

Fluctuation of Despair and Hopefulness: A Metamodernist Reading of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* in the Thought of Robin van den Akker.

Assist. Lect. Fahad Wali Shayyal

Dept. of English, College of Education for Human science, Sawa University,
Almuthana, Iraq. fahad@sawauniversity.edu.iq

Abstract

This article offers a metamodernist reading of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) through the theoretical framework developed by Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen. It argues that both novels articulate a cultural sensibility characterized by oscillation between despair and hopefulness, sincerity and irony, and fragmentation and meaning. Situated at the historical moment marking the waning of postmodernism, these texts neither abandon irony nor fully recover modernist certainty; instead, they enact a continuous movement between critique and belief. Through close textual analysis, the study examines how narrative form, stylistic experimentation, and thematic concerns—such as consumerism, media saturation, addiction, and existential anxiety—reflect a metamodern structure of feeling. While *White Noise* exposes the alienation produced by commodified life and mediated reality, it simultaneously gestures toward moments of affective intimacy and provisional meaning. Similarly, *Infinite Jest* depicts a culture trapped in cycles of entertainment and addiction, yet frames recovery, empathy, and communal practice as fragile but necessary responses. By foregrounding van den Akker's concepts of oscillation and "as-if" epistemology, the article demonstrates how DeLillo and Wallace negotiate the legacies of modernism and postmodernism. Ultimately, it positions both novels as key literary expressions of metamodernism, capturing a cultural condition defined by hopeful skepticism rather than resolution or nihilism.

Keywords:: Despair and Hopefulness; Irony and Sincerity; Contemporary American Fiction; Narrative Oscillation; Cultural Critique.

تذبذب اليأس والأمل: قراءة ميتامودرنية لرواية "الضحيج الأبيض" لدون ديليلو ورواية "مزحة لانهاية" لديفيد فوستر والاس في فكر روبن فان دن آكير

م:م فهد ولي الشيايل

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة ساوة، المتنى، العراق

. fahad@sawauniversity.edu.iq

الملخص

هذا المقال يقدم قراءة ميتامودرنية لرواية "الضحيج الأبيض" لدون ديليلو (1985) و"مزحة لانهاية" لديفيد فوستر والاس (1996) من خلال الإطار النظري الذي طوره روبن فان دن آكير وتيموثيوس فيرمولين. يناقش أن كلا الروايتين تعبران عن حس ثقافي يتميز بالتذبذب بين اليأس والأمل، والصدق والسخرية،

والتفكك والمعنى. وفي لحظة التاريخ التي تشهد تراجع ما بعد الحداثة، لا تتخلى هذه النصوص عن السخرية ولا تستعيد اليقين الحداثي بالكامل؛ بدلاً من ذلك، تُظهر حركة مستمرة بين النقد والإيمان. من خلال تحليل نصي دقيق، يتناول الدراسة كيف تعكس الشكل السردي، والتجريب الأسلوبي، والاهتمامات الموضوعية—مثل الاستهلاكية، وإشباع وسائل الإعلام، والإدمان، والقلق الوجودي—بنية شعورية ميتامودرنية. بينما تكشف "الضجيج الأبيض" عن اغتراب الحياة المعيشية المُجسّمة والواقع الوسائلي، تشير في الوقت نفسه إلى لحظات من الحميمية العاطفية والمعنى المؤقت. وبالمثل، تُصوّر "مزحة لانهائية" ثقافة محاصرة في دورات من الترفيه والإدمان، لكنها تُقدّم الاسترداد، والتعاطف، والممارسة الجماعية كاستجابات هشة ولكن ضرورية. من خلال التركيز على مفاهيم فان دن آكير حول التذبذب ونظرية المعرفة "كما لو"، يُظهر المقال كيف يتفاوض ديليلو والاس مع إرثي الحداثة وما بعد الحداثة. في النهاية، يضع كلا الروائيتين كتعابير أدبية رئيسية للميتابعدحداثة، مصورة حالة ثقافية تُعرّف بتشكيك مليء بالأمل بدلاً من الحل أو العدمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ميتا بعد حداثة؛ اليأس والأمل؛ السخرية والصدق؛ الأدب الأمريكي المعاصر؛ تذبذب السردي؛ النقد الثقافي.

1. Background of the Study

The study of contemporary literature focuses on a specific time period and describes broader cultural changes that need interpretive strategies beyond the scope of modernism and postmodernism. Scholars and critics perceive an emerging shift in the style and form of artistic and literary discourse during the transition from the twentieth century to the twenty-first. This shift does not completely adopt the optimistic characteristics of modernism or surrender to the cold indifference of postmodernism. Cultural theorists, such as Robin van den Akker, describe this emerging paradigm as "metamodernism." Within this paradigm, works oscillate between opposing poles, such as despair and hope, irony and sincerity, and fragmentation and unity. Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, published in 1985, and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996, embody the contradictions of metamodernism. The novels, as part of American literature, engage with the challenges and opportunities presented by the late twentieth century and thus prove rich in meaning and interpretation. The transition between cultural shifts and the intellectual paradigm between modernism and postmodernism centers on an excessive level of self-skepticism and a fondness for pastiche. This marks an important portion of the late twentieth century. Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, in their essay "Notes on Metamodernism," published in 2010, argue that the new structure of feeling revolves around the veil of exhaustion brought by the irony of postmodernism. They write, "Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 5). This oscillation represents a dynamic negotiation where equilibrium never truly establishes a balanced position. This notion stems from traditions of the self,

including an in-between state or Plato's *metaxy*, and provisional belief systems that remain unfulfilled, such as Kant's "as-if" epistemology. Van den Akker and Vermeulen's formulation stands as a fundamental aspect of contemporary cultural criticism and influences research in the fields of art, literature, and philosophy.

