wanted it to, as well as the novel still instilling the same feeling in her after repeated re-readings, as it had done initially (ibid.). The commentary on entertainment addiction and even the self-reflection of the reader are in her view contained in the context of the fictional narrative of the book. She does, however, recognize the impact of the novel and the discussion it continues to create in classrooms and reading groups (Holland 2018: 138). Whereas this thesis and the majority of Wallace studies support the notion of Wallace succeeding in critiquing postmodern irony, Holland makes a compelling case for the other side of the discussion.

1.3.2 Implications of sincerity

Dulk (2012: 340) disagrees with Holland’s view of *Infinite Jest* not being a successful critique of the irony and the overarching themes it engages with. According to Dulk (2012: 337), Søren Kierkegaard’s philosophy defines a leap that can be made to overcome irony, which

essentially lies in the process of making a conscious choice to do it. It is not that you can eliminate the aspect of irony, but you can choose to commit to the change towards sincerity (Dulk 2012: 338). In Holland's view, this was not as relevant, as the content of the novel itself, which alludes to these changes being very difficult, expresses a sense of futility in these efforts. Dulk (2012: 339), however, feels that Wallace has successfully made the leap out of irony and towards sincerity in *Infinite Jest*, pointing out that the idea of freedom of choice is discussed thoroughly and positively in the novel, as well as the parallels with the 12-step program, which promotes the choice of taking positive action. The characters in the novel attempt positive changes in their lives by choice, not by circumstance (ibid.). He concludes that the film *Infinite Jest* represented within the novel is an accurate embodiment of the irony-aesthetic attitude and self-obsessed indulgence, separate from the novel itself (Dulk 2012: 342). In his view the novel, *Infinite Jest*, advocates engagement with entertaining cycles as an ethical choice. Dulk (2015: 220) believes that characters arrive at the realization that to have a meaningful life, one has to be connected to the outside world, leaving behind their solipsistic worldviews.

This sentiment is shared by Christopher Bartlett (2016: 385), according to whom the novel sets out "to reconnect and communicate with the next generation in order to curtail the cycles of solipsism and "existential irony". Bartlett (2016: 376) also argues against the common notion that Hal Incandenza is a conduit for Wallace in the text. He instead believes Hal's father Jim Incandenza to fill that role (ibid.). Bartlett (ibid.) draws a parallel between Jim Incandenza and Wallace in that Jim creates the movie *Infinite Jest* in order to communicate with his son i.e. the next generation, which Wallace has said was his goal with *Infinite Jest*. My thesis agrees with this theory. Another hint at Jim being a representation of Wallace is that Jim Incandenza is to some degree responsible for almost everything that takes place in the novel (Bartlett 2016: 377).

According to Bartlett (ibid.) Hal's inability to communicate in the book's first chapter is not symbolic of Wallace being unable to break out of the ironic aura of postmodernism and convey his message, but rather represents the next generation, who will face these problems with communication, isolation and solipsism if Wallace's generation does not accept their position as adults.

Wallace's good intentions are further highlighted in Robert W. Short's 2017 PhD dissertation, which approaches David Foster Wallace's writing ethic, as a function of addiction recovery. Similarly to Dulk (2012), Short draws parallels between Wallace's internalization of the 12-step addiction recovery program and the evolution and content of his writing. Short's conclusions and main body of the study are unfortunately not relevant for the discussion of entertainment addiction or compulsive behavior in *Infinite Jest* and the role of its reader, but the perspective of Wallace's writing as an exercise in addiction management has certainly been helpful in navigating the critical responses to Wallace in this thesis as well. His perspective into Wallace as having internalized recovery and drawing from it when writing also hints at sincerity in Wallace's fiction, which is also implied by Dulk (2012, 2015) and Bartlett (2016).

To conclude, David Foster Wallace critiqued the evolution of postmodern irony in "E Unibus Pluram" and set certain goals for his fiction and what he seeks to evoke in his readers: to actively engage the reader and spark self-reflection on their role in the relationship they have with media and entertainment. *Infinite Jest* is widely considered to be his magnum opus, and his major attempt to break out of the postmodernist loop of aesthetic irony, described by Holland (2006), in which much of the fiction in his field and peer group are stuck in. There are advocates for both sides of whether or not he succeeded in doing so, leaving room for detailed discussion on the cyclical aspects of the novel. The focal point of the commentary on entertainment

addiction in the novel lies in the film “Infinite Jest”. Secondary literature has thoroughly covered its relation with irony and sincerity, providing a strong basis for finding ways it relates to addiction cycles both consciously and subconsciously. In the secondary literature as a whole, there is minimal mention of the aspect of tennis as it relates to the position of the reader. My thesis seeks to find parallels between the much studied entertainment addiction and ironic aspects and the aspect of tennis in *Infinite Jest* that is interwoven into the narrative in order to highlight how it manipulates with the role of the reader, and what it has to say about how we engage with entertainment as a whole.

