



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Corso di Dottorato di ricerca
in Lingue, culture e società
moderne e Scienze del linguaggio
XXX ciclo

Tesi di Ricerca

**The Gaze Regained:
Elements of Lacanian Film
Theory in David Foster
Wallace's *INFINITE JEST***

SSD: L-LIN/11

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To my siblings Giancarlo, Alessandro and Maria Grazia

The eye sees not itself / But by reflection, by some other things.

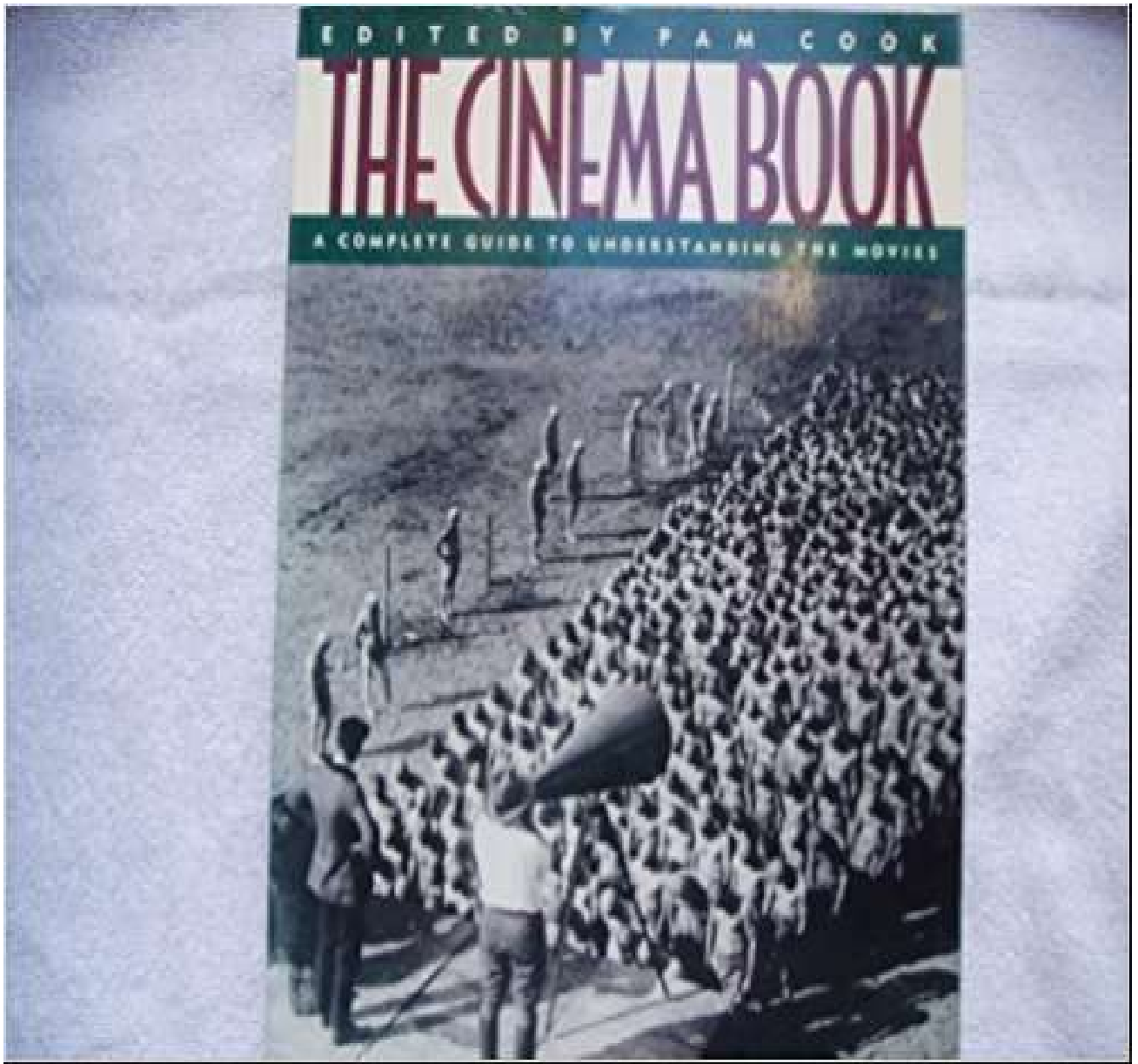
(William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1-2)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The research and writing process of this thesis would have constituted a much more daunting task without the invaluable assistance of many people to whom I feel highly indebted. First and foremost, I feel profoundly grateful to Pia Masiero – my supervisor – for her invariably generous, relentless and perceptive guidance; I am deeply thankful to Daniela Ciani Forza for her constantly passionate willingness to help and give advice; I am strongly indebted to Christopher Kocela and Calvin Thomas who, during my stay at Georgia State University in Fall 2016 and early Spring 2017, have played a pivotal role in orienting my research and prompting me to find the connections that constitute its theoretical spine; I am thankful to the International Credit Mobility for making my research stay in Atlanta possible; I am grateful to the coordinator of the exchange Richard Keatley for allowing me to prolong my stay in the USA and for making it pleasurable with his friendship; my warmest gratitude goes also to my friends and fellow doctoral students Cristina Cugnata, Lucio De Capitani, Agnese Marino, Francesca Pasciolla, Giorgia Simion, Alice Balestrino, Nicola Paladin, who made this journey joyful and from whom I learned a great deal; I am particularly grateful to my friends and fellow Americanists Nicholas Stangherlin and Giorgia Tommasi for patiently reading several extracts of my work when my research was still in a preliminary stage as well as for their constant help and encouragement; I also want to thank the staff of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. This PhD also gave me the opportunity to meet some people who have been very influential in shaping my “gaze” toward the arts and reality. A special thought goes to Mayank Austen Soofi and Clive Wilmer. Last but not least, a heartfelt thanks goes to my twin brother Giancarlo, a researcher in film studies, for the priceless confrontation that has constantly nourished this work, and to my parents.

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The cover of Pam Cook's edited *The Cinema Book* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), the main source of David Foster Wallace's research on film theory for *Infinite Jest*. (Source: Amazon).

INTRODUCTION

I never get quite to see the distant opponent, for all the apparatus of the game.

(*Infinite Jest*, 68)

In David Lipsky's account of his 1996 road trip with David Foster Wallace, *Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself* (2010), Wallace confesses a certain distaste for the original cover of his then freshly published magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*. He believed that this cover, which shows a blue sky with clouds, was too similar to an airline booklet (although it references a wallpaper present in the novel and not devoid of a certain significance). The author would have preferred "a great photo of Fritz Lang directing *Metropolis* [...] [w]here he's standing there, and there are about a thousand shaven-headed men in kind of rows and phalanxes, and he's standing there with a megaphone" (Lipsky 70). This photo does appear in the novel in the form of a poster described as "[t]he chilling framed print of Lang directing *Metropolis* in 1924" (951)¹ which hangs on the wall of one of the protagonists' living room. When Lipsky asks Wallace whether he intended to invest the cover with a particular metaphoric meaning, Wallace replies evasively: "No, I just thought it was *cool*—" (Lipsky 70, emphasis in original).

The real answer to Lipsky's question can be found in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin, which, starting from 2009, has acquired Wallace's archive, his papers and personal library included, and has opened to the general public since 2010. As a matter of fact, the photo of Lang mentioned by Wallace serves as front cover of his worn out and heavily annotated personal copy of Pam Cook's edited volume *The Cinema Book* (New York: Pantheon, 1986)². The *Cinema Book* is a guide whose purpose is not only to provide a

¹ Endnote 381 corrects the text specifying the picture's exact year: "1926" (en 381, 1078).

² Actually, when I visited the archive, in March 2017, the copy available at the Harry Ransom Center was separated from its front cover. The front cover could be found in one of the folders comprising the correspondence between Wallace and Michael Pietsch, his editor from Little, Brown (Little Brown Papers 2.7).

complete overview of the history of the cinematic art, but, first and foremost, to present in an accessible form the often daunting theoretical debates developed in the field of film studies throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Those theories, especially during the 1970s, channeled into the field of film studies several structuralist and post-structuralist approaches. In his article “Historical Poetics of the Cinema” prominent film scholar David Bordwell gathered all these approaches under the term “SLAB theory” (Bordwell 1989, 384”), which is a sarcastic acronym for “Saussurean semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism, and Barthesian textual theory” (Ibidem).

To my knowledge, Wallace did not receive any formal education in film theory (nor in film history or practice), although in 1989, as a PhD student at Harvard, he briefly attended some lectures held by the philosopher and film scholar Stanley Cavell. Cavell’s influence on Wallace’s body of work – whether conspicuous or limited – is more useful to understand Wallace’s philosophical upbringing than to track down the source of the countless elements of film theory that he channeled into *Infinite Jest*³, which is what I will be doing in my thesis. On the contrary, Wallace’s markings inside the *Cinema Book* – which include the inscription “D. Wallace ‘92”, one of the years that he spent writing the novel – and his intention to use the same cover image, leave no doubt concerning the predominant source of Wallace’s knowledge of film theory. Therefore, Wallace’s unaccepted cover proposal constitutes both the declaration of a debt and an important indication of the absolute centrality of film theory (and not just film history and techniques) within the novel.

Close to Cook’s cover there was another proposal made by Wallace for the front cover of *Infinite Jest*, the photo of an artwork created by Los Angeles-based sculptor Nancy Rubins entitled *Worlds Apart* (1982), consisting in a 45-foot “tree” of cast-off electrical appliances.

³ Wallace’s personal library at the Harry Ransom Center contains Cavell’s *In Quest of the Ordinary* (1988) and *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981). Cavell’s pivotal work of film philosophy *The World Viewed* (1971) is surprisingly absent. Although *Pursuits of Happiness* is a collection of Cavell’s essays on the “Hollywood comedy of remarriage”, it does not appear to have had any particular influence on *Infinite Jest*. Moreover, in his biography on Wallace *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story* (Viking, 2012), D. T. Max reports Wallace’s discontent for Cavell (D.T. Max 132-133).

In this dissertation, I explore how David Foster Wallace channels into his novel the discourses that pertain to psychoanalytic film theories of the 1970s, especially that theoretical body of work that moved the focus of attention from the film content to the act of spectatorship. This corpus, often referred to as “apparatus theory”, was deeply influenced by the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, mixed with Louis Althusser’s take on interpellation and the ideological apparatus. Scholars generally agree (as I also do) with Marshall Boswell, who, in his volume on Wallace, states that “*Infinite Jest* takes on Lacan’s bewilderingly difficult theories about desire, pleasure, subjectivity, and infantile preoccupations with mothers” (Boswell, 128). He also maintains that “Lacanian concepts permeate the whole novel” (Ibidem) and that the content of the novel’s central metaphor, the lethally addictive film “Infinite Jest (V?)” (en 24, 993), “reads like a direct transcription of Lacan’s ideas” (Boswell 128). Nevertheless, what has been often overlooked is the hypothesis that the centrality of Lacanian tropes inside *Infinite Jest* may not be due to Wallace’s direct knowledge of Lacan’s theoretical body of work (Lacan’s books are absent from the author’s personal library at the Harry Ransom Center), but to the omnipresence of Lacan’s theories inside the theoretical approaches very clearly illustrated within *The Cinema Book*.