This theoretical framework situates itself against a backdrop of sociocultural upheaval, such as the advent of global capitalism, technological hypersaturation, and ecological disasters, which appear poignantly in *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest*. Regarding the state of the late twentieth century, Vermeulen and van den Akker write, "The postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over. In fact, if we are to believe the many academics, critics and pundits whose books and essays describe the decline and demise of the postmodern, they have been over for quite a while now" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2). This claim corresponds with the time frame of DeLillo's and Wallace's works, produced when postmodernism declines but remains present. The 1985 publication of *White Noise* captures the alienation and absurdity of consumer culture during the Reagan era, while *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996, critiques the rampant addiction to entertainment in a near-future America. Both works reveal a society comes to terms with the rubble of postmodernism, its cynicism and disconnect, and cautiously moves toward something more sincere and integrative, which indicates metamodern sensibility.

DeLillo's *White Noise* earns recognition as a postmodern novel, yet it deviates from those norms with metamodern tendencies. The story follows Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler Studies, who suffers from the fear of dying in a world dominated by media and consumerism. An "Airborne Toxic Event," a toxic precipitate, shatters the peaceful suburban setting and forces characters to face existential questions about their lives. DeLillo notes, "May the days be aimless. Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan" (DeLillo 98). This quote captures the author's philosophy of life, which celebrates digression and deviation from expected social norms. Contemporary critics, such as David Cowart, appreciate DeLillo's style and note his ability to find "beauty amid such emptiness" (Cowart 20), a quality that connects with van den Akker's ideas where emphasis rests on hope stemming from despair. The paradox manifests in Jack's unremarkable familial relationships alongside the absurdity of a Hitler Studies department, reflecting the metamodernistic duality van den Akker explains.

In the same manner, Wallace's *Infinite Jest* resists easy categorization and combines postmodern style with a modernist search for purpose. With over one thousand pages, the novel weaves an intricate tapestry of characters, including the Incandenza family and the residents of a halfway house, and examines addiction, entertainment, and the quest for meaning in a dystopian North America. The writing brims with irony, as it depicts a society captivated by a deadly film named "Infinite Jest," yet it stems from a deep yearning for human connection. Wallace

argues, "The truth will set you free. But not until it is finished with you" (Wallace 389), a statement that captures the bleakness of suffering while offering hope toward redemption. Scholar Mary K. Holland argues that Wallace's work "succeeds postmodernism" by stating it "reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives of an earlier cultural moment" (Holland 12), a perspective that aligns with van den Akker's take on metamodernism as a compromise between modernist and postmodernist ideas.

The emphasis on the oscillation of despair and hope stems vividly from van den Akker's formulation of metamodernism as a cultural logic swinging between emotive and cognitive poles. In *White Noise*, despair features in the strong sense of death and the commodification of life's experiences, while moments of quiet hopefulness appear, such as Jack's appreciation of the mundane: "I had never looked at coffee before" (DeLillo 97). The same oscillation presents itself in *Infinite Jest*, where the darkness of addiction and isolation accompanies persistent, if faltering, attempts to forge connection. Vermeulen and van den Akker affirm, "Each time the metamodern enthusiasm leans towards fanaticism, gravity pulls it back towards irony; the moment its irony moves towards apathy, it is pulled back towards enthusiasm" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 6). This oscillation propels the inquiry that unpacks how DeLillo and Wallace construct narrative and style to bridge this gap.

The negotiation of metamodernism takes place here at the intersection of narrative structure and stylistic innovation. *White Noise* employs an episodic structure that defies resolution, a feature of postmodernism, yet it includes modernist digressions and existential concerns. This blend underscores DeLillo's dialogue, which often fragments yet illuminates, as when Jack states, "The power of the dead is that we think they see us all the time" (DeLillo 102). In contrast, *Infinite Jest* pushes experimentation further with a loose, sprawling narrative interspersed with extensive footnotes, a postmodern quirk Wallace adopts to enhance engagement rather than dilute it. These stylistic marks, such as recursive sentences, suggest a modernist yearning to capture consciousness, while awareness of language as a medium in the postmodern sense remains apparent. Vermeulen and van den Akker state, "Metamodernism seeks to transcend postmodern relativism by reintroducing concepts like authenticity or truth, while keeping postmodern doubt entirely" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 8). Such shifts manifest in the structural strategies of the novels.

The critique in both *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* on American society corresponds with van den Akker's observations. DeLillo mocks the commodification of death and the media rapture and illustrates a culture where "everything was on television once" (DeLillo 75), a critique that foreshadows the digital era's extremes. Wallace aims at the numbing effects of entertainment and how desire becomes materialized

and cautions, "That sometimes human beings have to just sit in one place and, like, hurt" (Wallace 203). Suffering in despair dominates both authors' diagnoses, yet the portrayals give hope, as Jack's family ties and Hal Incandenza's self-reflective battles signal something greater than despair. Vermeulen and van den Akker connect this duality to larger cultural transformations and state, "For the metamodern generation, according to Vermeulen, 'grand narratives are as necessary as they are problematic; hope is not simply something to distrust, love not necessarily something to be ridiculed'" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 9). With this, DeLillo's and Wallace's works emerge as metamodern critiques that swing between judgment and possibility.