2. LETHALLY ENTERTAINING: THE LAYERS OF ADDICTION IN *INFINITE JEST*

It is essential to have a general overview of the plot in order to understand the meta-level connections between *Infinite Jest*'s content and form. In this chapter I will provide a plot synopsis for *Infinite Jest* and discuss the representation of addiction in its content, its implications, and how the novel establishes a unique relationship with its readers.

2.1 Plot synopsis and storytelling structure

The events in the novel *Infinite Jest* unfold approximately 15 years into the future from the period it was written, meaning around the late 2000s. The author has left the exact relation to the Gregorian calendar ambiguous. Years are subsidized by corporate sponsors, replacing numerical designations, for example most of the events take place in the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment. With few exceptions, the events of the novel take place in Boston, Massachusetts though in this vision of the future, the USA as we know it is replaced by the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.), which encompasses the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

The narrative follows three intertwining plotlines: the events at Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A) and the lives of members of the Incandenza family, mainly told through the youngest son Hal; events at the Ennet Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, mainly told through the character Don Gately; and the geopolitical terrorist efforts of a Quebecois separatist organization *Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants* (A.F.R.) to find and exploit a lethally entertaining film. The driving force connecting these narratives is a film directed by Hal's late father, James Orin Incandenza, titled *Infinite Jest*, also referred to as the Entertainment. The film is described to be so entertaining that anyone who watches it becomes so enthralled they cannot stop watching until

they eventually die. The A.F.R. seeks to find the “master tape”, which would enable them to copy the film and distribute it in the O.N.A.N. in order to gain political leverage for negotiating independence. The pursuit of this tape and the people connected to it tie the story together. James Incandenza committed suicide by putting his head in a microwave a few years before the year where the majority of the story takes place.

The chapters with the main viewpoint characters, Hal Incandenza and Don Gately, make up for the vast majority of the book. Hal is 17 years old in the Year of the Adult Undergarment, he has developed a marijuana addiction, which he uses as an escape from the rigorous physical training at the Enfield Tennis Academy. Don Gately is a recovered drug addict, who now works at Ennet House, which is separated by a hillside from the Enfield Tennis Academy.

The narration deviates from the main characters to numerous secondary characters and locations, which may not have an established connection to previous chapters or might not even come up in the story again, leaving the task of piecing the puzzle together to the reader. The novel is notoriously difficult to read. It spans 1,079 pages and the chapters alternate between different viewpoints, time and place, as well as narratives. Chapters are named after the dates and years they take place in. David Foster Wallace notably makes abundant use of footnotes, which span from page 983 to 1079 and are as much a part of the novel as is the main text. The footnotes can vary greatly in length and importance, with some offering brief in-character commentary, like note 216: “No clue” (Wallace 1996: 1036), but others, like note 110 (Wallace 1996: 1004-1022), encompassing a separate chapter’s worth of material. The reader is expected to constantly flip to the corresponding footnote and back as they progress through the text.

Infinite Jest makes little effort to be consumer-friendly and easily digestible. It does not stick to traditional storytelling structures, forcing the reader to adjust to its erratic form. For

example, there is no payoff in the traditional three act storytelling sense. The plot does certainly advance and come together, but there is no concrete resolution or discernible climax. Some of the crucial info for understanding the story is left ambiguous or offered through unreliable narrators. Piecing the narrative together and understanding its implications or author's intentions requires conscious effort from the reader. In the following, I will discuss how David Foster Wallace weaves the theme of addiction into various cyclical elements, character development, tennis, and his intentions for the reader.

2.2 Cyclical narratives

Infinite Jest is structured cyclically, and cycles play a large role throughout it. The narrative itself comes a full circle, with the first chapter (the only chapter taking place in the Year of Glad) chronologically taking place at the end of the story. This is, however, only revealed on page 223, which features a chronological list of years of subsidized time, meaning that the reader will only be able to fully comprehend the first chapter when coming back to it. In this way, the novel encourages you to complete the cycle by rereading, forcing you to reflect on how you engage with cycles, something that the characters in the novel constantly deal with. David Foster Wallace draws parallels between the structural form of the novel, the narrative content of the novel, and the ideas expressed in the novel.