Drawing especially on the Lacanian concept of misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) present in the “mirror stage” essay (1949), apparatus theorists such as Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry shared a pessimistic conception of cinema as an apparatus that produces subjectivation through a series of regressive ideological effects. These effects mainly depend on the subject’s deluded eye, characterized by an illusory sense of mastery over the object of the gaze, a deception that the cinematic apparatus replicates. I will show how in *Infinite Jest* the addictive film cartridge created by experimental filmmaker James O. Incandenza is just one of the many elements in which we can recognize a cinematic and spectatorial subjectivity akin to the one analyzed by apparatus theorists. This particular subjectivity permeates the

whole novel, defining many characters and even the narration itself. *Infinite Jest* perfectly lends itself to the same analysis that John Johnston provides of *Gravity's Rainbow* when he points out how in Thomas Pynchon's novel the "film has not simply become a novelistic theme. Rather, the interest in cinema revealed in [this novel] seems to respond to a sense of the cinema as an apparatus for producing and disseminating images which both construct and control a new kind of subject" (Johnston 1990, p. 90). If *Infinite Jest* seems to share the same diagnosis of apparatus theory, it nonetheless embodies a strong critique of the remedies proposed by this same approach. The late capitalist ideological apparatus depicted in the novel does not only produce phantasmatic subjectivities through the pervasiveness of the cinema and media Entertainment. It also deploys the weapons that apparatus theory advocated as being appropriate for contesting the power of ideology: self-consciousness, critical distance and, in the case of British feminist theorist Laura Mulvey, deconstruction of pleasure. The embeddedness of these "weapons" inside ideology is thematized both through the issue of "analysis-paralysis" and through the Brechtian alienation effect that is a hallmark of James Incandenza's filmography.

I will also argue that the novel does indicate an exit from ideology (and an experience of the Real) which is very akin to the one proposed by the new wave of Lacanian film theory of the 1990s (Joan Copjec, Slavoj Žižek, Todd McGowan). The way out concerns the Lacanian concept of the "gaze." Whereas in apparatus theory the gaze is conceived as the subject's deluded look, in Lacan's formulation it pertains to the way the object looks back at the viewer. Lacan addresses this concept in *Seminar XI* by using the example of Hans Holbein the Younger's painting *The Ambassadors*; in the painting an anamorphic undecipherable blot is revealed to be a skull once it is seen downward and through the left. The skull marks the site of the gaze insofar as it indicates the way the subject is inscribed in the picture, an experience that dismantles her sense of mastery and control.

By investigating the theme of the gaze inside *Infinite Jest*, I obliquely propose that Lacan's conception of the Real offered to Wallace the possibility to conceive of a way to produce experimental literature outside the self-reflexivity of metafiction. Besides, I argue that the Lacanian real informs Wallace's refusal of the "soothing, familiar and anaesthetic" nature he attributed to classical realism (McCaffery 33-34). This is also the point on which I respectfully disagree with Marshal Boswell's reading of *Infinite Jest* as an "elaborate and ingenious critique of Lacan" (Boswell 151): my reading of the novel characterizes it as a path toward the Real as conceived by Lacan.

Although this dissertation is focused exclusively on *Infinite Jest*, these themes can be found throughout Wallace's whole production. Major examples of the representation of an ideological apparatus similar to the one portrayed in *Infinite Jest* range from the mirrored cage of the cockatiel Vlad the Impaler in *The Broom of the System* to the meditations on voyeurism present in the short story "Tri-Stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko" (*Brief*). Not to mention Wallace's intention to write a long novel revolving around the theme of pornography with his unreleased project *Sir John Feelgood or, The Genesis of a Great Lover*, many elements of which ended up in *The Pale King*.

My dissertation draws extensively on the work of several scholars who are building what is more and more becoming an independent and multidisciplinary field of study, namely, David Foster Wallace studies. This critical corpus can already be divided into four different stages. The earliest wave of criticism, dating back to the 1990s (Tom LeClair, N. Katherine Hayles), understood Wallace's works as being representative of a new wave of scientifically-inflected postmodern works of fiction called "system novels." In the turn of the century critics started to use Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram" and his 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery for *Review of Contemporary Fiction* as tools to interpret his fiction, shifting the focus of interest toward Wallace's aesthetic ideas. This shift started to coincide with the idea

– which will cross all the subsequent stages of criticism – that Wallace’s fiction should be understood as belonging to a supposed third stage of literary modernism beyond postmodernism. The first decade of the twenty-first century also saw the publication of some major pioneering monographs, such as *Understanding David Foster Wallace* by Marshall Boswell (2003), *Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide* by Stephen Burn (2003) and *Elegant Complexity* by Greg Carlisle (2007), which mapped out Wallace’s works providing valuable guides that are still among the most fundamental critical tools to approach them. After Wallace’s death (2008), the studies on his work both increased dramatically and registered an ethically inflected shift – still strongly influenced by what Adam Kelly calls the “essay-interview nexus” (Death, 54) – toward thematic issues like sincerity, irony and solipsism. The analysis of the double binds and undecidabilities with which Wallace addresses these themes has often required the introduction of several new concepts, as demonstrated by Adam Kelly’s theorization of the “new sincerity”⁴ and Lee Konstantinou’s analysis of “post-irony”.⁵ Academic analysis on Wallace’s work after 2010 is also strongly influenced by another factor, which is fundamental also for this thesis: the availability of Wallace’s archival material to the general public at the Harry Ransom Center. This availability opens up to the development of a new stage, which is characterized by the possibility to overcome the centrality of the essay-interview nexus as the main interpretative tool of Wallace’s fiction and to use Wallace’s drafts, letters and annotations to verify (or dismiss) several hypotheses that would otherwise remain hypothetical. It becomes especially possible to expand the analysis of the influences on Wallace’s work and to investigate his choices in terms of structure. Among the most recent and advanced contributions of this stage there are Lucas Thompson’s *Global Wallace*, Clare Hayes-Brady’s *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace* and David Hering’s

⁴ See Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (2010): 131-46.

⁵ See Konstantinou, Lee. "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief." *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (2012): 83-112.

David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form, all published in 2016. By adopting the concept of anamorphosis as an interpretative key to the novel, my thesis especially explores and expands on David Hering's recognition in Wallace's oeuvre of an "ethically inflected model of refraction" (Hering 120) as well as of "a complex system of what Foucault and Dällenbach term 'reciprocity'" (Hering 82).

The dissertation is made up of three parts, a tripartition that mirrors the triadic pattern of Jacques Lacan's intrapsychic orders: 1) Imaginary, 2) Symbolic, and 3) Real. The first part, "The Imaginary", will be composed of four chapters. In Chapter 1.1, I will analyze the presence of the theme of the cinema's ideological and regressive effects inside *Infinite Jest*. I will especially link it to the work of the first wave of Lacanian film theory, underscoring (thanks also to Wallace's markings in his copy of the *Cinema Book*) Wallace's awareness of these theoretical approaches. In chapter 1.2 I will draw a parallel between apparatus theory's formulations on the issue of the "impression of reality" at stake in the cinema and Wallace's pessimistic take on classical realism. Chapter 1.3 will be devoted to the centrality in the novel of the theme of the mirror – the mirror being the source of misrecognition, whose specular model according to apparatus theorists is replicated by the cinematic screen. In pointing out the presence (both thematic and structural) in the novel of models of reflection and refraction, I will draw extensively both on the chapter "Visuality" of David Hering's book *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* and on Roberto Natalini's essay "David Foster Wallace and the Mathematics of Infinity." Chapter 1.4 will investigate the way Wallace channels into *Infinite Jest* Laura Mulvey's landmark essay "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" (1975), especially with regard to the concepts of scopophilia and the male gaze.

The second part, "The Symbolic", will be divided into two chapters. In Chapter 2.1 I will analyze the way in which *Infinite Jest* elaborates a strong critique of the idea, spread among apparatus theorists, that self-reflexivity and critical distance constitute the solution to

the ideological problems of the Imaginary. I will concentrate on the ways the novel seems to connote apparatus theory's weapons to contest ideology as belonging themselves to the ideological apparatus. In this chapter I will also draw a parallel (suggested by many clues scattered throughout the novel) between Incandenza's films and the structural/materialist cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. In Chapter 2.2 I will introduce the presence of the themes of anamorphosis and the "object-gaze" inside the novel, drawing on some concepts elaborated by the aforementioned new wave of Lacanian film theorists (Copjec, McGowan, Žižek). I will also analyze the theme of aphasia, interpreting it as a break inside the symbolic order, an experience of the traumatic silence of the Real. My take is that, while in the realm of images the anamorphic object prompts the subject to experience the reality of her own deformity, in the realm of symbols and language the real of the subject is revealed by an experience of silence that points at language's inability to symbolize everything. In this sense, I will pay particular attention to the novel's initial and final parts: Hal and Gately's experiences of hitting the bottom, which both revolve around the inability to speak. The presence of this chapter (which introduces concepts concerning the Real) in a part entitled "The Symbolic" is justified by the idea rooted in Lacan's thought that the Real is not something that resists being caught by the Symbolic network, but a hole in the Symbolic network itself.

The third part, "The Real", will be also split into two chapters. In Chapter 3.1 I will argue that an important model for the presence of the theme of the "gaze" inside *Infinite Jest* is represented by David Lynch's cinema. I will also show how Lynch's lesson is especially evident in the novel's subplot revolving around uncanny misplaced objects found in incongruous places, and how this subplot is connected with the issue of the "object-gaze." Finally, in Chapter 3.2 I will explore *Infinite Jest's* ongoing issue of deformity, focusing my attention both on the plethora of deformed characters present in the novel and on the novel's

own structural deformity. In doing so, I will connect this theme to the concept of anamorphosis as well as with what Martin Jay calls “anti-ocularcentrism.”⁶

I hope this mapping will provide valuable insights on the various implications of the cinematic discourse present in *Infinite Jest*, and help to increase understanding of both the formal and thematic aspects of one of the most ambitious and multilayered novels of contemporary literature.

⁶ See Jay, Martin. *Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*. Univ of California Press, 1993.

PART 1. THE IMAGINARY

1.1. Right into Spectation

The last two pages of *Infinite Jest* (endnotes aside) contain an overt quotation of the Ludovico Technique in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), arguably one of the scenes in the American director's production that most vividly have entered the popular imaginary. It is the scene where Alex, the sadistic protagonist, is tied to a chair with his eyes held open by metal clips and forced to watch a footage of images of ultraviolence accompanied by Ludwig Van Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The quotation occurs toward the very ending of the last section of Wallace's magnum opus, when Dilaudid addict Gene Fackelman is facing the horrific fate that he has not even tried to escape from (except for an imaginary escape with the help of a binge of the stolen drug): a punishment on the part of his betrayed boss Whitey Sorkin executed by his fellow thug Bobby C and C's heterogenous crew. It is a crescendo of horror that the reader follows through the internal focalization of Don Gately, who is remembering this moment four years afterwards while he is stuck in a hospital bed. Gately had lost consciousness before the apex of violence was reached, but had enough time to contemplate the dreadful image of a "corporate-tool type" who was "dropping fluid from a pipette into Fackelman's sewed-open eye" (980). The possible obviousness of the Kubrick quotation for a novel that displays references to much more obscure and experimental films is counterbalanced by the difficulty of Gately's vain effort to recall the name of the movie that reminds him of this scenario: we learn that "Gately had seen the fluid-in-eye thing in a cartridge or movie the M.P. [Gately's stepfather] liked when he was a Bim [Gately's nickname as a child, standing for Big Indestructible Moron] playing ball on the chintz in the sea" (980) and, later, that the "cartridge with the held-open eyes and dropper had

been the one about ultraviolence and sadism” (981). This scene is the penultimate image Gately is forced to see before he loses consciousness, after he sees his own image reflected in a mirror: “the last thing that Gately saw was an Oriental bearing down with the held square and he looked into the square and saw clearly a reflection of his own big square pale head with its eyes closing as the floor finally pounced” (981).