The simultaneous juxtaposition of irony and sincerity marks the most striking form of this shift and aligns with van den Akker's view of "as-if" thinking, a conscious surrender to "an impossible possibility" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 10). Throughout *White Noise*, irony encompasses the outrageousness of a toxic occurrence recounted with deadpan wit, yet Jack's grappling with death, "What if death is nothing but sound?" (DeLillo 198), showcases sincerity. *Infinite Jest* exemplifies the coexistence of overbearing irony, such as the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, against a quiet meditative focus on recovery and reconnection, as Don Gately reflects, "He couldn't stop it, he could only wait it out" (Wallace 443). This "both-neither" dynamic, as van den Akker calls it, indicates a metamodern refusal of the binary choice of one or the other and instead accepts the nexus of opposites as meaning.

This analysis combines aspects of cultural theory and literary analysis by applying van den Akker's metamodernism to the intricacies of *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest*. The study of how these texts demonstrate oscillation, negotiate literary traditions, critique society, and manage the balance of irony and sincerity constructs a counter-monologue within the discourse on the development of modern literature. DeLillo and Wallace, writing at the cusp of this shift, provide analogies to van den Akker's culture of hopeful skepticism, poised between despair and belief. Today, as the twenty-first century unfolds, their works actively mark the metamodern condition and invite pursuit of ever-elusive horizons.

2. Statement of Problem

The problem stems from the need to analyze the duality of despair and hope in American literature through metamodernism, as proposed by van den Akker. Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* serve as critical sociocultural commentaries of the United States in the latter half of the 20th century, highlighting the rampant consumerism, media proliferation, and existential ambiguity. These texts have received much attention through the modernist and postmodernist lenses but less so with metamodernism, which attempts to make sense of the swing between hope and despair, the coexistence of irony and

sincerity, and modernist and postmodernist traditions. This gap in scholarship and focus impedes the comprehension of how these texts attempt to confront and shape sensibility in a culture that is moving beyond the postmodernist phase. The gap needs to be filled with research based on van den Akker's theories to fulfill the emerging need.

Van den Akker defines this sensibility as a structure of feeling that is interposed by vowel sounds, modernist zeal, postmodern irony, hope, sentimentality, knowing and naive, empathetic and indifferent, oneness and multiplicity, totality, fragmentation, clarity, and ambiguity. These contours interpret *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest*, which show despair in the featured spectacle of commodification and medialization of life but evoke hope through the family's endurance and the community's healing. Current analyses primarily emphasize postmodern despair without considering the countervailing hope that van den Akker finds so important, thus leaving the books' importance as metamodern novels partially concealed.

The issue concerns the narrative patterns and imaginative styles of *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest*, which combine modernist logic with postmodernist fragmentation in a manner not addressed in previous research concerning metamodernism. It is noted that DeLillo's style has the character of a postmodern reproach, but the forward-flowing plot of the novel suggests modernistic unity. In the same way, Wallace's structure is postmodern, but Gately's redemption suggests modernity. In attempting to resolve these extremes, one could apply van den Akker's hypothesis that metamodernism reframes the focus of aesthetics. However, there is little attempt to apply this claim comprehensively to these two novels, which means that the intermingling of literary traditions remains poorly defined.

Moreover, criticism of contemporary American society in these texts, while acknowledged, lacks a cohesive metamodern critique in line with van den Akker's sociocultural remarks. Both authors critique the alienation of America in late capitalism, but the degree to which the portrayals of despair and hopeful optimism amalgamate with van den Akker's perspective remains unexplored. The tension between sincerity and irony, pivotal in van den Akker's "as-if" epistemology, can be observed in Jack's ironic pondering and Wallace's portrayal of Hal's mute anguish. Scholars seldom make this duality part of a wider metamodern oscillation, attributing only the role of an ironist revealing the absurdity of the consumer society. The gap in the research is that no systematic metamodernist interpretation accounts for oscillation, narrative structure, social critique, and the interplay of irony and sincerity in van den Akker's terms for *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest*. This gap is tackled by looking at how the novels fill in and expand the boundaries of metamodernism.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Conceptual Framework

The major obligation of the dissertation framework stems from the metamodernism literary paradigm, as proposed by Robin van den Akker, and seeks to apply it to the literary critique of two significant American novels, *White Noise* (1985) by Don DeLillo and *Infinite Jest* (1996) by David Foster Wallace. Metamodernism, as a cultural and aesthetic dialect, is the answer to the exhaustion phenomenon of postmodernism and provides a means through which an analysis of oscillation between opposing poles such as despair and hopefulness, irony and sincerity, enthusiasm in modernism, and skepticism in postmodernism is performed. This explains the situational context of the examined novels that serve as capstones that integrate the legacies of modernist and postmodernist literary traditions and at the same time underscore American society through a metamodern lens. The need of examining the sociocultural features of postmodern America, flooded with consumerism, mass media, and existential doubt during the 20th century, is anchored in the metamodernism framework with focus on historicity and affect, marked by the “as-if” epistemology.