As laid out by Bartlett (2016), Wallace probably uses the character James "Jim" Incandenza as a conduit for himself in the novel. There are many clues that point to this. The first is that Jim connects the story, everything originates from him and his actions, just as Wallace's role as a writer is to conceive and connect the story. They are both creators of something called *Infinite Jest*, which are in both cases attempts to draw our attention to problems surrounding

irony, addiction, and solipsism that the next generation after the author faces. This is expressed in the novel through the viewpoint of Jim, as he appears as a ghost-like wraith to Don Gately in what he believes to be a dream, as the latter fades in and out of consciousness in a hospital bed. The wraith describes Jim's attempt at making a medium to connect with his son: "His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life" (Wallace 1996: 839). While Jim was attempting to converse only with his youngest son, Hal, who was intellectually gifted, but was unable to express himself, Wallace's message is meant to reach both his as well as the next generation, which he was afraid would grow up warped by solipsism, when the parents and role models of his generation stop taking responsibility and let young minds be shaped by mass media culture. Wallace invites the reader to make the obvious connection between the novel and the titular film. Both are essentially pieces of entertainment that seek to captivate the audience through themes of addiction and cycles, while sparking change in the audience.

2.3 Entertainment addiction and anti-entertainment

As a symbolic stand-in for the next generation, Hal represents the problems that will arise, when society allows entertainment addiction and aesthetic mass media to overtake discipline and integrity. Hal struggles with marijuana addiction, his devotion to tennis, and relating emotionally to the world around him. Wallace also illustrates the idea of media addiction through the character of Hugh Steeply, who recounts how an addiction to the television show *M*A*S*H* once consumed his father's life (Wallace 1996: 639-648). It had first been a habit of watching the show while eating supper. However, when the show was syndicated and other channels picked it up, Steeply's father started watching all the reruns and showings, regardless of

if he had seen them before. He quickly became obsessed, started to relate most conversations back to M*A*S*H (Wallace 1996: 641), kept a notebook detailing things he observed in the show, and started to write letters to fictional characters in the show (Wallace 1996: 642). Eventually the man started to miss work and refuse to leave his TV watching room, rarely sleeping, just to watch the show and other movies and other shows in which the show's actors appeared. This led to his death (Wallace 1996: 642-646). With this story, Wallace relates the extremely addictive quality of *Infinite Jest* to how television and mass media can slowly consume its audiences, much like how he laid out in "E Unibus Pluram".

The story of Steeply's father also serves to remind the reader that they are themselves engaging with similar media. While the man got consumed by his addiction to a TV-show, the reader can at this point observe that they are devoting large amounts of their time to a much more complex novel. The contrast here is that the character started putting time into media that requires little to no participation, illustrating how easily one can start regarding mass media as important to their daily lives. The novel requires the reader to participate and actively engage with it to get maximum entertainment value out of the novel. This also illustrates why the film *Infinite Jest*, a piece of media designed to spark reflection and expression only managed to do the opposite and, in essence, failed, whereas in the form of a novel it is much more effective in doing so.

Infinite Jest, the novel, serves as anti-entertainment. This idea is briefly expressed in the fictional narrative of the novel. There is a rumor that Jim Incandenza also made an anti-entertainment film to counteract the effects of his *Infinite Jest* (Wallace 1996: 126). There is no more mention of this, but it is a significant marker for what the novel tries to express. As stated previously, Jim is a conduit for Wallace, and I believe this reference to anti-entertainment serves

to solidify Wallace's intentions with the novel. Wallace achieves this by breaking up the pace of the novel through the use of different viewpoint characters and time of events taking place, as well as using blatantly unreliable narrators, and requiring the reader to flip back and forth between the footnotes and the main text. The conscious choice to make the novel more difficult to progress through also enables nuances in writing techniques to stand out better and be more effective in signifying ideas.

2.4 Hal as a metaphor for the next generation tackling the narcissistic loop of irony

As laid out previously, the first chapter in the book is also chronologically the last. The viewpoint character for this chapter is Hal, whose narration is notably written in the first person. This is not the case for the majority of the book. Writing Hal in the first person first happens chronologically on the page 864 in one of Hal's last chapters, which also take place shortly after Hal stops smoking marijuana. It is at this point where Hal truly begins to feel and express his ideas to at least himself. He is previously described by Wallace in a certain fourth wall breaking fashion: "Hal himself hasn't had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny; he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarified equations..." (Wallace 1996: 694). This fits into what he observed in the development of mass media and postmodern fiction. However, Hal being written in the first person and becoming expressive is certainly a positive note. This looks like a conscious attempt to break out of postmodernist narcissistic irony, which often entails the irony of observing people observing something else. Through switching into first person, Wallace cuts out a layer of observation.