It would be too easy to dismiss the significant position of the Kubrick quotation towards the novel’s very final lines as just a plain tribute to the American filmmaker. On the contrary, Wallace was not an overt admirer of Kubrick, as he himself confided to Don DeLillo in a postcard dated November 3, 1999 where he wrote: “Lee Siegel had a smart piece defending *Eyes Wide Shut*, but I still think it was a dink – I never forgave S.K. for *The Shining*, I don’t think” (Don DeLillo Papers, Box 101.10). Furthermore, a public occasion when Wallace mentioned Kubrick, and specifically *A Clockwork Orange*, is the 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery,⁷ where it is also possible to perceive Wallace’s lack of admiration for the American director: Wallace sees the film adaptation from Anthony Burgess’s novel as the epitome of a work of art that is only apparently bold but, in fact, “is basically an anesthetic” (McCaffery 33), an opinion that is not absent from *Infinite Jest*, where we read that the M.P., Gately’s abusive stepfather, was particularly fond of the movie.

On the one hand, what is at stake with these references is a synthesis of the novel’s main themes: passivity, deprivation of free will, as represented by Fackelman’s impossibility to close his eyelids and by the pathetic fallacy of the floor pouncing (the latter being a leit-motif in Gately’s memories), spectatorship and, immediately thereafter, the reflexivity of vision (the mirror). On the other hand, the other function of the *Clockwork Orange* reference (and of Gately’s difficulty to recall the film’s title) might be to divert the reader’s attention

⁷ Wallace, David Foster. "Interview with Larry McCaffery" in Burn, Stephen, ed. *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2012: 21-53.

from the other explicit reference that overcharges this scene with cinematic allusions, one that is much more recurrent inside the novel. As a matter of fact, the presence of the mirror (the “square”) hints at Michael Powell’s infamous masterpiece *Peeping Tom* (1960). The British director’s arguably most controversial film revolves around a photographer and occasional filmmaker who murders women while using a movie camera to film their expressions of terror before the moment of death. His victims are also forced to see, while they try to look their assassin in the face, their own face reflected (and distorted) in a round convex mirror atop the camera. Similarly, Gately watches his reflection in the mirror before a loss of consciousness that is very close to a metaphorical death – as this is the moment where he hits the existential bottom of his life, although his mirror is square and not round, a detail that does not render the allusion to Powell’s last film less evident, due to the coincidence between the square shape of the Oriental man’s mirror and the one of Gately’s head – the shape of a screen – resembling the assonance between the round shape chosen by Powell’s serial killer and the shape of a more regular head than Gately’s. It is worth noticing that this is not the first allusion to *Peeping Tom* or Powell inside *Infinite Jest*, since we learn from a section set in a chronologically earlier period (1963) that *Peeping Tom*’s poster used to hang on the wall of James O. Incandenza’s room during his adolescence (502) and that one of the doctors in the St. Elizabeth Hospital, where Gately is recovering from being shot while he is recalling the aforementioned events of his past, is named Pressburger (920), like the Hungarian co-director of the majority of Michael Powell’s films, Emeric Pressburger. As a matter of fact, in Wallace’s heavily marked personal copy of Pam Cook’s *The Cinema Book*, which is kept at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin (Texas) and has an handwritten mark stating “1992” on the title page, all the sections devoted to *Peeping Tom* (Cook, 105) are significantly underlined. It is even one of the few films whose title Wallace wrote down inside the book’s cover (Little, Brown/ Wallace, Box 2.7), and the only one of these that he marked with a little

star.⁸

The connection in terms of content between *Peeping Tom*'s brutal killings, *A Clockwork Orange*'s Ludovico technique and *Infinite Jest* is rather evident insofar as the two films are to a certain extent metafilms that, like Wallace's novel, pessimistically represent the ideological implications of cinematic voyeurism, which in both representations functions as a weapon whose mechanism leads to the deprivation of free will (in Kubrick's film) or to plain destruction (in Powell's). There is a strong analogy between these kinds of weapon and the mass weapon constituted by the 'Entertainment', the cartridge "Infinite Jest (V) or (VI)", so compelling that its viewers become unable to do anything else but watch, relinquishing any basic human function and eventually dying watching.

The fact that in *Infinite Jest*, like in *Peeping Tom*, the abundance of mirrors functions as a conceptual extension of the oversaturated presence of screens and cameras is even more evident if we consider the novel's ending in its first draft version, specifically the copy that Wallace sent to Steven Moore in 1993 in order to ask him for suggestions concerning cuts. In the last page of the draft (609), after the last sentences – identical to the ones of the published version – Wallace wrote three annotations: together with the handwritten note reading "Section unfinished" there are typewritten annotations numbered 18 and 19; it is not clear if they suggest alternative ideas for already written passages or subsequent developments of the same section. The annotation numbered 19 reads: "Gately and Joelle. 'They sewed his eyes open and Superglued the back of his head to the wall and propped the TP viewer in front of him and put something in the viewer. The chinks had propped up mirrors all around him so he couldn't look away'" (Steven Moore Collection, Box 2.1)⁹. The blurring between the landmark

⁸ Additionally, in a letter to Don DeLillo dated 25 June 1996, Wallace suggests his elder colleague to watch *Twin Peaks* describing David Lynch's tv series with the following words: "it's as if Michael Powell did a soap opera" (Don DeLillo Papers, Box 101.10).

⁹ The other annotation, numbered 18, reads: "Hal and Helen, Hal and Exhibition, Pemulis and DMZ" (Steven Moore Collection, Box 2.1). It is not preposterous to suppose that annotations 18 and 19 may point at some of

scenes of *Peeping Tom* and *Clockwork Orange* was probably far too explicit in this note, differently from the final version where the narrator omits to reveal whether Fackelman is forced to view anything in particular. Nevertheless, the role that mirrors play in marking the impossibility to “look away”, to escape the fixedness of a position that is concealed by an only apparent multiplication of points of view (the presence of mirrors all around), evokes the experience of cinematic spectatorship while simultaneously presenting it in its most sinister dimension.

It is the same fixedness of point of view that torments the protagonist of one of Incandenza’s films, ‘Pre-Nuptial Agreement of Heaven and Hell.’ In the film an “alcoholic sandwich-bag salesman”’s point of view “was on screen every moment” except for four minutes where the screen is filled by the “motionless low-angle shot of Gianlorenzo Bernini’s ‘Ecstasy of St. Teresa”” (742), the latter being a recurrent image in the novel which often pinpoints the longing for self-transcendence. And although in the final version of *Infinite Jest* the mirror becomes only one, the internal focalization restricted on Don Gately suggests the presence of another mirror, given the specularity of the character’s past and present situation. Gately’s focalization is doubly centering on his 24-year-old self who, having been forced to take a drug named “pharm-grade Sunshine” (979), looks at the scene while it unfolds and on the 28-year-old one who relives that moment while lying still in a hospital bed: both unable, in their immobilized and therefore spectatorial position, to look away.

This representation of spectatorship as a system whereby the spectator is seen as a passive victim of an apparatus of power and violence, the blurring between screens and mirrors through the references to *Peeping Tom* and *A Clockwork Orange*, and the problematic conception of the subject position (the fixed point of view of the Cartesian perspective) are

those episodes that were supposed not to be inside the book, but whose projection outside the novel is indicated by the text’s clues. Therefore, the presence of the TP viewers and of the mirror would be what really takes place during the final section, but what both Gately’s future memory and his altered simultaneous perception fail to register.

only some of the many clues that suggest that, in writing *Infinite Jest*, Wallace may have been familiar with such theorists as Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey, Jean-Louis Comolli, and in general with the theoretical corpus known in the Anglo-Saxon world under the Althusserian term of “Apparatus Theory.”¹⁰ This theoretical approach, basically animated by an attempt to channel psychoanalytic theories such as (especially) those of Jacques Lacan into film theory, in the 1970s played a key role in shifting the focus of academic attention from the film content to the act of spectatorship. The possibility that a significant part of the inspiration for *Infinite Jest* stemmed from this mainly francophone theoretical corpus is also confirmed by Wallace’s lost and recently recovered conversation with Christopher Lydon in February 1996 – the exact month when *Infinite Jest* was published – for the radio-show “The Connection”, hosted in Boston’s radiostation WBUR. In that interview, Wallace maintained: “A certain amount of the book is about the theoretics of entertainment. [...] If you want to know the theoretical underpinnings I can start spouting French names at you, but that’s less interesting to me than whether people find it fun.”¹¹ This statement is obviously not sufficient to demonstrate Wallace’s interest for apparatus theory, given that it is also very likely that other influences concerning French theorists of the entertainment might have stemmed from Deleuze, Barthes, Baudrillard and, to a more evident extent, Guy Debord, who shares many traits with the late theorist and director of the samizdat entertainment James O. Incandenza¹², not to mention JOI’s theoretical “enemy” André Bazin, the “film-theorist Himself detested” (745).

¹⁰ For a connection between this theoretical approach and the thematization of spectatorship in Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom*, see Mulvey, Laura. “The Light that Fails: A Commentary on Peeping Tom.” *The Cinema of Michael Powell: International Perspectives on an English Film-Maker* (2005): 143-155.

¹¹ See <https://soundcloud.com/radioopensource/david-foster-wallace-on-the-connection-1996> and <https://medium.com/@kunaljasty/a-lost-1996-interview-with-david-foster-wallace-63987d93c2c#.yq7ldv4n0>

¹² In underscoring this, we must leave aside Debord’s suicide (Debord died in November 1994, when the project for *Infinite Jest* was already set up), but not his issues with alcohol, testified also in his autobiography *Panegyric* (1989), where he maintains: “Among the small number of things that I have liked and known how to do well, what I have assuredly known how to do best is drink” (*Panegyric*, vol.1, p. 29). It may also be inferred that Enfield Tennis Academy’s apparently nonsensical former motto, coined by JOI, “TE OCCIDERE POSSUNT SED TE EDERE NON POSSUNT NEFAS EST” (81), echoes the title of Debord’s experimental film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*.

A connection between the thematization of spectatorship inside *Infinite Jest* and the theories of Christian Metz has already been pointed out by some scholars, although this relationship has never yet constituted the main focus of any essay. For instance, Philip Sayers in his essay “Representing Entertainment” connects the cinematic theme in *Infinite Jest* with both Roland Barthes’s reflections on the cinema’s hypnotic and lethargic effects in his 1975 essay “Upon Leaving the Movie Theater” and Christian Metz’s work. Similarly, David Hering in the chapter “Visuality” in his *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* mentions Metz among those critics “to whose models of flatness and reflection Wallace is indebted” (Hering, 81). It is indeed possible to demonstrate Wallace’s awareness of this theoretical corpus thanks to his aforementioned personal copy of Pam Cook’s *Cinema Book*. As a matter of fact, a whole chapter of Cook’s book is simply entitled “Metz” (Cook, 229-231), although it must be said that this particular chapter was left unmarked by Wallace. His interest seems to have been more focused on Laura Mulvey: a paragraph devoted to her seminal essay “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema” is not only underlined, but accompanied by handwritten initials of *Infinite Jest* (Cook 51).

It is important, especially in relation to what we will see later on, to understand that the apparatus theorists’ understanding of Jacques Lacan’s theories was limited to the famous essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” (1949), an essay that belongs to an early stage of Lacan’s development of his thought, and whose concepts will face some significant changes in the following Seminars. Nevertheless, Lacan’s arguably most famous essay offered a way to films theorists to think about cinema’s ideological problems.