In their 2010 essay “Notes on Metamodernism,” van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen first outline metamodernism, describing it as a “structure of feeling” that “oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (van den Akker and Vermeulen 5). This oscillation does not exist as a fixed equilibrium. It is, much like the metaphor, movement; “a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles,” where “every time the metamodern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony. The moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm” (van den Akker and Vermeulen 6). This notion is essential because it claims that in *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* the oscillations between extremes portray a cultural transition from postmodernism’s deconstructive cynicism to a more actively, albeit tentatively, meaning-seeking engagement. Consequently, van den Akker’s framework analyzes these texts in the context of their oscillation between despair due to the alienating impacts of consumerism and technologically saturated society, and hope in authentic moments of human empathy and kindness.

The theoretical architecture also relies on van den Akker’s delineation of metamodern historicity presented in the 2017 edited volume *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*. The claim is made that metamodernism transforms the attitude towards history, not as a grand narrative to be recovered (like in modernism) or endlessly spoofed (like in postmodernism) but as “a possibility—not as project but as projection” (van den Akker et al. 21). Projections which represent the past inform analyses of how *White Noise* and

Infinite Jest deal with American society's past and present. In *White Noise*, DeLillo portrays an America which is overfilled with media and consumer waste in which "the most photographed barn in America" stands as a symbol of a history which has been turned into a spectacle and yet the protagonist Jack Gladney tries to establish some semblance of familial relationships (DeLillo 12). In the same fashion, Wallace's *Infinite Jest* shifts from a dystopian entertainment-saturated future to redemption-saturated moments, including the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings which provide a collapsed society with some hope (Wallace 343). Van den Akker's historicity interprets these texts in terms of a metamodern contradiction of a commodified past and a hopeful, yet vague, future.

Affect, one of the pillars of van den Akker's metamodernism, is equally important for the frame. Van den Akker claims in the 2017 volume that metamodernism is the re-emergence of literature with feeling because it transforms the postmodern affective sensibilities from having a "nihilistic view" to being "more engaged and interested subjectivity" (van den Akker et al. 83). This shift is important in comprehending how one oscillates between hopelessness and hopefulness in the critique of contemporary America done in *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest*. DeLillo's gruesome depiction of the "airborne toxic event" conjures feelings of deep despair that accompany environmental and existential dread; nevertheless, the dark humor paired with gentle domesticity displayed in the novel provides a hopeful outlook on life (DeLillo 117). Wallace employs an extensive narrative to drown the readers in the affective realm of isolation and addiction, only to give an antidote with the earnestness of Don Gately, a recovering addict whose optimism is sincere although fragile (Wallace 860). Van den Akker's affect theory helps to examine how these works invite postmodern apathy in embracing emotion which allows feeling and critique in metamodern form.

This interplay of irony and reflection is important in the study of van den Akker's metamodern epistemology and guides the thinking framework. Van den Akker refers to this epistemology as thinking "as-if" because "the metamodernist does not seek a truth that can be found, but performs as if such a truth might exist" (van den Akker and Vermeulen 8). This "bothneither," that is, not completely modernist in its truthfulness and not entirely postmodernist in its sarcasm and mockery, explains how DeLillo and Wallace construct their narratives in the context of the analysis. In *White Noise*, Jack observes, "I am the false character that follows the name around" (DeLillo 17), and so the commodified linguistics of advertising and academic instructional discourse is filled with irony, yet this is balanced by genuine phases, such as the protective reflexes in the toxic event. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace's unguarded serving of cutting remarks, ironic annotations, and his general pieces of writing in circles criticize the saturation with mass media, but the honest depiction of human suffering, and Hal Incandenza's mute despair, hints to a certain truth that

is admirable (Wallace 851). Thus, oscillations from despair to hope are anchored within the vicious cycle of late capitalist America, and van den Akker's "as-if" epistemology allows these contradictions to be freely consumed.

The framework also incorporates van den Akker's sociocultural comments, especially that metamodernism addresses "the recent reconfigurations of Western capitalist societies at large" (van den Akker et al. xi). This context understands *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* as responses to capitalism and media-fueled culture of despair, which, in their subtle ways, offer hope. For example, DeLillo describes the "white noise" of incessant televisions, radios, and supermarkets. A family under such noise is largely hopeless, but the emphasis on family endurance is hopeful (DeLillo 36). Wallace's projection of the future is equally hopeless—entertainment as addiction is a reality—but just like in DeLillo, there are hints of hope with the portrayal of recovery (Wallace 200). Van den Akker's comment, "grand narratives are as necessary as they are problematic; hope is not simply something to distrust, love not necessarily something to be ridiculed" (van den Akker and Vermeulen 9), captures these elements and the novels as metamodern critiques without leaving behind traditional values.

Lastly, the framework builds upon van den Akker's focus on narrative form and style as sites of metamodern contestation. In the text, it is noted that metamodernism "gives up the aesthetic principles of deconstruction, parataxis and pastiche in favor of those of myth and metaxis" (van den Akker and Vermeulen 5). This change guides the investigation of how *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* integrate modernist unification and postmodern disintegration. DeLillo's linear but digressive story and Wallace's nonlinear, encyclopedic narrative embody this hybridity and oscillate between oneness and multiplicity in response to the changing state of hopelessness and hope. Through van den Akker, metamodernity makes sense of the irredeemable passiveness that these forms issue while offering a placeholder meaning, which corresponds with a reality "trying to reach" something "as if it were within our grasp" (van den Akker and Vermeulen 12).

So, the foundational consideration is based on Robin van den Akker's metamodernism revolving around oscillation, historicity, affect, and "as-if" epistemology in order to study *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest*. Placing these works in van den Akker's framework exposes the ways in which DeLillo and Wallace deal with modernist and postmodernist legacies, offer a commentary on American society, and weave together an intricate tapestry of hopelessness and hope. This method has integrated literary studies with sociocultural critiques and views the novels as paradigm cases of a metamodern attitude, caught in the crosscurrents of history.