Hal is the second best player in the academy, next to John Wayne. I believe John Wayne represents "the end of the end of the line" of postmodernist fiction that Wallace (1993) discussed

in “E Unibus Pluram”. The character of John Wayne is also an attempt by Wallace to use an overtly postmodernist referential joke, in this case John Wayne essentially strongly resembling an archetypical cowboy in American westerns, as an opportunity to distance from self-indulgent postmodernist irony. This is exemplified by how Wayne is described as a player in relation to Hal: “John Wayne’s got a gestalt because Wayne’s simply got everything, and everything with him’s got the sort of base that a touch-artist and thinker like Hal just can’t handle.” (Wallace 1996: 681). Just like the men of action and few words in westerns, John Wayne has been purposely given no lines of dialogue in the novel, is depicted as robot-like and extremely efficient on the tennis court, and is not described to have any distinct features or flaws to his personality. He is the personification of perfect postmodernist aestheticism—pretty and entertaining, but ultimately meaningless and self-indulgent. It is Hal’s imperfection that sets him apart from Wayne. Until his last chapters Hal is emotionally distant, but still susceptible to emotions when playing, and his tennis coaches see that it is this emotional vulnerability that holds him back from becoming a machine-like player like Wayne (Wallace 1996: 682). I believe this vulnerability is what Wallace sees as potential breathing room for sincerity in the next generation.

When Hal begins his journey inward, towards understanding his wants and motivations, he begins to question his devotion to tennis: “It now lately sometimes seemed like a kind of a black miracle to me that people could eventually care deeply about a subject or pursuit, and could go on caring this way for years on end” (Wallace 1996: 900). Hal is for the first time beginning to question the reasons for what he devotes himself to. The doubt he expresses does not come from feelings of emptiness, but rather his experiences thus far lacking emotional value. He also makes observations on how minds are conditioned: “This was why they started us here

so young: to give ourselves away before the age when the questions of *why* and *to what* grow real beaks and claws.” (ibid.). Wallace hopes this epiphany is reached by Hal’s generation at some point. He does, however, illustrate a potential danger. As Hal becomes more in tune with himself and his feelings, he begins to have trouble expressing them outward. It is at multiple points that Hal’s communication is perceived not as he intends it. For example, when he simply tries to speak to Ortho Stice, a fellow student, Ortho hears him cry (Wallace 1996: 865). This culminates in the first chapter of the book, where Hal is at a college interview and his attempts to communicate, which he feels are done in clear language, come across as grimaces and eventually resemble a seizure (Wallace 1996: 5-15). I believe that what is being implied here, is that it might be impossible for next generation’s potential for sincerity to be received in an environment of deep-rooted irony and its implicit addiction.

2.5 The theme of tennis and the Enfield Tennis Academy as an environment for discussing entertainment addiction

When the Enfield Tennis Academy is approached by someone they believe to be a journalist, the person is refused a chance to interview Hal. The academy attempts to root the ego out of the players so that they could be ready for the “Show”, which is the highest level of professional tennis. The players, who reach that level would be entertainers. The tennis academy attempts to prepare their best players for the dangers of getting addicted to the fame and burning out that come with being an entertainer (Wallace 1996: 661). The academy tries to develop in their players a certain addiction to tennis, so that addiction to fame would be easier to manage.

The idea is described by a coach as:

If they can forget everything but the game when all of you out there outside the fence see only them and want only them and the game’s incidental to you, for you it’s about entertainment and personality, it’s about the statue, but if they can get inculcated right they’ll never be slaves to the statue, they’ll never blow

their brains out after winning an event when they win, or dive out a third-story window when they start getting poked at or profiled, when their blossom starts to fade. (Wallace 1996: 661)

The Enfield Tennis Academy wishes to shield the players from fame, but does nothing to prepare them for it, which is ironic, considering that getting to the Show is the ultimate goal for the players and their coaches. However, the Show is a realistic goal for only a handful of students, meaning that in a way, the ones who put in most effort and are the best, are likely also eventually going to lose the most. Here Wallace questions the value of training to be an entertainer without understanding what it might entail, implying that there is a certain addiction to the entertainment being ingrained to both entertainers and audiences. Another example of such dangers being represented in the novel is the character of Eric Clipperton, who was a 16-year-old tennis player, who was so afraid of losing that he would carry a gun to his matches and effectively hold himself hostage, threatening to shoot himself if the opponent beats him (Wallace 1996: 408). Trying to maintain one's fame and standards can manifest itself in a dangerous addiction.