According to Lacan’s essay, when an infant discovers a mirror for the first time, the image in the mirror is deceptive because it returns the body as a coherent image, presenting a sense of wholeness that the infant at this stage lacks. Therefore, the infant experiences an

illusory sense of mastery over its own body that it cannot possess in reality. The child's body, at this stage still fragmented and defying self-control, returns an opposite image, an image of wholeness, coherence and even mastery, since the child can exert a control over that image. The birth of subjectivity is therefore linked to the emergence of this imaginary sense of wholeness and coherence. And, even more fundamental, to a sense of mastery and control.

In his later work during the Fifties, Lacan formulated the triad of intrapsychic orders that constitute different levels of psychic phenomena: Imaginary-Symbolic-Real. These orders place subjectivity inside a system of perception and in a relationship with the external world. Within this triad, the Imaginary order provides and protects in ourselves and in what we see the sense of completeness and coherence that was born with the mirror stage. It is the space where the relation between the ego and its images develops. The Symbolic order is the realm of language, signs and meaning. It constitutes the structure supporting and regulating the visible and provides us with the words that we use to describe ourselves and the world. It is also referred to as "the big Other." The Real is the indication of the limits of the Symbolic order, of the inability of language and signification to speak the whole truth. It is the point at which language and signification break down, or, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, it "is not an external thing that resists being caught in the symbolic network, but the crack within the symbolic network itself" (Žižek 2009).¹³

The Imaginary order has the specific function of hiding the functioning of the other two orders, which means that not only does it conceal the power of language in shaping our identity and our sense of the world, but also its inability to do so completely. Due to this deceptive quality, the Imaginary order can easily be associated with the Althusserian notion of

¹³ Found in <http://www.lacan.com/essays/?p=180>.

“ideology.”¹⁴ As a matter of fact, the apparatus theorists often used the two concepts as synonyms. Althusser famously calls ‘interpellation’ the process which involves individuals misrecognizing themselves as subjects by accepting an identity given to them by the social order. By becoming a subject, an individual enters an ideological apparatus, and accordingly every subject position is the product of ideology. As Althusser puts it, “the existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (Althusser 1972, 175). Interpellation is a sort of recruitment: it invites a person to accept a subject position (i.e. an externalized image that is perceived both as ‘self’ and as ‘other’), and, in doing so, to simultaneously embrace the ideology that produces that position. Film studies borrowed Althusser’s notion of ‘ideological interpellation’ to describe how cinema replicates this process when it employs its techniques, such as the continuity editing system, the synchronicity of sound, the fixedness of the spectator’s position, and so on. All these filmic components misguide spectators by presenting the events on screen as the coherent object of their mastering look.

The similarity between Lacan and Althusser’s formulations explains why Althusser became the decisive bridge through which Lacanian film theorists channeled Lacan’s concepts into the analysis of the cinematic experience and came to understand them through a political lens. French film theorists like Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean-Pierre Oudart, along with British film theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Peter Wollen and Stephen Heath, although with different approaches, all believed in the connection between the psychic effects of the cinema and the mechanisms of ideology. In their understanding of Lacan, the ideological apparatus became the political expression of the Imaginary order, but did not necessarily involve the Symbolic order, which in their approach appeared to be somewhat untouched by the mechanics of ideology. Therefore, they identified

¹⁴ See Althusser, Louis. ““Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” (1970).” *Cultural Theory: An Anthology* (2011): 204.

the cinematic screen with the Lacanian mirror and the cinema came to be understood as the art that most specifically served the purposes of ideological interpellation.

As Metz maintains in his pivotal work *The Imaginary Signifier* (1982): “More than the other arts, or in a more unique way, the cinema involves us in the imaginary” (Metz, 1982: 45) and this happens insofar as “the activity of perception which it involves is real (the cinema is not a phantasy), but the perceived is not really an object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its *replica* in a new kind of mirror” (45 emphasis in the original). The deception of the cinematic apparatus works by means of hiding the act of production that generates images for the spectator, therefore in the same way the Imaginary order works by concealing the Symbolic. Like the child of the mirror stage, the spectator, while believing the illusion s/he is confronted with, has a sense of control over what s/he watches, thus deriving from the cinematic experience a sense of mastery over the events on the screen. As Metz maintains: “The spectator is absent from the screen *as perceived*, but also (the two things inevitably go together) present there and even ‘all-present’ as *perceiver*. At every moment I am in the film by my look’s caress.” (Metz, 1982: 54, emphasis on the original).¹⁵ Therefore, for Metz the spectator does not identify with characters—if not through a secondary identification—but with an all-present and all-perceiving gaze that confers to her a sense of mastery over what she sees. This identification prompts the spectator to feel temporarily free from the sense of lack that characterizes life outside the cinema and, as Judith Mayne puts it, reactivates “myths of the transcendental subject, i.e., the unified, rational, coherent witness, as well as the regressive individual.” But Metz’s primary cinematic identification does not only involve the subject’s identification with her perception. As Metz explains:

it is true that as he identifies with himself as look, the spectator can do no other than

¹⁵ It should be noted that Metz does not use the word “perception” as a synonym of “look”. The word “perception” involves both the visual and the auditory fields. In Metz’s words: “The cinema’s signifier is *perceptual* (visual and auditory)” (Metz, 1982.: 42).

identify with the camera, too, which has looked before him at what he is now looking at and whose stationing (=framing) determines the vanishing point. During the projection this camera is absent, but it has a representative consisting of another apparatus, called precisely a “projector.” An apparatus the spectator has behind him, at the back of his head, that is, precisely where phantasy locates the “focus” of all vision. (Metz 1982: 49).

Similarly, Jean-Louis Baudry asserts that ideology is not something cinema imposes to the viewer, but something it already inherently implies. According to him the cinematic apparatus, by providing an impression of reality that conceals the work of production, is “destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a phantasmization of the subject, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the maintainance of idealism” (Baudry 1970: 259). The pleasure the viewer finds in the cinematic experience is linked to a desire of regression to the Lacanian phase of the imaginary, anterior to the mirror stage, a notion central also to Metz’s hypothesis of the ‘imaginary signifier’.

An image that was very popular to describe this cinematic experience is the myth of Plato’s cave, that especially recurs within Jean-Louis Baudry’s work. For instance, as Baudry explained, “The arrangement of the different elements—projector, darkened hall, screen—in addition from reproducing in a striking way the mise-en-scene of Plato's cave [...] reconstructs the situation necessary to the release of the “mirror stage” discovered by Lacan” (Baudry, 539).¹⁶ What marks this regression is the sense of complete mastery over what the subject perceives, a condition of being in control of the filmic experience that conceals the lack of control that characterizes life outside the cinema. Therefore, the cinematic apparatus is similar to the mirror stage because of its deceptive nature, which, similarly to what happens in the Imaginary order, creates an impression of coherent reality that blinds the spectator to the means of production (the underlying symbolic structure). In this context the gaze is conceived

¹⁶Jean-Louis Baudry. “Basic Effects of the Cinematographic Apparatus,” in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

as the spectator's deluded look, a key to the functioning of the ideological apparatus thanks to its sense of illusory mastery, whereas the solution to these ideological implications is the destruction of this illusion by means of making the concealed symbolic structure visible. Furthermore, among all arts cinema is conceived as the one that produces the most vivid "impression of reality." As Metz maintains: "It is because the world does not intrude upon the fiction and constantly deny [*sic*] its claim to reality – as happens in the theatre – that a film diegesis can yield the peculiar and well-known impression of reality" (Metz [1965] 1974, 11).

There is passage inside *Infinite Jest* where there is an explicit elaboration on the theme of Plato's cave. It occurs in a moment when quadruple agent Remy Marathe, donning a veil in order to pretend to be a member of the U.H.I.D. (Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed) and waiting for his interview to enter Ennet House (where he is looking for Joelle), is stopped by a psychically unstable person who later turns out to be named Selwyn (748). Selwyn starts a rambling monologue whose goal is far from being simply comedic, especially insofar as its disconnected sentences seem to point at an ontological doubt that is connected to other enigmatic passages of the novel. He says:

You ain't here. These fuckers are metal. Us — us that are real — there's not many — they're fooling us. We're all in one room. The real ones. One room all the time. Everything's pro — jected. They can do it with machines. They pro — ject. To fool us. The pictures on the walls change so's we think we're going places. Here and there, this and that. That's just they change the pro — jections. It's all the same place all the time. They fool your mind with machines to think you're moving, eating, cooking up, doing this and that.' (735)

The monologue goes on to describe a system where the totality of people that someone meets in a lifetime is actually composed by only 26 people – the reason of the number is obscure – who play different characters and "wear different faces with different pictures they

pro — ject on the wall” (735). Besides the intentional absurdity of the monologue, the reference to Plato’s cave and the idea that the world around is filled with projections and delusory impressions of reality render this passage one of the most straightforward clues that connect *Infinite Jest* with the Althusserian and Lacanian take on ideology present in apparatus theory. In the next chapter I will analyze more extensively how the impression of reality is thematized inside the novel, drawing a parallel with Wallace’s more general take on realism.

1.2 The Pernicious Illusion of Realism

Inside *Infinite Jest*'s storyworld, the boundaries between cinema, drugs and narcosis are continuously blurred in the depiction of entertainments in general and not only in what Wallace himself referred to as the novel's "MacGuffin" (Lipsky 157) and "metaphorical device" (Lipsky 157), *the Entertainment*. The most significant example of this tendency concerns the fact that the fictional slang used by the novel's Metro-Boston addicts substitutes the most common drugs' names with names of entertainers of the past and of the novel's (fictional) present: marijuana is almost invariably mentioned under the name Bob Hope – with all the consequent puns such as "he abruptly Abandoned All Hope" (796) and so on. Cocaine is Bing (after Bing Crosby) and the fictional D.M.Z., the lysergic drug described as "temporally-cerebral and almost ontological" (170, emphasis in original) takes the name of an equally fictional character, Madame Psychosis aka Joelle Van Dyne.¹⁷ Furthermore, in the second section of the novel, which portrays marijuana-addict Ken Erdedy waiting for a drug dealer, Erdedy, while paralyzed by several contrasting thoughts and anxieties, suddenly remembers that "He'd had to buy a new bong at Bogart's in Porter Square" (20), an obvious reference to the protagonist of *Casablanca*.

In his personal copy of Don DeLillo's *Americana* Wallace had underlined a passage reading "Drugs are scheduled to supplant the media – a dull gloomy bliss will replace the burning fears of your nights and early mornings" (367). On the contrary, in the fictional world of *Infinite Jest* drugs and media not only coexist, but become completely interchangeable. In this respect, it is meaningful that, if the drugs are named after stars of the entertainment, at the

¹⁷ MP are also the initials by which Gately's abusive stepfather is always referred to in the novel, standing for Military Police.

same time several movie references are hidden under the vocabulary of the accurately constructed self-help slang of the novel, especially the one spoken inside the Alcoholic Anonymous facility Ennet House. One meaningful example is given by the recurrent “entomologic [*sic*] tropes and analogies” (en 139, 1026) whereby the “Spider” becomes the term that indicates the Disease, with recurrent phrases like: “You have to Starve The Spider: you have to surrender your will” and “You have to want to surrender your will to people who know how to Starve The Spider” (357). A symbol that is referenced also in the name of JOI’s second production company, “*Latrodectus Mactans*,” the black widow’s scientific name, also present in JOI’s father’s monologue as a delirium tremens hallucination (159).¹⁸

The spider image is probably a reference to a scene in Ingmar Bergman’s *Through a Glass Darkly*, a movie that was meant to form, along with *Winter Light* (1963) and *The Silence* (1964), the Swedish filmmaker’s so-called ‘trilogy on the silence of God.’ Its title, a quote of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, perfectly applies to apparatus theory’s take on the cinema. The most famous scene of the film displays a character’s experience of God, who breaks his silence by appearing in the disguise of a disquieting spider. Wallace was aware of this film, and particularly of the aforementioned scene: as a matter of fact, he underlined a passage in his personal copy of Don DeLillo’s *Americana* that reads: “Bergman is a prime example of the filmmaker as mortician. His films suffer from rigor mortis. I haven’t looked at anything of his since the first mention of the spider-god. The new Paramount comedy-western is worth any number of Bergman’s exegetical nightmares” (248). Likewise, another recurrent image in the novel that simultaneously serves as a metaphor of addiction and as a subtle allusion to a cinematic artwork is the cage. For instance, we read that Joelle Van Dyne, before attempting suicide by overdosing on cocaine, reflects on how “[w]hat looks like the cage’s exit is actually the bars of the cage” (222), or that Gately’s first success in resisting his

¹⁸ Additionally, in the novel’s 1993 draft there was a small section (p. 23) where JOI narrated of a night in which he accompanied his father to kill a huge black widow.

compulsions is described as “the first time he’d been out of this kind of mental cage since he was maybe ten” (468), to mention only two examples of what is one of the novel’s most obsessive leitmotifs. *The Cage* is also the title and the central metaphor of a 1947 experimental film by Sidney Peterson where a man’s head is constantly entrapped in a birdcage. Both Peterson and his film are often mentioned in the novel,¹⁹ where *The Cage* is seen playing in the background of a lecture in Incandenza’s film ‘Good-Looking Men in Small Clever Rooms That Utilize Every Centimeter of Available Space With Mind-Boggling Efficiency’ (911).

