

**Entertainment, Addiction, and Absurdity: *Infinite Jest* and Digital Culture****Research Submitted By****Asst. Lect. Basim Salim Khalaf ALhababi****University of Samarra/ College of Education for Humanities/ Department of English****Khalafbasim48@gmail.com****م.م باسم سالم خلف الحبابي
جامعة سامراء / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية/ قسم اللغة الانكليزية****Abstract**

The research inspects David Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* through the lens of today's digital culture, in an effort to interrogate the book's depictions of entertainment, addiction and uncertainty about one's existence as found within the late modern culture of consumption and contemporary digital life. The study takes an analytic approach of closely examining the way that the novel is applicable to contemporary life with regard to the development of digital life and the nature of subjectivity that it fosters. It endeavors to reveal the nature of Wallace's critique on the proliferation of media in terms of its complicity with the increase in commodity culture within everyday life. The research probes into the ways the novel displays addiction and its effects on the individual's sense of self as well as on the overall sense of standards and norms. The comparison of Wallace's book with contemporary digital culture opens up argumentative discourse to discuss the compulsive consumption and alienation in the digital century.

Keywords: Entertainment, Addiction, Absurdity, Infinite Jest, Digital Culture, consumerism

I. Introduction

The publication of *Infinite Jest* in 1996 makes it not only the magnum opus of David Wallace's writings, but an outstanding contribution to contemporary literary studies for its exploration of late twentieth century fiction and the manner in which social ills can be represented in the language of disease. The enormous text, set in two distinct communities: the Enfield Tennis Academy and Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, demonstrates the interrelationships between addiction and compulsion not only through internal psychological struggles but through the institutions in which addicts exist.

Elizabeth Freudenthal has argued that following 1990 many literary texts now "contextualize the biomedical in relation to contemporary social, economic, and political threats" and depict mental disorders such as substance dependence not as private states of being but as external relationships to others and objects (194). By rendering Ennet House as a structured environment with its own rules and procedures, Wallace shows how addiction is constructed in the contexts of therapy, societal expectations regarding addiction and recovering addicts, and language that both defines and stigmatises addicts.

The extensive narrative of *Infinite Jest* itself demonstrates that the fragmented narrative is not an experimental tool alone, but a way for Wallace to depict the neurotic subject within the social fabric rather than solely inside the self, unlike many modernist authors who depicted hysteria and neurasthenia as confined to the individual. Michael



Gibson Wollitz claims, "the novel's unity derives not from any single plot thread, but rather from the interaction (direct and otherwise) of the novel's wide range of voices" (56). The most prominent plot of the novel involves the "Entertainment," which, upon viewing, causes viewers to lose all desire in a perpetual pursuit of gratification.

Wallace's commentary on indulgence and the resultant despondency is grounded in an observational approach to culture. Mary K. Holland notes that in Wallace's cruise ship essay despair has transcended from its modernist roots of "the primordial nada" to a post-modern condition which he describes as stemming from "the solipsistic narcissism of contemporary American culture" (221). Wallace views the cruise line's promise of "Absolutely Nothing," as fulfilled through marketing which infantilises its audience and frees them of the burden of responsibility, a process by which consumption is rendered as needlessness. Similar principles are illustrated in *Infinite Jest* where the "Entertainment" acts as a fictional illustration of cultural dynamics which deplete personal agency by offering effortless pleasure. In both Wallace's cruise ship essay and *Infinite Jest*, his diagnosis of indulgence structures demonstrates the underpinnings of contemporary digital culture, which has threatened the very concept of meaning with infinite consumption.