The aspect of tennis is also prevalent in the reading process of the novel. The back and forth that comes with flipping between the footnotes and main text strongly resembles a tennis match. Tennis is played in sets and games with small breaks in between, which is also how the story is structured. It gives you breaks from action and like tennis, does not culminate, but is a sum of its parts of equal importance and content. It could also be said that the relationship between the Enfield Tennis Academy and its students is similar to *Infinite Jest* and its readers. The academy instills an addiction to tennis in its students in an attempt to prepare them for the world of entertainment; *Infinite Jest* tries to similarly compel the reader, but also draw attention to itself as an addicting form of media, in order to make its reader aware of the dangers related to entertainment and mass media.

The students in the ETA are trained exhaustingly. They have to dedicate themselves fully to their sport. As laid out before, Hal eventually begins to doubt his devotion to tennis near the end of the book. I believe Wallace also intends for the audience to consider their choice to devote their time to *Infinite Jest* in a similar fashion. The long-winded descriptions of tennis drills or matches, such as (Wallace 1996: 450-461; 651-662) make the reader ask, why they are being given this information. I, again, point to the passage: “This was why they started us here so young: to give ourselves away before the age when the questions of *why* and *to what* grow real beaks and claws.” (Wallace 1996: 900). Through seeing Hal’s relation to tennis change, Wallace intends to instill in his audience a healthy pessimism or a critical perspective towards how and why they spend their own time. Furthermore he invites the reader to question if they are making a voluntary choice when engaging media or are they subconsciously feeding an entertainment addiction.

Conclusion

David Foster Wallace laid out the goals for his fiction and expressed his concerns for irony and entertainment addiction in postmodern literature and mass media in his essay “E Unibus Pluram” in 1993. These goals had to do with engaging the reader through the form of his writing. He later illustrates and expands on these ideas in the novel *Infinite Jest*. The book along with Wallace’s other works has been subject to academic research and debate since the early 1990s. Among other things, *Infinite Jest* engages with the topic of addiction thoroughly and draws parallels between substance and entertainment addiction. This thesis argues that the treatment of addiction in the novel is tied to the question of reading the novel.

Hayles (1999) was the first to research the role of *Infinite Jest*’s reader and was the first major researcher to point out how addiction in the novel could be better understood, when the reader understands that the story is told to them through cycles. Later, the academic discourse shifted to the question of whether or not Wallace was successful in critiquing postmodernism and the aura of irony around mass media consumption. There are scholars who believe that *Infinite Jest* falls within the same self-indulgent narcissism it hopes to stand against. The critical response as a whole, however, has been generally in favor of Wallace breaking out of the narcissistic loop, and this thesis agrees with that sentiment. The aspect of tennis, as it relates to the role of the reader, has only been scarcely researched. This thesis tries to investigate this relationship.

Wallace uses the character of James O. Incandenza as a conduit for his ideas in *Infinite Jest*: Incandenza also directs a film called *Infinite Jest*, which is so compelling to its viewers that they lose the motivation to do anything, but watch the film until they die. The film is supposed to be his last effort to communicate with James’s son Hal, who represents the lives of the next

generation that comes after Wallace and the problems with solipsism, addiction, and anhedonia they might be faced with. The character of John Wayne is the only student regarded as a better player than Hal. As a blatant ironic joke, Wallace has named him after John Wayne, the western action star. Wallace has, however, used this ironic character in a sincere way, shining a light to Hal's, i.e. the next generation's potential for humanity and empathy.

Tennis is one of the central themes in the novel, and is used to tie together both the fictional narrative and the narrative of the reader. Through seeing Hal's journey towards becoming his own person who is capable of understanding his emotions and motivations, especially towards tennis, Wallace expects the reader to rethink their disposition towards entertainment, including the novel itself. Tennis is also connected to the reading process of the novel through the use of footnotes that the reader must constantly flip back to.

The assessment of this thesis is that *Infinite Jest* conveys Wallace's ideas and goals effectively. He draws easy to understand parallels between his novel and the fictional film of the same name and rewards deeper engagement. On the other hand, the reader might be deterred from engaging with the book, because Wallace makes an effort to make the novel difficult to approach. There is evidence that the novel symbolizes anti-entertainment, James Incandenza's rumored last film that would reverse *Infinite Jest's* lethally addictive effects. In this light, the novel serves to counteract real life entertainment and mass media addiction.