This semantic interchange between addiction and cinema (both commercial and highbrow) might suggest the idea that the novel displays an exclusively pessimistic view of the cinematic art. His view was actually not so radical, as it emerges in Lipsky’s interview, where he states: “God, if the book comes off as some kind of indictment of entertainment, then it fails” (Lipsky 80-81). It is still undeniable that there are points of contact between the characterization of the cinematic theme in *Infinite Jest* and the tragic view of apparatus theorists about the cinema’s regressive and narcotic effects. There is indeed a strong analogy between Wallace’s take on realism (a transversal reflection that concerns both literature and cinema) and apparatus theorists’ theorization of the “impression of reality”, which in, Metz’s words, “presupposes the beginning of regression” (Metz 1982, 115), a regression that is seen as intrinsic to the cinematic experience, which constitutes “a kind of sleep in miniature, a waking sleep” (Metz 1982, 116).

Wallace’s point of view on realism, which is rather important in the thematic economy of *Infinite Jest*, was extensively expressed in his 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery. That interview is often quoted along with the essay “E Unibus Pluram” (1990) as Wallace artistic

¹⁹ Peterson and his co-director Broughton appear to be among Incandenza’s strongest influences. Endnote 331 claims that “Peterson’s *Potted Psalm*’s mother-and-Death stuff and *The Cage*’s cranial-imprisonment and disconnected-eyeball stuff are pretty obvious touchstones in a lot of Himself’s more parodic-slapstick productions” (en 331, 1072).

manifesto.²⁰ Critics when dealing with these texts have often focused their attention (and rightly so) toward a polemical attitude, of no marginal importance, toward metafiction (especially toward the commodified metafiction made by those authors that Wallace defines “the crank turners”). Nevertheless, what Wallace defines “big R realism” in his view appears to display dangers as subtle as those he underscored about metafiction. The language used by Wallace is particularly close to the one adopted by Metz and Baudry: he also uses words like “anesthetic” and “narcotic” several times to describe the effects of mimetic realism. It is also meaningful that, as previously mentioned, Wallace chooses *A Clockwork Orange*, the film referenced in the ending of *Infinite Jest*, as an example of a work of art providing these effects. Wallace’s explanation is particularly telling of his attitude towards realism and worth to be quoted at length:

Sure “A Clockwork Orange” is a self-consciously sick, nasty film about the sickness and nastiness of the post-industrial condition, but if you look at it structurally, slo-mo and fast-mo and arty cinematography aside, it does what all commercial entertainment does: it proceeds more or less chronologically, and if its transitions are less cause-and-effect-based than most movies’, it still kind of eases you from scene to scene in a way that drops you into certain kinds of easy cerebral rhythms. It admits passive spectatorship. Encourages it. TV-type art’s biggest hook is that it’s figured out ways to “reward” passive spectatorship. A certain amount of the form-conscious stuff I write is trying—with whatever success—to do the opposite. It’s supposed to be uneasy. (McCaffery 33)

This dichotomy between “anesthetic” realistic cinema and serious art is present also in Wallace’s reportage of the filming of David Lynch’s *Lost Highways* (Lynch being a

²⁰ See Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace: the Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline." *Irish Journal of American Studies Online* 2 (2010): 2-24.

filmmaker that Wallace openly revered and to whom we will return later on), entitled “David Lynch Keeps His Head” (Premiere 1996), where Wallace maintains that “a commercial movie doesn’t try to wake people up but rather to make their sleep so comfortable and their dreams so pleasant that they will fork over money to experience it” (Supposedly, 170), while with an art film “you usually have to do some interpretative work to get it” (Ibidem). The fundamental component that according to Wallace promotes passive spectation is the “classical Realist form” which the author describes as being “soothing, familiar and anesthetic: it drops right into spectation” (McCaffery 34). Wallace uses these explanations in order to justify why his fiction, while animated by a polemical attitude towards metafiction, is not realistic in the classic sense.

In opposition to the anaesthetic effect of realism, Wallace advocates “distortion of linearity” (McCaffery 34) as one of the solutions that prompt the reader (and the viewer) to assume an active role. This distortion is supposed “to prohibit the reader from forgetting that she's receiving heavily mediated data” (Ibidem), a goal that is unmistakably in line with the metafiction of the postmodern authors (especially John Barth of *Lost in the Funhouse*), generally considered as Wallace’s favorite polemical target. Nevertheless, the active role required to Wallace’s ideal reader is not only propelled by awareness, but by work and pain, the same pain whose importance for the overcoming of compulsions at Ennet House is both acknowledged and regarded as a taboo: “Something they seem to omit to mention in Boston AA [...]: that the way it gets better and you get better is through pain. Not around pain, or in spite of it. There’s serious pain in being sober, though, you find out, after time. [...] At least this pain means you’re going somewhere, they say, instead of the repetitive gerbil-wheel of addictive pain” (445-446). What is at stake here is not an ascetic indictment of pleasure per se, but only of the effortless pleasure that commercial cinema and literature deploy for lucrative and self-referential purposes. On the contrary, for Wallace the “true pleasure [...] in

real life [...] is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort” (McCaffery 22). Hard work on the part of the reader/viewer also entails the conception of art as a relationship, notoriously one of Wallace’s recurrent obsessions. Serious art “would take an architect who could hate enough to feel enough to love enough to perpetuate the kind of special cruelty only real lovers can inflict” (23).

All these statements, as agreeable as they may be, can resonate as cliché if we do not read them in terms of ideological interpellation. As a matter of fact, it is possible to understand the “special cruelty” Wallace mentions as concerning an attack to the subject’s sense of illusory mastery over the object, the sense of narcissistic misidentification that the “pernicious illusion of realism” (944), encourages. In the novel, this sense of mastery is especially thematized through the character of Orin Incandenza, among the Incandenza brothers the one who “liked to sit in the dark and enter what he watched, his jaw slackening, a child raised on multi-channel cable TV” (741). The sections filtered through Orin’s internal focalization present a peculiar subjectivity that is overtly regressive, to an extent that lends itself to several comedic effects. His most distinctive feature is that, as a compulsive womanizer, he does not seem to notice any distinction between the women he collects, all of whom he invariably mentions using the same abstract definition, “The Subject”. It is the same abstract name that apparatus theorists used to define the moviegoer while analyzing her spectatorial experience, which was criticized on many fronts for its abstraction.²¹ And as in apparatus theory the word “subject” was considered appropriate because of its double meaning that describes the relationship with the institution of cinematic spectatorship – the condition of being simultaneously ‘subject *of*’ and ‘subject *to*’ spectatorship – Orin’s female partners hardly ever assume their role as actual bearers of subjectivity: they remain objects,

²¹ The harshest critique came from David Bordwell and Noël Carroll in 1996 published the collection of essays that is considered to have proclaimed the death of apparatus theory, entitled *Post-Theory*, they simply referred to it as “the Theory”.

subject to the mastery of Orin's perception. As Hal points out in one of the phone conversations with his elder brother that are recurrent in the novel: "It's poignant somehow that you always use the word Subject when you mean the exact obverse" (en 110, 1008). One of the most comedic effects provided by Orin's inability to distinguish one Subject from another concerns his mistaking O.U.S.²² agent in drag Hugh/Helen Steeply for an actual woman, and even an irresistibly attractive one, while all the sections involving Steeply filtered through other characters' internal focalization constantly underscore the grotesqueness of Steeply's disguise. In this sense, Orin is the opposite of the protagonists of postmodern fiction, like the Oedipa Mass of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*: he never suspects the existence of any plot against him even though he is constantly surrounded by literally blatant clues. Furthermore, we are repeatedly told that his role as a football punter consists of "simply kicking the ball out of sight and past hope of return" (294), with successful outcomes but avoiding any physical contact in what is clearly a thematization of a problematic relationship with otherness. A relationship – or lack thereof – that is metaphorized since his first appearance through the image of the roaches that he entraps inside overturned glasses.

It is interesting that his subjectivity is intermingled with a certain kind of spectatorship: the regressive one entrapped in the Imaginary order.²³ Wallace entrusts Orin's subjectivity with features that render him a model of that passive spectation analyzed in Larry McCaffery's interview, as it is especially evident in the scene where Orin answers a survey provided by an AFR member by expressing his nostalgia for the television of the pre-teleputer era: "I miss stuff so low-denominator I could watch and know in advance what people were going to say. [...] Emotions of mastery and control and superiority. And pleasure" (599-

²² "Office of Unspecified Services" (89), a sort of CIA of the novel's fictional near future.

²³ It would indeed be not too arbitrary to interpret the Incandenza brothers as a triad that mirrors the Lacanian one, whereby Orin is entrapped in the Imaginary order, Hal in the Symbolic and Mario stands for the Real.

600). Mastery, control and pleasure are, as we have seen, all emotions that accompany the process of misrecognition inside the mirror stage. But more importantly, mastery and control are the result of a key-element that explains why realism works as an anesthetic: the familiarity that produces anticipation, the possibility to “know in advance” what is going to happen.

Wallace’s polemical attitude toward realism might also explain the motif of James Incandenza’s aversion toward André Bazin, one of the most important post-war film theorists, co-founder of the Cahiers du Cinema and strenuous supporter of cinematic realism as well as of a conception of the screen as a window that will inevitably be rejected by apparatus theory. Incandenza’s disdain for Bazin is underscored in several passages. For instance, the section set in 1963 and narrated by JOI opens with the sentence: “I remember I was eating lunch and reading something dull by Bazin” (491). Moreover, in the only account of a dinner where all the Incandenzas (plus Joelle) are present (in this case a Thanksgiving dinner) it occurs that “Joelle and Dr. Incandenza found themselves in a small conversation about Bazin, a film-theorist Himself detested, making a tormented face at the name” (745). Such a dislike is, as I previously mentioned, probably due to Bazin’s support of cinematic realism, and especially of neorealism, which he described as an “attitude of mind” that “rejects analysis, whether political, moral, psychological, logical, or social, of the characters and their actions. It looks on reality as a whole, not incomprehensible, certainly, but inseparably one” (Bazin, 96). This conception of the cinema as the art that is more apt to preserve the integrity of reality in representation – rooted in Bazin’s reflections on photography – cannot appear other than delusive to Incandenza. Nevertheless, it is important to underscore the philosophical background of Bazin’s approach, which is well contextualized by Joelle in the Thanksgiving dinner as being “historically connected to the neo-Thomist Realism of the *Personalistes*,’ an aesthetic school of great influence over French Catholic intellectuals circa 1930-1940 —

many of Bazin's teachers had been eminent *Personalistes*" (745).