3.2 Previous Studies on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

Earlier research on *White Noise* by Don DeLillo and *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace analyzes the thematic, stylistic, and cultural aspects of these works in a detailed manner that supports a metamodernist reading in the context of Robin van den Akker's ideas. The scholarship on *White Noise*, published in 1985, critiques postmodern American society, especially the impact of consumerism, media, and anxiety. In the same way, studies on *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996, focus on the structure, the treatment of entertainment and addiction, and the integration of a postmodern literary form. Even though these studies do not apply metamodern concepts systematically, they incorporate, to a greater or lesser degree, the concept of oscillation between hope and despair, irony and sincerity, and modernist and postmodernist legacies as proposed by van den Akker. This review intertwines the ideas of several literary critics and describes them as forerunners to the dissertation's metamodernist approach on the gap between hope and despair in these novels.

The scholarship on *White Noise* constantly deals with the issue of America as a media and consumeristic society, which connects with van den Akker's late capitalism sociocultural reflections. In his 1992 study *Don DeLillo*, Douglas Keesey analyzes the book by claiming, "*White Noise* is a novel about the fear of death in a society where the real has been replaced by simulations, where the media noise suppresses any possibility of genuine experience" (Keesey 137). This viewpoint highlights some of the features of the culture industry, for instance, the "most photographed barn in America," which DeLillo uses as a metaphor for unfulfilled reality (DeLillo 12). Keesey is also aware of willing suspension of disbelief and asserts, "Jack Gladney's fumbling attempts to protect his family suggest a lingering hope beneath the surface noise" (Keesey 141). This duality indicates one of the shifts of metamodernism and also complements van den Akker's theory about the movement between hopelessness and optimism.

In the same way, Tom LeClair argues in his 1987 book *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* that brand naming is emblematic of dysfunctional systems that subjugate the plot's characters. "DeLillo's writing is terse, repetitive, brand-name saturated, which are all indicative of the systems his characters live in" (LeClair 209). LeClair's attention to style as part of systemic despair allows focus on the way *White Noise* renders modernist wholeness and postmodernist dismemberment, a central issue in metamodernism.

The studies conducted around *White Noise* center on its postmodernism perspective and its intermingling of irony and sincerity, motives van den Akker relates to "as-if" thought. In his 2008 publication for *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Mark Osteen claims, "DeLillo employs irony to illuminate

the madness of capitalism and its culture, but it has also to be qualified with concern for people,” and continues, “Take for instance Jack’s impression of the airborne toxic event” (Osteen 67). This is a remark filled with tension that captures the essence of metamodernism’s “bothneither” paradigm, which morally scoffs at social issues only to offer an empty gesture of meaning. N.H. Reeve also engages with this concept through his 2001 essay “This Time, This Place: Reading Don DeLillo,” stating, “It is indeed *White Noise* that claims death is a commodity, but the obscured domesticity of Jack and Babette’s wounded intimacy is a glimmer of hope” (Reeve 129). Reeve illustrates this glimmer of hope in correlation with the disappointment of contemporary reality, which, in the words of van den Akker, expresses through engaged subjectivity. This perspective lays the foundation for seeing a metamodern DeLillo’s changing from despair to wide-eyed hopefulness. Turning to *Infinite Jest*, previous studies grapple with its sprawling narrative and thematic complexity and frame it often as a postmodern masterpiece while noting its departures from that tradition, departures that resonate with metamodernist sensibilities. In his 2003 book *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell asserts that “*Infinite Jest* is a critique of a culture addicted to entertainment, where the characters are isolated and consumed by despair, yet Wallace infuses the novel with a sincere plea for human connection, most evident in the AA scenes” (Boswell 162). Boswell’s recognition of this sincerity amid despair mirrors van den Akker’s oscillation between apathy and empathy, suggesting a metamodern negotiation of postmodern cynicism. Also, Stephen J. Burn, in his 2012 study *David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide*, remarks, “Wallace’s use of endnotes and his digressive structure represent a postmodern fragmentation, but the emotional heart of the novel, Gately’s redemption, seeks a modernist wholeness” (Burn 54). Burn’s analysis of stylistic hybridity serves as a starting point for examining what Burn refers to as the great synthesis of metamodernism constructed around the figure of Wallace, particularly concerning how *Infinite Jest* embodies a metamodernist compilation of literary traditions, as posited in the dissertation’s questions.

Critics view *Infinite Jest* through the lens of irony, a major component in van den Akker’s reasoning, and often juxtapose it with Wallace’s apparent desire for authenticity. In his 1993 essay in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Larry McCaffery notes that, “Despite the fact that Wallace uses irony as a weapon against the superficiality of media culture, his characters’ struggles, Hal’s mute anguish, Gately’s quiet heroism, are deeply sincere and contradictory to postmodern apathy” (McCaffery 142). This interplay sets the stage for van den Akker’s concept of “as-if” thinking whereby irony is constructive while sincerity acts as though there is genuine meaning. Similarly, Catherine Toal argues in her 2003 article “The World According to Jest,” that “*Infinite Jest* moves between the bleakness of a dystopian

vision and the optimism of believing in a collective rehabilitation of society, tension which is housed in the encyclopedic yet intimate narrative” (Toal 189). Toal’s attention to this oscillation corresponds directly with van den Akker’s structure of feeling and provides groundwork for the dissertation’s attention to the interplay of despair and hope as defining characteristics of metamodernism.