This paper seeks to discuss two main research questions. First, how does Wallace's presentation of entertainment comment on the compulsive culture of today's digital society? Second, how does *Infinite Jest* address the forms of existential uncertainty that are characteristic of mediated communication and digital connectivity? In analysing Wallace's concept of entertainment and addiction within the context of digital culture, this paper adds new contributions to the discourse regarding digital culture, addiction of consumption from a literary philosophical perspectives. Additionally, this paper hopes to critically analyse works concerning the novel so that a critical framework concerning postmodernism, psychoanalysis, and existentialism can be constructed to analyse the narrative portrayal of entertainment, addiction, and emptiness from the view point of digital culture and other contexts. This study intends to analyse *Infinite Jest* not through a scientific or empirical method but through cultural analysis and comparison between literary text and actual culture and then articulate its insights regarding compulsive entertainment within digital culture. The study uses three critical frameworks to achieve its literary analysis and readings of Wallace's work. The research draws upon the theories of Jean Baudrillard's postmodernism, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, and Albert Camus's existentialism to explore Wallace's prefiguring of addiction, entertainment, and the collapse of meaning. These frameworks will enhance our ability to analyse Wallace's observations about contemporary digital culture using the elements of his narrative, his depictions of compulsive addiction, and his view on the breakdown of meaning. These insights, presented by Wallace, are employed in a comparative, theoretical manner which offers critical evaluation of digital culture instead of a scientific, empirical approach. Such a comparison offers scope for significant arguments to be made about compulsive consumption and alienation in the twenty-first century.

II. Literature Review

Infinite Jest is often understood as a defining example of postmodernism in the realm of literary studies, mainly characterised by its broken narrative form, its use of recurring



footnotes and the creation of metafictional elements. Mary K. Holland states that the book, "is an obvious attempt" by Wallace to manifest the "redemptive" capabilities of "postmodern fiction" (220), by departing from a tendency toward irony and pessimism to an attempt to authentically address human suffering. However, this understanding has also been increasingly complexified, as critics have argued that Wallace's literary style is unique from his post-modern predecessors. According to Allard den Dulk, despite its early reception as a work that fully embraced post-modernism's fragmented narrative, recursive footnotes, and hyper-aware storytelling, Wallace's fiction actually "re assumes key ideas from existentialist thought" and ultimately embraces becoming a subject rather than its fragmentation (385). Michael Gibson Wollitz states that Wallace is not so much a post-modern author as a proponent of the emerging "post postmodern cultural condition" (4).

The study of *Infinite Jest* tends to be understood through two general perspectives: that the book represents postmodern literature, or that the book critiques the culture of post-modernism. In comparison to the works of others in the literary field, Wallace's work has often been identified with maximalism due to the depth of detail, the scattered nature of the narrative and its expansive content. Mark McGurl describes the way that Wallace contributes to literary postmodernism's development in the context of university creative writing programs while Nick Levey observes that excess in Wallace's novel is not used to flaunt his capabilities but rather to defeat the standard expectations of completeness (21–22). The footnotes, length and fractured narrative are all part of the way that Wallace expresses a critique of consumptive culture and a world of endless distraction (ibid).

There are numerous critical studies about the uncanny nature of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and, as it has been noted before, many academics have noted Wallace's acute awareness regarding the "addictive tendencies of contemporary society" (Holland 220). While McGurl's institutional reading grounds *Infinite Jest* within the landscape of creative writing pedagogy, Wollitz regards it as a final jettisoning of postmodernism, ushering in a "post postmodern cultural condition" (4). More recently, critical attention has turned to the novel's mimeticism and semiotic richness and the ways in which Wallace's formalism can be said to embody the same forms of addiction and dependency he satirises.

Michael Gieger claims that the novel's prohibitive size and syntactic complexity mimic what it feels to experience the characters' "loneliness" and to exist on the solipsistic plane that Hal Incandenza inhabits with his melancholy, or Kate Gompert with her anhedonia (9–10), indicating an awareness in Wallace of forms of isolation which manifest within structures meant for companionship, connection, and institutionality. Elena Violaris continues this exploration by reading the ambivalence of the yellow smiley face, a repeated motif whose iconicity, particularly in *Infinite Jest*, represents both addiction and a fake ebullience, within this trajectory. Elena Violaris points out, in relation to the yellow smiley face, In *Infinite Jest*, this is no longer just a symbol of joy to embellish images but "a product of consumer culture" that promises to generate joy (3).

This iconic sign, found throughout the novel—in the insignia of the A.F.R. And in a hallucination had by Don Gately—symbolises a cultural conflict over the image itself, one which oscillates between genuine irony and outright threat and fails to provide a consistently legible or even simple symbol for the reader. Together with Michael Gieger's



work on the mimetic nature of Wallace's narrative, in which its very density simulates what it feels to experience the characters' loneliness (9–10), the smiley face motif signifies part of a broader narrative structure in which both language and iconographic sign have been instrumental in replicating the conditions of alienation and dependency they seem meant to critique. What seems apparent then is not just that Wallace is commenting on the addictive nature of institutions in this novel (as has been previously argued), but also that the linguistic and pictorial texture of the work has been complicit in the production of late twentieth-century cultural addictiveness.