Personalism was a philosophical current whose main representative was Emmanuel Mounier, author of *Personnalisme* (1950) and Bazin's mentor. It was a mixture of Catholicism and existentialism that underscored the centrality of "the person as the ultimate explanatory, epistemological, ontological, and axiological principle of all reality"²⁴ and strongly impacted Bazin's condemnation of montage. As a matter of fact, Bazin rejects montage because it imposes a directorial interpretation on reality (it is on this purpose that Joelle mentions "Bazin's disparagement of self-conscious directorial expression" [745]), while in his view the spectator should be as free to seek for meaning before the images as she is before reality itself.

In his aforementioned personal copy of Pam Cook's *Cinema Book*, Wallace underlined several paragraphs devoted to Bazin. The majority of them illustrates Bazin's idea according to which with the introduction of the deep-focus cinematography (whose most famous employment occurred in Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*), there arises a possibility to construct a meaning *a posteriori* (whereby the spectator is, through his own discernment, in control of the process of signification) as opposed to one *a priori* (where the auteur predetermines the meaning through editing). On the bottom of a passage devoted to Bazin's article "In defense of Rossellini", where it is explained that Rossellini's films "give evidence of an *ad hoc* construction in which bits of the external world which happen to be there, together with reactions solicited from the actors/characters from the events of the filming/scenario, are fused together in an apparently unpremeditated way" (Cook 39), Wallace wrote down: "Rossellini + 'Ad hoc' Structure' – Jest", a clear suggestion that this is a relevant issue inside the novel. As a matter of fact, the apparent unpremeditated nature of neorealistic montage (its *ad hoc* construction), on the one hand conveys an impression of

²⁴ See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/personalism/>.

reality even stronger than the one of Hollywood's cinema and might therefore be interpreted as more deceptive; on the other hand, by rejecting the formation of meaning a priori (the one produced by the old editing systems), it conceives the spectator's sense of mastery (her mastery of the construction of meaning) as an accurate reproduction of an experience of reality. It is evident how early Lacanian film theorists could easily consider the same process as a form of misrecognition and accordingly it is possible to regard Incandenza's dislike for Bazin as a clue to his compatibility with apparatus theory.

As a matter of fact, the main part of Incandenza's filmography is clearly informed by an attempt to avoid at all cost the impression of reality. A letter from Michael Pietsch to Wallace dated 12/22/1994 reveals that one of the sections that Pietsch suggested cutting revolved around Orin talking to Steeply about his father's consideration of neorealism as a fraud. The letter summarizes the section (which was not included in the finished work) with the following word: "Orin w Helen S. Cut Neorealism Fraud" (Little,Brown/Wallace Papers, Box 3.2). With this respect it is curious that one of James's declared models is French auteur Robert Bresson (944)²⁵, generally more known for the ascetic quality of his *mise-en-scène* and rarefied performances of his often non-professional actors than for his anti-realist attitude. Inspired by Bresson, "Himself had apparently thought the stilted, wooden quality of nonprofessionals helped to strip away the pernicious illusion of realism and to remind the audience that they were in reality watching actors acting and not people behaving" (944, emphasis mine), although the result is "more like Brecht than like Bresson" (944). The German playwright and the French auteur were compared by Susan Sontag in an essay on Bresson, where Sontag associates the two artists in the common category of "reflective art." Exactly like James Incandenza, Sontag notices that Bresson's use of distancing was conceived

²⁵ Endnote 24 indicates that JOI's film "Dial C for Concupiscence" is a "[p]arodic *noir*-style tribute to Bresson's *Les Anges du Peché*". Nevertheless, Bresson's first film, *Les Anges du Peché* (1943), set in a nun's convent, has more elements in common with the diegesis of Incandenza's "Blood Sister: One Tough Nun" (704). "Dial C..." is, both for its title and its synopsis, a clear allusion to Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder* (1954).

to avoid misrecognition with characters. She writes: “The emotional distance typical of Bresson’s films seems to exist for a different reason altogether: because all identification with characters, deeply conceived, is an impertinence” (Sontag 1966, 181).

To conclude, we have seen how both the theme of cinematic impression of reality and Wallace’s more general take on realism are intertwined inside *Infinite Jest*. In the next section I will focus my attention on more formal aspects. I will explore, both from a thematic and from a structural point of view, the pervasiveness in the novel of the theme of the mirror, the privileged metaphor for the functioning of both the cinematic screen and mimetic realism.

1.3 Las Meninas

This chapter, with its focus on the centrality of the mirror theme in *Infinite Jest*, only apparently represents a digression from issues related to film theory. While I will start to explore the presence – both thematic and structural – of models of reflection and refraction in the novel, the analysis of the hypotheses concerning these models will be momentarily disconnected from Lacanian film theory. Nevertheless, the way these issues are relevant in relation to both Lacan and film theory will become clear later on, when I will propose a model of refraction to interpret *Infinite Jest* that originates from Lacan’s theory, namely “the gaze.”

When he was attending his MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Arizona between 1985 and 1986, David Foster Wallace wrote a two-page draft entitled “Las Meniñas” (David Foster Wallace Papers, Box 15.7).²⁶ With hardly any alteration, the draft will become the section of *Infinite Jest* (37-38) set in Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar (five years before the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment when the main part of the novel is set) and narrated by a minor character, Clenette Henderson, an African-American and future Ennet House Resident. The section is told in a broken non-syntactical language that mimics both an African-American slang and a childish spoken language and depicts scenes of extreme degradation, involving child abuse and domestic violence. The victim is Clenette’s half-sister, a child named Wardine, who does not appear in any other section of the book. Understanding the relationship between the draft’s title and its content is far from easy. Without taking into consideration the embryonal value of “Las Meniñas” and the fact that Wallace cherished it particularly, to the extent of defining it in a letter to his agent Bonnie Nadell written in 1988 as “a 2-page story that has been distilled to its fictional essence” (Bonnie Nadell’s David

²⁶ In his David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest: A Reader’s Guide* Stephen Burn maintains that the draft was written in 1986 (Burn, xii). The typed draft present at the Harry Ransom Center does not actually specify any date, but on the bottom of its second page there is the indication: “David Foster Wallace, c/o Creative Writing Program Office, English Department, MLB, University of Arizona.”

Foster Wallace Collection, 1.1), it is difficult to understand the role of the section in the novel's structure. Nevertheless, its importance is also marked by the fact that it is one of the few sections where the narrator is intradiegetic and is not Hal, his father or his grandfather.²⁷

What remains most mysterious is the draft's title. As a matter of fact, "Las Meniñas" is, as David Hering points out, a reference to Velasquez's famous 1656 painting *Las Meninas* – the "ñ" in Wallace's title being an evident hypercorrection. Whereas the relationship between this painting and Wardine's story is elusive, its connection with the whole novel's content and its preoccupation with issues of mirrors, screens and spectatorship that we have introduced in the previous chapter is far less arbitrary. Suffice it to say that the handwritten annotation "Las Meninas" can be found in the first page of Wallace's personal copy of Don DeLillo's *Americana*.²⁸ Although there is not a single mention inside DeLillo's first novel of Velasquez's painting, it is arguably one of the novels that most successfully explores the pathologies concerning a cinema-inflected subjectivity. The association between *Americana* and *Las Meninas* is probably due to the self-reflexive subjectivity of DeLillo's protagonist, David Bell, which is in keeping with the self-reflexive game played by Velasquez, structured as a mirror where the artist portrays himself while painting in his studio.

The painting's foreground displays the Infanta Margarita surrounded by her maids of honor (the title's "meninas") and a dwarf, while the subject of the painting (the royal couple formed by Philip IV and Mariana of Austria) is visible in another mirror in the background. In his exploration of the significance of *Las Meninas* for Wallace's fiction, David Hering draws

²⁷ The other sections where the narrator shares these features are respectively narrated by an unspecified ETA student who at "almost twelve" (63) describes a nightmare (61-63), by another resident at Ennet House, Emil Minty, who refers to himself as "yrstruly" (128-135) and by another unspecified ETA student (964-971). It is worth mentioning that also the first section where Lyle appears (127-128) is narrated by an unspecified intradiegetic character, as it is evident from the sentence: "I want to be like that. Able to just sit all quiet and pull life toward me, one forehead at a time" (128).

²⁸ What Wallace wrote on the title page of his personal copy of *Americana* is a numbered list of ideas for *Infinite Jest*, which reads as follows:

1) Great Marvel; 2) Las Meninas; 3) Pemulis + DMZ / Insert of Hal and Orin's Call; 4) Bed frame 5) + Dad's Dialogue.

on the first chapter of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966), where Foucault points out how the use of mirrors and of the *mise-en-abyme* in the painting reveals a system that questions "the extent to which the viewer is participant or acknowledged presence [*sic*]" (Hering 82). The painter turns his eyes toward the viewer only because she occupies the same position of his subject, but "transcribed by his [the painter's] hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can in fact apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lustreless back" (Foucault 7). Nonetheless, the viewer's acknowledgement of the presence of the mirror in the background offers her the possibility of a condition of reciprocity between the viewer and the painter. The gaze of the author that has organized the painting and the gaze of the viewer for which it is displayed are both drawn into the interior of the picture, thus providing an "oscillation between interior and exterior" (Foucault 12).

This model is particularly relevant for Wallace's fiction, insofar as it adopts deeply self-reflexive tools in order to provide the possibility of an encounter between the author and the viewer, an act of communication that occurs both inside and outside the work of art. In this sense, it is much more akin to Wallace's use of the "you" in the short story "Octet" (included in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Man*), where he builds a similar oscillation between interior and exterior that is evident in sentences like "You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer" (*Brief* 123), than to the experimentations going on in the section narrated by Clenette Henderson. David Hering uses this model in order to underscore the presence of a "formal model of 'reflection'" (Hering 86) that develops across Wallace's fiction. In doing so, he understands this model as following an intricate structure where more reflective models are deployed. As Hering points out, Wallace employs "the reflection of the text within the text (*mise-en-abyme*)", then "the reflection of the author within the text (authorial presence)" and finally "the absorption of the character within the reflective image, be it mirror or screen" (Hering 86-87). At the same time, Hering locates a fourth model, one that is in stark contrast

with the preceding ones and which represents a possible antidote to them: “a motif of *refraction*” (Hering 87). Refraction stands for an attempt to “refractively pass through the reflective surface and dialogically communicate with whoever is through or outside that surface” (87).

In this dissertation, I will interpret the refractive model by drawing on Lacanian film studies; I will deal with this topic in chapter 2.2. For this chapter, I am more interested in comparing the model identified by Hering with two models coming from mathematics that indicate the presence, in the structure of *Infinite Jest*, of a mirrorlike shape, a fact that, if confirmed, could illuminate the reference to Velázquez with interesting implications.