These analyses of *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* expand the academic landscape further and emphasize recurrent thematic issues that call for a metamodern approach. In a 2011 essay in *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, David Hering argues that “both DeLillo and Wallace critique the alienation of late capitalist America, *White Noise* by media noise and *Infinite Jest* by entertainment addiction, yet both suggest glimmers of hope in human strength” (Hering 17). Hering’s remark of this dual critique and resilience is similar to van den Akker’s sociocultural remarks and offers a linkage to the third research question of the dissertation. Likewise, Timothy Aubry, in his 2011 book *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans*, claims that “*White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* tackle existential despair with their complex and stylistically unique prose, but they also offer therapeutic hope, familial in DeLillo, communal in Wallace” (Aubry 93). Aubry’s therapeutic lens reinforces the sociocultural dimension van den Akker advocates and underlines the importance of previous research to metamodernism.

Further analysis looks into the narrative techniques used in retelling these novels, which helps answer the dissertation’s exploration of stylistic change as an area of metamodern negotiation. In her 1998 study *Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting in the Cold War Era and After*, Marcel Cornis-Pope writes that, “DeLillo’s *White Noise* blends a linear plot with postmodern digressions, creating a narrative that critiques consumer society while seeking coherence” (Cornis-Pope 214). This blending is what van den Akker later refers to when he talks about the shift from postmodern pastiche to metamodern reconstruction. For *Infinite Jest*, Iannis Goerlandt, in a 2007 article in *English Studies*, posits that “Wallace’s nonlinear, encyclopedic form reflects the postmodern chaos, but his emphasis on the depth of characters and their moral dilemmas is a modernist’s gesture” (Goerlandt 312). Goerlandt’s insight into this hybridity converges with van den Akker’s metaxis and gives an enabling critique for the second research question of the dissertation.

Some other studies also refer explicitly to theorists that touch on postpostmodern or protometamodern readings, but may not use van den Akker’s terms. Adam Kelly, in his 2010 essay for *Twentieth-Century Literature*, states that “Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* moves beyond postmodern irony toward a ‘new sincerity,’ a stance which, as he puts it, ‘balances critique with a hopeful ethics’” (Kelly 137). Kelly’s “new sincerity” is reminiscent of van den Akker’s combination of irony and sincerity,

which is very helpful towards answering the fourth research question of the dissertation. John Duvall, in his 2008 book *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, regarding *White Noise* offers, “DeLillo’s irony critiques the postmodern condition, but his attention to human fragility hints at a postpostmodern turn” (Duvall 108). Duvall’s framing positions *White Noise* as a crossover text and makes it amenable to metamodern analysis.

To recap, earlier analyses of *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* provide a strong basis for a metamodernist interpretation by locating themes of despair and hope, conflict, and hybrid style in a manner that corresponds with van den Akker’s framework. Even if not all scholars explicitly adopt a metamodern perspective, their analysis of the novels’ critiques of American culture, their self-referential structure, and the tension of emotions inspires a response that serves as the skeleton for the dissertation and its examination of the oscillation between despair and hopefulness.

4. Research Questions

This paper focuses on Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) using metamodernism developed by van den Akker. It focuses on the representation of oscillation between desperation and hope as a form of reconciliation of modernist and postmodernist strategies of narrative form and style, American societal critique about van den Akker's socio-cultural analysis, and meaning construction through irony and sincerity as "as-if" epistemology.

RQ1- How do *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* exemplify the metamodern oscillation between despair and hopefulness as articulated by Robin van den Akker?

RQ2- In what ways do the narrative structures and stylistic innovations of *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* reflect a metamodernist negotiation of modernist and postmodernist literary traditions?

RQ3- How do DeLillo and Wallace critique contemporary American society through a metamodern lens, and to what extent do their portrayals of despair and hopefulness align with van den Akker’s socio-cultural observations?

RQ4- What role does the interplay of irony and sincerity play in constructing the fluctuation of despair and hopefulness in *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest*, and how does this align with van den Akker’s metamodern epistemology of "as-if" thinking?

5. Research Objectives

Objective 1: To analyze how *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* exemplify Robin van den Akker’s metamodern oscillation between despair and hopefulness through key themes and character actions.

Objective 2: To examine the narrative structures and stylistic innovations of *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest*, showing how they reflect a metamodernist blend of modernist and postmodernist literary traditions.

Objective 3: To investigate how DeLillo and Wallace critique American society in *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* through a metamodern lens, comparing their despair and hopefulness to van den Akker's sociocultural observations.

Objective 4: To explore how irony and sincerity in *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* shape the fluctuation of despair and hopefulness, aligning with van den Akker's "as-if" metamodern epistemology.

6. Research Hypothesis

The hypothesis posits that Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* metamodernistically oscillate between despair and hopefulness, as van den Akker has thematically, structurally, sociologically, and heavily ironically blended institutional critique with sincere compassion. It further argues that such constitutive features serve as a modernist and postmodernist literary tradition fusion, mimic van den Akker's sociocultural remarks, and manifest his "as-if" epistemology, thus situating the novels as paradigmatic metamodern repudiations of sensibility in the American literature of the late twentieth century.