Wallace is thus seen to be placing his reader, not merely pointing out the anxious condition of late modern culture; instead, the reader is placed into a system of loneliness, commodity culture, and psychological addiction in sympathy with the characters. Medvetz situates *Infinite Jest* as part of a wider discourse about culture; through concepts like reputation, symbolic goods, and literary consecration, he accounts for the novel's cultural valuation as literature. *Infinite Jest* is also viewed in relationship to both mass culture and cultural consecration. Thomas Medvetz reads the novel's ability to bridge these seemingly separate domains- academic critique and popular reception—as unusual, and links its status to the thematic material that it treats—the pervasive aspects of entertainment, consumption and mediated culture. He posits that Wallace's novel manages to fuse this intellectualism, a broad range of cultural references, and what seems at times excessive levels of detail in order to convey what he calls the tension between the spectacle of modern culture, or entertainment, and the seriousness it inherently obscures.

Medvetz's reading does not present entertainment simply as diversion, but as a cultural field that illuminates the cultural space within which we live and, in doing so, provides a structure which shapes both our self-conceptions and our deepest desires. However, while sociological works like Medvetz's shed light on the circulation of meaning within popular reception of *Infinite Jest*, they remain limited in that they are primarily concerned with the ideological context of the novel's consecration as literature, rather than the ways in which Wallace's depiction of a system of addictive, technologically driven experience replicates such a system. A theoretically nuanced study is thus needed that directly addresses the ways in which Wallace's treatment of "Entertainment" prefigures the addictive nature of digital society in an era of hyperreality. This study addresses this gap by reading *Infinite Jest* through Baudrillardian theories of simulation and hyperreality and psychoanalytic frameworks of compulsion and repetition as a treatment of digitally transmitted forms of entertainment and existential fragmentation.

III. Theoretical Framework

This study seeks to examine *Infinite Jest* through the lens of three related theoretical approaches: postmodern theories of simulation and hyperreality, psychoanalytic understandings of addiction and repetition, and existentialist conceptions of the absurd and the self. Each approach contributes an analytic lens through which to discuss *Infinite Jest*'s treatment of the interconnected concepts of entertainment, compulsion, and technologically mediated reality in late modern culture. As Baudrillard writes, it is no longer simulation, but hyperreality that has begun to shape the nature of reality itself



(Barroso 2), and the lethal seductions of Entertainment are clearly part of Wallace's allegory of such hyperreal mediated experience, which prefigures aspects of digital culture.

Freud's groundbreaking theory of "compulsive repetition" laid the groundwork for the psychiatric and psychological analysis of addiction, and forms the theoretical basis of this analysis of *Infinite Jest* (Freud 18–23). As Freud writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, The pleasure principle seems to be superseded when the return to painful psychic states outweighs the expectation of satisfaction (23). This description applies perfectly to the paradox that Wallace's characters, in their unending search for pleasure, are simultaneously driving themselves toward a deepening solitude, self-destruction, and existential emptiness. Rather than viewing addiction solely as the desire for stimulation or reward, Wallace also seems to imply, within his textual performance, an addiction in the more general sense as a cyclical addiction to internal states, emotions and sensations (60–63).

Building upon Freud's theorisations, Elizabeth Freudenthal examines addiction in Wallace through a psychoanalytic concept of crisis of interiority. Hal Incandenza's pseudo-autistic state where he cannot get outside of his thoughts or even smile captures, Freudenthal says, a fundamental blurring between thinking and compulsion; in *Alcoholics Anonymous* Wallace states that the most "educated" newcomer will more likely identify his total self with his head, "and the Disease makes its command headquarters in the head" (*Infinite Jest* 272; Freudenthal 200). This habit of compulsory self-reflexivity, termed "Analysis Paralysis" in A.A. Literature, creates a self-sustaining system in which "99% of compulsive thinkers' thinking is about themselves" and "100% of the things they spend 99% of their time...imagining...are never good" (*Infinite Jest* 203–4). According to Freudenthal, Wallace also demonstrates how rational thought, under such a paradigm of compulsive reflexivity, can become indistinguishable from addiction itself. Thus Wallace links psychoanalytic compulsion directly to a contemporary condition of inward-turned thought, where the recursive loop of thinking about thinking produces a form of self-destructive intellectualism.