In his essay “David Foster Wallace and the Mathematics of Infinity,” mathematician Roberto Natalini quotes an undergraduate thesis written by Chris Hager which suggests that the narrative structure of *Infinite Jest* might be shaped like a parabola creating a mirror symmetry between the two halves of the novel. It is in fact interesting to notice how there are many clues to demonstrate this symmetry: there are many instances of episodes that are as distant from the beginning of the novel as other episodes that produce with them a rhyming effect are distant from the ending. As Natalini elaborates: “Hal and Gately – Wallace’s two most contrasting autobiographical projections – form the two branches of this curve [...] and the relationship between their stories is reflected in the novel’s larger double symmetry” (Natalini 49-50). This is in fact particularly evident if we take into consideration the polarity formed by the beginning and the ending, which portray the two protagonists of the novel in the moment when they hit the bottom and both are unable to speak. Besides the episodes mentioned by Natalini (he notices that Poor Tony Krause experiences a seizure at around p. 300 and appears 300 pages before the book’s ending), there are many other instances of the presence of such a specular structure. I will list only some of them: the first-person narration in sections involving Hal, which comes back in the last sections; the use of the past tense in

the first section (55-60) where the protagonist is Gately, the one where he burglarizes the Assistant District Attorney's house and then its return in the sections where Gately is hospitalized; the episode of Gately's polaroid snapshots sent to the A.D.A., with the "enhanced-focus handle of one of the couple's toothbrushes protruding from his bottom" (56) is almost as distant from the beginning as the reappearance of the A.D.A., complaining about the consequences of that action for his OCD wife (960-964) is from the ending; Furthermore, Hal's confused remembrance of himself, John Wayne and Gately digging up JOI's head (16-17) displays a similar symmetry with Gately's dream featuring the same scene (934).

Nevertheless, Natalini finds another mathematical model that better describes this symmetry: the hyperbola. As he explains: "there is also the inverse (hyperbolic) relationship between Hal's rise and fall, and Gately's fall and subsequent rise. The hyperbola's foci could be located in the Eschaton incident and Gately's fight with two Nucks, which respectively occur at $1/3$ and $2/3$ of the way through the novel (Natalini 50). What makes the hyperbolic structure fitting for a comparison with the models analyzed by Hering is that it does not only seem to imply reflection, but also the oscillation between interior and exterior. As a matter of fact, according to Natalini, "The two protagonists, as the two branches of the hyperbola, only meet beyond our view, which is to say at infinity, a point indicated by mysterious clues placed at the beginning and end of the novel", a clear reference to the scene of Hal and Gately digging up JOI's head, the only moment where Hal and Gately actually meet, but that in the novel is vaguely outlined through a confused thought (Hal's) and a supposedly anticipatory dream. This point at infinity where Hal and Gately meet is therefore the place where the reader stands, thus producing an oscillation between the interior and the exterior of the novel.

Another compelling aspect of the mirrorlike model adopted in *Infinite Jest* is that the specularity it involves is an intricately inverted one. A meaningful example of this inversion is the relationship between the "I'm *in* here" (3, emphasis mine) with which the novel opens

and the “the tide was way *out*” (981, emphasis mine) that marks its closure.²⁹ Another one is provided by the first and the last appearance of Orin: the former portraying him while he entraps roaches (42-49) using glasses and the last one showing him entrapped by the Wheelchair Assassins under a giant overturned glass (971). Orin’s last scene is meaningful in terms of the inverted glass-process also because it operates a shift of focalization from Orin to Luria P. This shift involves a reversal whereby for the first time Orin is perceived by another character as “The Subject” (972). The inverted mirror in *Infinite Jest*’s seems to characterize also the relationship between life and afterlife. As a matter of fact, James’s wraith, appearing to Gately in the hospital, displays some features that are the exact obverse of the ones he has shown up to that moment. We have known him as a character “so blankly and irretrievably hidden that Orin said he’d come to see him as like autistic, almost catatonic” (737), and learned that Avril used to nickname his deadpan expression with the Gallicism “*Le Masque*” (737, emphasis in original), but his wraith “pushes his glasses up sadly. You never think of a wraith looking sad or unsad, but this dream-wraith displays the whole affective range” (837). A similar inversion occurs with Lucien Antitoui in the first scene where the afterlife is mentioned, after his brutal killing with the broomstick by the Wheelchair Assassins. In this case we read that Lucien, who is characterized by his monolinguisism (he speaks only French and his store’s name is misspelled as “Antitoui Entertainment” (480)) after death is “sounding a bell-clear and nearly maternal alarmed call-to-arms in all the world’s well-known tongues” (488-489). That is why this exact scene, occurring halfway through the novel, can be regarded as the place where the two mirroring halves of the novel encounter: it is the moment where the inverted transformation occurs at once. This inverted mirror structure is also evoked by the motto that appears in James Incandenza’s film “Blood Sister: One Tough Nun”,

²⁹ The polarity between the “in here” of the opening and the “way out” of the closure can be confronted with two recurrent terms present in the slang of the Crocodiles, former Ennet House residents who are the veterans among the current members of the House’s staff. The terms, capitalized like all the words to which the AA slang puts a certain emphasis, are “*Back In*” and “*Out There*” (355). This comparison would be an indication of the circular and recursive pattern of the plot.

“CONTRARIA SUNT COMPLEMENTA” (713), which is the motto that prominent physicist Niels Bohr had in his coat of arms, which displayed a Yin-Yang symbol.

Actually, the shape of *Infinite Jest*'s structure is open to debate and there are several clues among Wallace's letters and interviews that lead toward different, though not at all incompatible, directions than the ones thus far explored. Wallace maintained in a 1996 interview with Michael Silverblatt for the radioshow “Bookworm” that the novel is structured like a specific kind of fractal named “Sierpinski gasket.”³⁰ As Wallace specifically said, answering to Silverblatt, who in his question had managed to grasp the fractal structure: “[what] was structured as a Sierpinski gasket was the draft that I delivered to Michael [Pietsch] in '94, and it went through some, I think, mercy cuts, so it's probably kind of a lopsided Sierpinski gasket now.”³¹ Nevertheless, as Wallace himself specifies, the Sierpinski gasket is only “one of the things structurally going on”, which leaves room for the search of other patterns.

Natalini's hypotheses are compatible with some other clues left by Wallace in his correspondences. In 1994 Wallace wrote a letter to Michael Pietsch, dated 29 April, where he explained the choice of using the endnotes instead of the previous footnotes. He wrote:

Endnotes are the best way of “having so much plot-relevant stuff in the Notes so that really three separate plots (both tangled and slightly ambiguous, but discernably different) exist depending on whether one reads the Notes in conjunction with the text, reads them separately, or skips them altogether. I pray this is nothing like hypertext, but it seems to be interesting and the best way to get the exfoliating

³⁰ The interview can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKCMTHX5WHk>.

³¹ As a matter of fact, the image of a Sierpinski gasket appears in the novel once: in the room of one of the main characters of the novel, Michael Pemulis, an ETA student coming from the working class and mathematical prodigy, there is “an enormous hand-drawn Sierpinski gasket” (213).

curved line plot I wanted without making the primary text so hard to read that nobody but Ph.D.'s'll even try" (Little, Brown/Wallace Papers, Box 3.2).

The curved line could easily belong both to a parabolic and to a hyperbolic structure, thus confirming Hager and Natalini's hypotheses. Wallace communicated the idea of structuring the plot as a curved line also in a much earlier letter to his agent Bonnie Nadell, dated 15 April 1992, where, while discussing the possibility of cuts, he confided that: "Plot-wise, this thing proceeds according to something more like a broad arc than a Freitagian triangle. The low gear in which plot stuff proceeds in sections 1 and 2 is intentional." Moreover, while expressing his resignation to the acceptance of the cuts, he underscored that they would distort a thoroughly planned mathematical structure by writing: "I'm far from refusing to give the straight math a healthy machete-whack – ends up being rather key a couple hundreds pp. down the line" (Little, Brown/Wallace Papers, Box 3.2).

Reflection and refraction are not the only optical phenomena that structure *Infinite Jest*: the other one is diffraction. In a letter to Steven Moore dated 1988 Wallace tried to explain his view of the difference between modernism and postmodernism in terms of refraction and diffraction, but curiously not through the model of reflection. He wrote:

The refracted world of Proust and Musil, Schulz and Stein, Borges and Faulkner has, post-war, exploded into diffraction, a weird, protracted Manhattan project staffed by Robbe-Grillet, Grass, Nabokov, Sorrentino, Bohl, Barth, McCarthy, Marquez, Puig, Kundera, Gass, Fuentes, Elkin, Donoso... (Steven Moore Collection, Box 1.2).

Diffraction was the basis for Dennis Gabor's invention of holography. At the beginning of the novel (the last event in terms of fabula), Hal says that Gabor "may very well have been the

Antichrist” (12) a statement that points at the purely deceptive dimension of holograms,³² their role in producing an impression of reality. Holography is also adopted by James Incandenza in some of his films, like ‘Medusa vs. The Odalisque’, in this case with the purpose of underscoring the illusory dimension of the cinema by using holograms instead of actors. As Steeply explains: “He’d used holography a couple times before, and in the context of a kind of filmed assault on the viewer” (490). As a matter of fact, the theme of holograms is in line with the “depthlessness” producing a “whole new culture of simulacrum” (Jameson 6), that Frederic Jameson analyzed in his 1984 article that will become the 1991 volume *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

It must be also noted that in the 1988 letter to Moore the image of the mirror does appear. If Wallace indicates refraction as the model for modernism and diffraction as connoting postmodernism, reflection is connected to the realist form through an image that is very similar to the Stendhalian mirror that “reflects the blue skies and mudpuddle” mentioned in “E Unibus Pluram” (*Supposedly* 22). As Wallace writes to Moore: “The stubborn romanticist view of fiction as essentially a mirror, distinguished from the real world it reflects only by its portability and mercilessly “objective” clarity, has finally taken it on the chin. Form-content distinctions are now flat planet” (Steven Moore, Box 1.2). Nevertheless, in “E Unibus Pluram”, which was written in 1990, it is already clear how Wallace conceives the mirror as a referent of the screen, as well as of the illusion of mastery on the part of a regressive and self-reflexive subjectivity: “For television’s whole raison is reflecting what people want to see. It’s a mirror” (*Supposedly* 22).

Accordingly, in *Infinite Jest* the moments where the presence of mirrors emphasizes the existence of an ideological apparatus that encourages the reflexivity of vision (“reflecting

³²In the same section we learn that one of the essays written by Hal was entitled “The Implications of Post-Fourier Transformations for a Holographically Mimetic Cinema” (7).

what people want to see”) are far more abundant than the ones where the refractive model takes place. In the 1993 draft they were even more pervasive, including a small section where the mirror’s role as screen or as mirror of nature is ambiguous. The section, which Steven Moore suggested to cut, described the content of James Incandenza’s “first attempt ever at something filmed”, namely “The Cage I”, which features “an old pre-digital television set, a clean wall mirror and two images in both, only one of which is attractive” (IJ 1993 Draft 469, Steven Moore Collection Box 2.4). The image on the screen is a “shampoo-commercial-type woman” saying “I am unreal, but you are the one who is trapped” (Ibidem).

One of the most meaningful examples of the use of mirrors to underscore the presence of a “trap” (an ideological apparatus) in the novel’s final version occurs in a passage embedded in one of the longest endnotes, endnote 324. The endnote contains an authentic whole section of the novel and revolves around 13-year old Todd Possalthwaite in the locker room crying over a cancelled trip to Disneyland, an episode that prompts him to be entrapped for the first time in his life in a “metaphysical angst” (en 324, 1067). He starts questioning the reality of things and repeating over and over the phrase “Nothing’s true” (Ibidem), a statement that has many echoing variations scattered throughout the novel, from the aforementioned monologue of the psychically unstable man encountered by Marathe at Ennet’s house to Fackelman’s harrowing and similarly repetitious “’s a goddamn lie” (936) during the stolen Dilaudid binge.