Infinite Jest describes severe entertainment addiction and seeks to make its readers aware of dangers inherent in entertainment and mass media through satire, analogies and metaphors. While addiction cycles play a central role in both the real and the fictional version of *Infinite Jest*, there is a stark difference in how the audience engages with them. The film embodies some of the central ideas expressed in his essay (Wallace 1993), which are that television engages

without demanding and that postmodern fiction fails to step outside the ironic loop of mass media culture. While *Infinite Jest* is meant to be entertaining, Wallace has structured it to actively break the flow of reading through the use of footnotes, narratively unnecessary descriptions of various things, for example the morning drills of students of the academy, and constantly picking up or slowing down the pace of the plot through different characters and playing with chronology. This way the novel asks the reader to actively participate and work independently to connect the dots and ambiguous details. This is perhaps one of the most telling aspects of how the novel breaks the self-indulging loop of postmodern irony. Wallace makes use of irony to paint a bigger picture and connect back to his central ideas, and this thesis regards its use as sincere.

In the view of this thesis, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*'s idea that mass media has high potential to be addictive and dangerous is conveyed successfully. The hint of self-referential irony is overshadowed by the choice to use it for a larger purpose. The role of the reader is unique in that the book leaves many ambiguous ends, but manipulates with the reader until the very end and subverts expectations. The novel requires the reader to engage it in a thoughtful manner and rewards a close reading, while also casting doubt on the value of the novel itself as entertainment. Regardless of perceived narrative payoff, the questions raised on the topic of consumerism and addiction are answered in a positive key, promoting a critical perspective on engaging with mass media.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Ott Abroi
In on the Joke: How *Infinite Jest*
Represents Entertainment Addiction

Osa naljast: Kuidas *Infinite Jest*
meelelahutussõltuvust käsitleb

Bakalaureusetöö

2020

Lehekülgede arv: 32

Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva uurimistöö eesmärgiks on uurida, kuidas David Foster Wallace'i romaan "Infinite Jest" käsitleb meelelahutussõltuvust. Töö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatus, esimene ja teine peatükk ning kokkuvõte. Sissejuhatus tutvustab erinevaid viise, kuidas sõltuvus "Infinite Jestis" esindatud on. Esimene peatükk uurib Wallace'i enda ilukirjandusele seatud eesmärke ja ideid kui ka varasemate uurijate sõltuvuse ja iroonia käsitlusi romaani "Infinite Jest" kohta. Teine peatükk analüüsib püstitatud teooria valguses erinevaid viise, kuidas meelelahutussõltuvus romaanis esineb. Kokkuvõte annab leidudest ülevaate.

Käesolev uurimustöö leiab, et varemalt on "Infinite Jesti" põhjalikult uuritud iroonia ja siiruse valguses. Teose käsitlemine käis pikka aega käsikäes Wallace'i enda välja käidud eesmärkidega tema essees "E Unibus Pluram". Saab kokkuvõtvalt öelda, et nendeks eesmärkideks on lugejat köita läbi kirjandusliku vormi ja tõsta tema teadlikkust meelelahutuse negatiivsetest külgedest. Samuti nägi Wallace probleeme postmodernistliku irooniaga ning proovis seda kritiseerida läbi selle enda vormi. On uurijaid, kes ei ole nõus, et Wallace seda ka saavutas, kuid teaduslik konsensus on, et ta seda tegi. Sellega nõustub ka käesolev töö. Teises osas leiab see bakalaureusetöö, et Wallace on peamise näitena meelelahutuse ohtudest kasutanud teosega samanimelist filmi, mille filmi režissöör, James O. Incandenza oli kokku pannud, et suhelda oma kinnise poja Haliga. Filmil on aga sõltuvust tekitav mõju ja kõik, kes seda näevad, kaotavad motivatsiooni teha kõike muud peale vaatamise. James on tõenäoliselt teoses ka Wallace'i enda ideede väljendajaks. Hal seevastu esindab järgmist generatsiooni, kes on sunnitud sõltuvusega silmitsi seisma. Teoses on kasutatud tennist läbiva motiivina, mis on põimitud sõltuvusega ja see mängib ka rolli selle struktuuris.

Märksõnad:

David Foster Wallace, sõltuvus, meelelahutus, meelelahutussõltuvus, postmodernism, iroonia, siirus, tennis

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