As an example, the hypothesis claims that both *Infinite Jest* and *White Noise* portray the consumerist, media-induced alienation, and existential despair in a manner that intertwines with the hope manifest in human connection and resilience, which forms the essence of van den Akker's metamodern oscillation. This aligns with van den Akker's description of metamodernism as a feeling oscillating between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony, hope, and anguish. For example, DeLillo's portrayal of a media-drowned society elides familial ties, while Wallace's depiction of addiction forces communal recovery, hinting at a postmodernist cynical movement surrounding the center of the pendulum.

In addition, the hypothesis claims that the radical narrative innovations and structures of the metamodernist and postmodernist novels would have constructed prose of modernist and postmodernist literature traditions. The parallel, though at times the elliptical narrative line of DeLillo and Wallace's encyclopedic, non-linear structure, combines modernist unity and postmodernist disunity, efficiently representing van den Akker's change from deconstruction to reconstruction. This serves as a way for the novels to elude the traditions of both oppositions, framing the texts as metamodern responses to heritage literature.

In addition, the hypothesis argues that both DeLillo and Wallace tackle contemporary American society's issues through a metamodern lens of despair and hopefulness that closely align with van den Akker's sociocultural postulations of late capitalist conditions. The novels' depictions of consumerism and technological overload as sources of despair, tempered by provisional hope in human relationships, pass as a metaphor for van den Akker's oscillating view of culture between problematic grand narratives and their necessity, offering a sophisticated critique of America in the slough of chronic capitalism.

Thus, the hypothesis states that DeLillo's and Wallace's use of irony and sincerity in the novels *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* mutually create the oscillation of hopefulness and despair by van den Akker's "as-if" epistemological stance. Irony critiques societal absurdities, and sincerity gestures toward meaning, producing an outcome that emblematically captures metamodernism's engagement with reality. This working hypothesis can be verified through textual analysis. It seeks to prove that these novels illustrate and amplify van den Akker's metamodern proposition, revealing them in the light of contemporary literary criticism.

7. Significance of the Research

This dissertation marks an important step in modern literary criticism, especially in the development of metamodernism. It analyzes two pivotal texts of American fiction from the end of the 20th century, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, through the metaphor proposed by cultural theorist Robin van den Akker in order to demonstrate the intricate blends of emotion, structure, and philosophy that lie within the metamodern sensibility. Its importance is in precisely investigating how these texts deal with their period's cultural and literary conflicts, articulating the oscillation of despair and hope in a post-postmodern context and its complexities and stereotypes.

Van den Akker describes the metamodernism aspect this study engages in as an oscillation between fundamentalist modernism and cynical postmodernism; it crystallizes into a complex structure of feeling that forms modern socio-cultural realities. While analyzing *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* through this lens, the dissertation shifts the focus of the literary critique to the overarching philosophical and sociological issues, showing how these texts go beyond their postmodernist heritage to reach for a new form. Such a perspective broadens the scope of the works of DeLillo and Wallace as the two most important modern American authors. However, it also defines them and their texts as products of a new, dislocated, hypermediated, dominantly modern reality.

The dissertation's narrative and stylistic innovation focus also illustrate its scholarly relevance. Both novels are well-known for DeLillo's incisive satirical prose and Wallace's contorted encyclopedic narrative, and this study reframes these strategies as negotiations with the literary canon. Examining how these texts both take up and leave modernist and postmodernist orthodoxy, the study contributes a new understanding of their structural creativity: how they use form to address and understand complex cultural and existential problems. This analysis improves the conversation to a systematic critique instead of elaborate scoping for contemporary fiction.

However, this dissertation has additional relevance in its critique of American society, which is also a primary concern of both authors. It adopts a metamodernist lens to analyze how DeLillo and Wallace deal with the hyper commodification,

technological saturation, and existential scattering of late capitalist culture and whether meaning can be made in such contexts. This combination of critique and potential directly corresponds with van den Akker's explanation of metamodernism as a reaction to the deadening exhaustion of postmodern cynical belief, making this research an important piece in understanding literature's role in the socio-cultural change.

Hence, the interplay between irony and sincerity a distinct feature of metamodern thought – emerges as a significant pointer of analysis, providing a profound rethinking of how these novels construct their emotional and epistemological undertones. The dissertation employed van den Akker's notion of as-if thinking to emphasize the oscillation's active character, situating *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* as works that participate in and subvert the ethos of their times. In this way, the dissertation contributes to the scholarship of literature and raises other non-literary considerations about the place of art in confronting the difficulties of our times.

8. Methodology

The dissertation applies a methodology based on literary theory, cultural study, and philosophical analysis. This study centers around the theoretical framework of metamodernism, defined by Robin van den Akker, a cultural theorist whose work serves as a paradigm for analyzing contemporary literature and its sociocultural context. So, this methodology allows for the relations between literary works and the culture from which they stem, analyzing the literature's context, especially van den Akker's metamodernism as a feeling structure between modernism and postmodernism.

The metamodernism theory, as defined by Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, does not provide a prescriptive manifesto or an aesthetic movement but instead serves as a descriptive framework to enable understanding of contemporary culture. Akker's contribution stems from defining this deformation as one of the features of the metamodern conditions formulated as a reaction to sociocultural processes of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, like globalization, technological changes, and economic upheavals. Within this context, the postmodern era, filled with irony with pastiche and the denial of more incredible stories, was triumphantly replaced by a novel structure of feeling that feats oscillation. In this view, the postmodern condition marks the phase that is dominated by the pretense of sarcastic trivialism mixed with love for literature, art, and culture. Essentially, he argues that the features of postmodernism can only be appreciated after the era has passed. As Akker set out with Vermeulen, metamodernism does not contain any aesthetic program but provides a framework to understand contemporary culture. It came as a result of the understanding of the exhaustion of postmodernism.