The existential nature of Wallace's enterprise also becomes clearer through Camus's work on the absurd and Sartre's account of consciousness. Camus insists that man finds himself confronted "with the irrational", and the absurd arises from "the confrontation" of this longing to make meaning with "the unreasonable silence of the world" (Camus 28; Saman 73–74). Similarly, Sartre argues that consciousness is "nothingness, a total emptiness with the entire world outside it"—a pre-reflective, intentional movement toward things which cannot be secured within the confines of its own being (Rowlands 180). *Infinite Jest* stages this confrontation not merely through its characters but through its textual form itself; Frank Louis Cioffi argues that Wallace's novel is "a staggering performance" which "disrupts the reading process itself" and binds the reader in addictive loops of expectation (162, 170). The act of reading thus becomes, in this schema, a compulsive, reality-bending behaviour—a pathological condition that blurs the lines between fiction and reality. In addition, Wallace demonstrates mediated experience through the contemporary discourse concerning digitally generated visibility and



spectacle-characteristics of late modern culture that place the novel in immediate relation with our contemporary lived world. Moreover, as David Lyon puts it contemporary forms of surveillance focus on a collection of data and a system of observation rather than a system of physical inspection (Lyon 4, 7) that when analysed in connection with Wallace's novel becomes an essential aspect of a system of control affecting not only people but their identity, behaviour and their affect (Lyon 7).

IV. Analysis

Through "decentered narrative", Benjamin Peyton claims, Wallace prevents any single character or storyline from acquiring dominance by displacing attention among a multiplicity of voices, which readers must piece together themselves rather than immerse in the reality of the fiction. (Peyton 51; Ercolino 246) Such "dissonant chorality" creates a sense of confusion and instability in the reader's mind similar to what Hal and Gately experience throughout the novel. Frank Louis Cioffi refers to *Infinite Jest* as "a staggering performance" that "disrupts the reading process itself" to make the reader participate in the Paratextuality of the novel by referring to its footnotes and by re-reading its pages in the circular fashion that it demands (162).

Hal Incandenza's descent into this madness and Don Gately's arduous struggle back from addiction serve as representations of this overwhelming condition. In fact, Wallace represents insignificant characters as well through their everyday lives, as is the case for Ken Erdedy and his compulsive obsession to have another binge dose of marijuana (*Infinite Jest*, Erdedy's apartment), as is also represented through Kate Gompert's realistic and emotionally charged account of her depression (*Infinite Jest*, Gompert's episode regarding her depression). Wallace uses his maximalist form of a sprawling narrative by intertwining lives and experiences of minor and major characters, so as to demonstrate the addictive rhythm of drug usage. Benjamin Peyton states that Wallace tries to explore the etiology of these "muffled geniuses or fast-talking idiots" and also how consumerism influences every sphere of one's existence, starting from childhood (LeClair 32; Peyton 53).

The film by James Incandenza named "Entertainment" also has a function of being a narrative device as well as a parable to explain a theme. Esteban Meneses calls it a "MacGuffin" that is used not to explain anything but to define the nature of things as well as to represent "America's obsession with entertainment", that invariably leads one to "a plunge into addiction" (74–75). The motionless viewers of "Entertainment" represent how reality has been subsumed by simulation and how our inability to cope with our real lives is replaced by this addiction. Hal is shown in a similar predicament of relying on marijuana, to escape his reality and an all-encompassing boredom and hence this leads to the degradation of his personality to an extent that he is completely unable to express himself (*Infinite Jest*, Admissions Interview scene), what Elizabeth Freudenthal terms as the collapse of "interiority" (200). The dependence on marijuana illustrates Wallace's representation of a system of control and mediation, by demonstrating how the drug serves as a quick solution for the character to escape the mundane, but ultimately, in the process of escapism he loses the ability to express himself although he possess extreme intellectual capacity, which indicates a flaw in the logic of escape in our society. Wallace



extends the discussion on this flawed logic of escapism in "Entertainment", which causes addiction as the audience becomes entrapped in a fatal consuming experience. In both the cases pleasure is inextricable from paralysis, showing how entertainment has evolved from being a simple distraction from our problems to becoming a tool of escape and psychological withdrawal.