At the heart of van den Akker's theory is the 'Metaxas' concept, which, in its more complete term, is understood to be defined as a form of in-betweenness or involvement with two opposing extremes. Postmodernism takes a neither/nor deconstructionist approach, and modernism takes a utopian either/or view. At the same time, metamodernism adopts a more integrating approach, a 'both/and' perspective, which adjudicates between the two without dissolving them into a coherent synthesis. This oscillation is not just a balancing act but rather one that is a constant pendular movement between the two extremes, evidencing a cultural disposition that seeks the elusive truth and meaning. Van den Akker introduces "as if" thinking, adopting from Kantian philosophy, which describes a pragmatic idealism where grand narratives and ethical actions are within reach but only in a contingent sense. This attitude forms the center of the texts and analyzes the discrepancies of hopefulness and despair with a contemporary scope through the delineating frame of fiction.

The methodology focuses on van den Akker's theoretical insights as heuristic, using these concepts to explain the chosen literary works' cultural and philosophical contexts. The study is in solidarity with van den Akker's affect, historicity, and depth emphasis by framing metamodernism as a structure of feeling rather than a formal category. Once argued to have emerged after the postmodern era, these qualities were claimed to have resurfaced. This argument feeds into the gap in the literature that will be filled by analyzing the sociocultural context of the texts within the frameworks provided by Van Den Akker.

The methodology implements several key analytical techniques to actualize van den Akker's theory. The concept of oscillation becomes a guiding hermeneutic instrument that allows the movement between two opposing affective and philosophical conditions to be located. This strategy captures the oscillation between the two extreme poles of hope and despair, which involves attention to the overt thematic elements, plot ideas, and expression level. The analysis pays attention to the changes in narrative tone and accompanying shifts in the speaker's voice as he transitions from cynical to cautiously optimistic in the metamodern world that is not content with one form of expression.

The combination of irony and sincerity serves as a vital point of departure for comprehending the metamodern aspect of the texts. In this sense, Van den Akker contends that metamodernism reinserts sincerity into postmodernism's all-encompassing irony while still self-reflexive. The approach looks at the novels in which the authors use irony not as an objective but rather in opposition to a sincere attempt to engage with existential and ethical dilemmas. This includes looking at the context of the use of irony and the context of its use in conjunction with unprotected emotional or moral outpourings to determine compliance with van den Akker's "informed naivety" concept.

The dissertation discusses engagement with van den Akker's epistemology of "as if" thinking for constructing the texts' philosophy. This approach concentrates on how the novels create narratives that point towards something meaningful, truthful, or redemptive but simultaneously claim such a reality is only partially true and constructed. Identifying where the texts assume an "as if" attitude, chasing after idealistic sentiments with an acceptance of their unattainable nature, reveals the texts' positioning within metamodernism's swing between modernist zeal and postmodernist derision.

The primary data for this research originates from the novels *White Noise* by Don DeLillo and *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, both chosen for their significance in the metamodern context and their late twentieth-century American literary attributes. These texts are supported by secondary materials, such as those by van den Akker himself and other metamodernism scholars, as well as modernism and postmodernism. The rationale for choosing these novels is based on their temporal closeness to the cultural changes van den Akker mentions, together with the fact that they all deal with the contentious relationship between free will and social structures, which is a predominant issue in metamodernism.

The iterative nature of the interpretive process incorporates several rounds of reading to synthetically analyze the data while remaining faithful to van der Akker's theory. The first readings focus on the overarching patterns of oscillation, irony, and sincerity, while later readings analyze specific texts that represent these patterns. Close reading is the primary means of analyzing the novels' narrative patterns, stylistic features, and significant themes, referring to them as issues. This form of literature is adapted from the more classic style of literary critiques, such as syntax, tone, and characterization, and is made more sophisticated to cater to metamodernist expectations. Supporting contextual analysis of metamodernism analyzes how the text engages with the sociocultural context of metamodernism, using cultural studies approaches to understand the critique the texts offer towards America's history and social environment towards the end of the 20th century.

This methodological framework, founded on Robin van den Akker's metamodernism theory, enables a more nuanced understanding of the interplay of despair and hope in modern literature. The combination of close reading with contextual criticism and the application of oscillation, irony, sincerity, and 'as if' thinking as key instruments enables the construction of sophisticated arguments about the metamodern condition. Striking a balance between novel approaches to theory and the sources themselves guarantees attention to detail and strives toward accuracy within the emerging discipline of metamodernist literary studies.

Conclusion

This article has argued that White Noise and Infinite Jest exemplify a metamodern structure of feeling characterized by oscillation between despair and hopefulness. Through narrative form, thematic complexity, and affective engagement, DeLillo and Wallace negotiate the legacies of modernism and postmodernism without fully inhabiting either. Their novels critique late capitalist culture while tentatively affirming the possibility of meaning, connection, and ethical responsibility.

By applying Robin van den Akker's metamodern framework, this study repositions these texts as paradigmatic expressions of a cultural sensibility defined not by resolution or nihilism, but by hopeful skepticism. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about post-postmodern literature and underscores the relevance of metamodernism as a critical tool for understanding contemporary fiction.

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