Don Gately's addiction to Demerol and its subsequently painful withdrawal process at Ennet House (*Infinite Jest*, Ennet House withdrawal scenes) represents the other half of Wallace's project to describe the physiological as well as an existential dimension of addiction. Heather Houser talks about Wallace's "intense descriptivity" in terms of the scene describing Gately's driving and Tony Krause's shameful withdrawal from the drug (*Infinite Jest*, Ennet House detail scenes) (747). The depiction of the withdrawal scene is intended to expose the severity of the physical aspect of drug abuse that makes Gately lose himself into psychological numbness after he gets over the physical pain and craving and it is during his stay in Ennet House that he realises that willpower is not enough and one needs community discipline, confession, and mutuality to recover. Eric Berman claims that Gately represents the "other half of the American prodigy's character", supplementing Hal's profile, thereby showing Gately's struggle within a bigger social paradigm (7). Hence, addiction is shown to be not merely a biological condition, but also a social/existential confrontation, where identity is sought by enduring the struggle together rather than fighting against it alone.

The commodification of desire within the novel is highlighted through the seductive yet destructive aspect of "Entertainment", but it also is evident in the everyday rituals of consumers at the Enfield Tennis Academy and the Ennet House residents. Wallace does not limit his satire to individual consumption practices; rather, he criticises a whole system by illustrating the nonsensical behaviour patterns of institutions and societies. For instance, the activities at the Office of Unspecified Services (OUS) and at the Enfield Tennis Academy show the absurd yet logical consequence of "the unreasonable silence of the world", according to Camus, the inevitable meet between human need and a senseless logic (Camus 28; Saman 74). Wallace satirises the entire idea of seeking an order through institutions with his grotesquely humorous scenes, from Eric Clipperton's tennis match with fatal consequences to the peculiar rules governing the sports academy. His use of grotesque humor not only serves to demonstrate the absurdity in the institution, but it also connects it to a broader, almost uncontrollable, spectacle similar to that of television and viral videos in a digital context. Furthermore, the fact that many characters are addicts is a way of expressing how their existence is unstable and uncertain—a theme central to certain philosophical understanding of consciousness and human existence.

V. *Infinite Jest* and Contemporary Digital Culture

Internet Addiction and Hyperreality in Digital Behaviour

"Entertainment" by Wallace may be read as a literary forewarning of more contemporary notions of compulsive digital use and Internet addiction. Kimberly Young's early definition of Internet Addiction Disorder includes phenomena such as withdrawal, tolerance, and compulsive usage that mirror the state of catatonia witnessed in the film's viewers (Young 1998). As Esteban Meneses has observed, the film is a "MacGuffin"



symbolising a morbid American obsession with entertainment and a "fatalistic progression towards addiction" (74–75); in Wallace's context the entrapped film viewer embodies this consequence as today's Internet addict gets stuck in a vortex of scrolling, clicking, and information accumulation. This use of entertainment not only serves as a metaphor for compulsive behaviour but as a vehicle for it, thus foreshadowing later analysis of problematic digital use and online addiction.

Reality Television and the Attention Economy

The satirical critique of entertainment in Wallace's novel also reflects the growing influence of reality television and the concept of an "attention economy" in contemporary media culture (Murray and Ouellette). Reality TV programs showcase daily human life as a commodity, and through its use as an entertaining product, develop mechanisms of engagement like click-based visibility and viral circulation. It is due to these kinds of mechanisms that Trottier and Siapera are able to examine the highly polarised world of online communities, where outrage is generated to draw in more viewers. This is how Wallace's text comments on entertainment as an addictive and sensationalist commodity in a world of media economics dominated by the capture of viewer attention.

Consumerism and the Commodification of Childhood

Wallace's treatment of consumerism extends beyond merely adult habits, and includes an exploration of advertising targeted at children. Juliet Schor explains how advertising produces material culture, while eroding parental control and changing values (11–12). His linking of addiction and consumerism aligns with Schor's thesis that marketing to children is responsible not just for material values but for existential alienation as well. The novel demonstrates consumerism's role in diminishing community values and exacerbating addiction (Schor 13–15).

VI. Discussion

In his characterisation of Hal Incandenza's deterioration, Wallace represents what Elizabeth Freudenthal calls the novel's "anti interior" whereby compulsions obliterate any possibility of authentic selfhood (200). Although Hal experiments with marijuana in leisure, his breakdown represents a comprehensive psychic collapse rendering him unable to utter words or even smile—a quintessential blankness indicative of addiction. This same crisis appears in James Incandenza's film *Entertainment*, wherein the audience is immobilised in pleasure. Both Hal's mute collapse and the alluring "Entertainment" are indicative of mediated addictions exacerbating isolation, even while appearing to promise community and engagement.

As Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette describe reality television as a "voyeuristic spectacle" that transforms everyday existence into commodity and performance, Wallace appropriates such logic through grotesquely hyperbolic language and the immobile spectators "viewers of Entertainment", where overwhelming pleasure results in equal nullification of individual agency. To Daniel Trottier, the nature of social media is analogous to surveillance, as it organises participation through visibility and exposure, while Eugenia Siapera remarks that new media intensifies fragmentation and polarisation by amplifying the spectacle and outrage. In *Infinite Jest*, the immobile audience at the conclusion of the film is representative of self-agent annihilation where pleasure gives



way to solipsism and addictive obsession, foretelling the echo chambers of the digital era where personalisation creates both alienating solipsism and a destruction of universal symbols of meaning.

The critique of meritocracy present at the Enfield Tennis Academy is underscored by the correlation between achievement and compliance, on one hand, and anxiety and addiction on the other. The overdose at the academy provides the narrative disruption that underscores the paradoxes of a society of hyper-achievement which subsequently morphs into failure. The condition that Albert Camus called the "unreasonable silence of the world" (28), a state represented by the repetitive rituals of training and competition in the Academy that ultimately serve to veil existence, is explained by Mark Rowlands's description of consciousness as a "nothingness, a total emptiness with the entire world outside it" (180), borrowing from Sartre. As a result, with their utter excitement of being able to showcase what they achieve, participants feel obliged to have to perform well within a manufactured process that will strip them of their authentic nature, to the point of being addicted to successful failure and addiction.

VII. Conclusion

Infinite Jest articulates central fears about addiction, mediated pleasure and the death of the subject that dominate late-twentieth century culture. Wallace characterises the captivating and deadly allure of Entertainment in such a manner as to anticipate the compulsive loops of digital behaviour such as Kimberly Young's description of Internet addiction. By employing grotesque humor and an overwhelming maximalist style, Wallace exposes issues of cultural breakdown, the spectacle, consumption, and meritocracy through repetition and addiction in cycles, predating modern developments in reality television, viral media, and algorithmic attention commodification.

Therefore, in his maximalist narrative Wallace consecrates the excess, fragmented nature and addictive repetition which he perceives to characterise the now, making the reader a participant in the same addictive economy of distraction as his characters. By analyzing Camus and Sartre's philosophy of existential absurdity within a Freudian framework of the theory of repetition and in relation to recent theories of recognition in sociology, the text constitutes an incisive analysis of irony and sincerity and makes one question the nature of life in the digital age. This study offers a unified approach to literary aesthetics and theory in that addiction is framed as a symptom of existential failure and a strategic maneuver in a society dictated by mediated pleasures.

The essay's distinct contribution is to link Wallace's critique of entertainment and consumption to the present cultural discourse on digital and mediated life, highlighting Wallace's prophetic articulation of the modern experience of fragmented communication and digitally imposed seclusion, illustrating the power of entertainment and consumption on the very construction of identity and weakening of the social fabric. The proposed future studies will build upon this interpretation through examining Wallace's exploration of addiction and absurdity from other perspectives such as the emergent technologies of virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and immersive media, demonstrating considerable opportunities for further engagement with the novel given the developing conditions of twenty-first century society and technology.





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