What is striking is that in the episode revolving around Possalthwaite’s inconsolability there is one of the most accurate descriptions of the ETA locker room, a description that meaningfully lingers on the presence everywhere of a multiplicity of mirrors. We read that “the mirror has projecting side-mirrors so you can check out the old biceps from either side, see the jawline in profile, practice expressions, try to look all natural and uncomposed so you can try to see what you really might normally look like to other people” and that “It’s the best

mirror in the Academy, intricately lit from all perspectives. Dr. J.O. Incandenza knew his adolescents” (en 324, 1066). As trivial as the cause of Possalthwaite’s metaphysical angst may be, it is meaningful that in this passage the doubt over the reality of things – and accordingly the reliability of vision – is underscored by the oppressive presence of mirrors. A presence that characterizes also the store Antittoi Entertainment, which is described as being “devoted to glass” (482), given that “they [the Antittoi brothers] have set curved and planar mirrors at studied angles whereby each part of the room is reflected in every other part, which flusters and disorients customers and keeps haggling to a minimum” (482-483). Furthermore, also the Wheelchair Assassins, before conceiving the samizdat cartridge as a weapon of mass destruction had a long training of terrorism exerted by means of dragging “huge standing mirrors across U.S. Interstate 87 at selected dangerous narrow winding Adirondack passes south of the border and its Lucite walls” (311), thus provoking predictable car-crashes.

To sum up, the pervasiveness of mirrors (the instruments that make misrecognition possible) both in the structure and in the content of *Infinite Jest* serves as a thematic extension of the issue of the ideological apparatus. At the same time, the model of the mirror seems to lend itself to the several possibilities outside specularity, as demonstrated by the reversed-mirror structure recognized by Natalini and by the models of reciprocity and refraction underscored by Hering. In the next chapter I will turn again to apparatus theory to analyze the way in which Wallace channels into *Infinite Jest* Laura Mulvey’s landmark study on scopophilia and the male gaze, “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema.”

1.4 Scopophilia

Wallace's copy of Pam Cook's *The Cinema Book* contains several clues that Laura Mulvey was probably the early Lacanian film theorist that exerted the strongest influence on *Infinite Jest*. Evidences of an intense interest for Mulvey are the initials of *Infinite Jest* that Wallace wrote on the side of the references to Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) contained in a chapter concerning the role of the star system inside the cinema (Cook 50-52). Wallace's markings show that he was particularly interested in Mulvey's argument that in classical Hollywood cinema the erotic play of the spectator's 'look' – an implied male look – around the female star is a fundamental part of the "narrative drive toward closure and the reinstatement of equilibrium" (Cook 51). According to Mulvey, classic Hollywood cinema has been dependent on structures of pleasure that respond to two mechanisms: the scopophilic instinct, which is the pleasure of looking at another person who cannot look back as an erotic object, and ego libido, which stems from the identification with the image seen. Both mechanisms have been structured by a patriarchal order in such a way that the owner of the implied active gaze is always male, while the passive object connoting *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey's neologism) is female. Also, while the woman displayed on screen functions as an erotic object for both the male character in the film story and the spectator in the auditorium, thus satisfying the scopophilic drive, the male protagonist works as an ideal ego and a screen surrogate for the spectator. Moreover, since the male character is also in control of the events as a motor of action, this identification acts as a form of misrecognition. On the contrary, the role of the woman's visual presence is to produce stasis rather than action, or, as Mulvey puts it, a woman's "visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of actions in moments of erotic contemplation" (Mulvey 19).

Wallace was certainly aware of the extent to which the interplay between the erotic instinct of scopophilia and ego libido structure specifically the cinematic art, as it is evident from an answer he gave to David Lipsky. While reasoning about the eroticism involved in aesthetic experiences (in his case his strong attachment for Donald Barthelme's short story "The Balloon"), Lipsky asked him to mention another medium that provides such an experience, to which Wallace answered: "Yeah—although you feel a kind of weird intimacy with actors in drama, although it's a bit different. That's more I think an enabling of the fantasy that you are them, or getting you to desire them as a body or something" (Lipsky 57). The idea that the "fantasy that you are them" and "getting you to desire them as a body" are the motors of the seduction involved in the cinematic experience is nothing else but a paraphrasis of Mulvey's essay, which demonstrates how Wallace's awareness of it was not limited to the synthetic paragraphs inside the *Cinema Book*. Furthermore, while it is indisputable that the interplay of narcissistic misrecognition and scopophilia pinpointed by Mulvey pervades the whole bulk of *Infinite Jest*, it is also worth noticing that the word "scopophilia" itself appears in scattered occasions throughout the novel. As a matter of fact, the samizdat Entertainment is once defined by Joelle as a "scophiliac thing" (230), while in the section set in Molly Notkin's house, where Joelle attempts suicide by overdosing on cocaine, a panoramic of mockingly hyperintellectualized conversations involves an unspecified person defining a movie as "some beastly post-annular scophiliac vector" (233). Scopophilia is also one of the sophisticated words that James O. Incandenza's wraith introduces in Gately's head (832).

Mulvey's 1975 essay also points out how the female figure on screen connotes "threat of castration and hence unpleasure" (21) that "constantly endangers the unity of the diegesis and bursts through the world of illusion as an intrusive, static, one dimensional fetish" (25-26). This occurs because the pleasure derived from the moments of erotic contemplation

constantly threatens to exceed the structures of narrative which work to regulate desire, thus overturning the balance between static contemplation and narrative flow that classical Hollywood cinema deploys to hold spectators in place while promising them the fulfillment of forbidden fantasies. The avenues of escape from this fear are two: the first one is voyeurism, associated with the sadistic pleasure given by “the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery) counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object” (21). The second avenue is fetishistic scopophilia, namely the overvaluation and cult of the star which “builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself” so that the object becomes “reassuring rather than dangerous” (21). Both as uncanny embodiment of a threat of castration and as an object of fetishistic pleasure, the female figure is subjected to a patriarchal signification that always inscribes her as bearer and not maker of meaning, or, as Mulvey puts it, she is “subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego” (209). Wallace’s interest for this process is also visible in his marking, inside the *Cinema Book*, of the title of Susan Lurie’s article “Pornography and the Dread of Woman”³³ (Pam Cook 105), a title that he also wrote down in the back of the book’s cover.

It is possible to find several traces of Wallace’s research on the themes of scopophilia and pornography also in his post-*Infinite Jest* production. One of the most overt elaborations on Mulvey’s themes is probably the short-story “TriStan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko”, in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Narrated in a parodic mythological style, but set in the offices of a contemporary entertainment agency, the short story revolves around a surgically enhanced actress, Sisse Nar (a pun for Narcissus), who becomes obsessed over by a character named Stasis and awakens the jealousy of Stasis’s wife Codependae, who plots an elaborate vengeance. The use of allegorical names for the characters (especially “Stasis”)

³³ Susan Lurie, “Pornography and the Dread of Woman,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: Morrow, 1980), 159 – 73.

makes it explicit how “Tri-Stan” can be read as a mythological illustration of Mulvey’s theory of the voyeuristic male gaze.

Another proof of Wallace’s concern with these themes is his unreleased project of a long novel titled *Sir John Feelgood or, The Genesis of a Great Lover*, whose early outline dates back to 1997. Although this project revolves around the theme of pornography – also at the center of Wallace’s article on the Adult Video News Awards “Big Red Son” (*Consider*) – its emphasis would have been placed on ego-libido rather than on scopophilia. As a matter of fact, it would have revolved around a pornographic actor, Shane Drinion (the same name of one of *The Pale King*’s protagonists) who is so easily replaceable that he serves as an exteriorized projection of the spectators’ selves. In Wallace’s words, Drinion – nicknamed ‘Sir John Feelgood’ – ends up becoming “the void the viewer is projected onto” (David Foster Wallace Collection, Box 37.4, qt. in Hering 110).

It has often been argued, and not without a reason, that the treatment that Wallace reserves to female characters is very akin to the patriarchal signification illustrated by Mulvey. For instance, Clare Hayes-Brady points out that “the female characters in Wallace’s novels and short stories do tend toward the archetypal”, while simultaneously “masculine figures that populate Wallace’s writing are physically solid, vibrant, and vocal”³⁴. Brady explains the opacity of the female characterization by contending that it is not based on a misogynistic disposition as much as on a sense of otherness to the male consciousness, an explanation that does not really distance Wallace’s attitude from the one of the patriarchal culture described by Mulvey, for which the woman is “a signifier for the male other” (15). Nevertheless, if on the one hand it is agreeable that *Infinite Jest*’s female characters do tend toward the archetypal if not the conceptual, as it is evident from the abundant presence in the

³⁴ Hayes-Brady, Clare. “‘...’: Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace.” *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013. 131-150. P. 131.

novel of archetypal imagoes of femininity (Bernini's Saint Teresa, The Medusa, the Odalisque, etc.), on the other hand Wallace's willingness to use Mulvey's concepts in *Infinite Jest*, expressed in his markings, suggests that this aspect is a specific choice rather than the offshoot of a limit.

A meaningful example is provided by the characterization of Joelle Van Dyne: the reader never comes to know whether her veil conceals a "transhuman beauty" (290) or a disfigured face, two possibilities that both embody the threat for the male gaze that classical Hollywood cinema tries to contain, rather than a simple idealization. As a matter of fact, Joelle's beauty is characterized by an excess that threatens the possibility of containing it inside the structures of narrative signification or of transforming it into something "satisfying in itself" and therefore "reassuring". If on the one hand the effect of her beauty on the novel's male characters is comparable to what Mulvey says about classical Hollywood film star, whose function is to "freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation", on the other hand she incorporates an excess in relation to those film icons that threatens, as Pam Cook's paragraph underlined by Wallace puts it, to "spill over, to exceed the bounds of narrative that work to regulate our desire" (Cook 52), thus overturning "the delicate balance between static image and narrative flow on which Hollywood cinema rests" (Ibidem). As a matter of fact, Joelle's excess of beauty in respect to Hollywood film stars is underscored in various passages. For instance, in the section where she attempts suicide by overdosing on cocaine, she suddenly remembers when her father brought her to the film theater – an association of thought that is triggered again by the comparison between film spectatorship and drug abuse. Joelle's remembers that the cinema was the "only other thing besides what she's about to do too much of here right now she'd ever come close to feeling this way about" (237). While she watched movies as a child, her father used to point up into "the rectangular world at this one or that one, performers, giant flawless 2D beauties irides-cent on the screen,

telling Joelle over and over again how she was prettier than this one or that one right there” (237). The same idea is expressed in endnote 101, which explains that some of Joelle’s earliest dates with Orin consisted in watching commercial films and that in one of these occasions “Orin had one time completely unpremeditatedly told her it was a strange feeling watching commercial films with a girl who was prettier than the women in the films” (en 101, 1004).

Joelle’s excess of “to-be-looked-at-ness” leads the subject/male and object/female hierarchy to a subversion whereby the male gaze loses its privileged illusion of being in control over the object, remaining paralyzed by its own contemplation. This process in the novel is defined “Actaeon complex”, which is a “a kind of deep phylogenic fear of transhuman beauty” (290) and is named after the Greek mythological figure Actaeon, a Theban hunter who, after watching Artemis bathing naked, was transformed into a stag and killed by his own hounds. A myth that is particularly appropriate in so far as it does not only describe a voyeuristic male gaze, but also an overturning of the parts whereby a hunter becomes a prey. Similarly, Joelle inspires dread rather than simple attraction. Nicknamed by Boston University schoolboys as “P.G.O.A.T.” (Prettiest Girl of All Times, 290) when she was a cheerleader and twirler for the Boston University Football team where Orin served as a punter, she is invariably described as “grotesquely lovely” (290) and “hideously attractive” (Ibidem). The dread is surely due to the fact that she, being a flesh and blood character (at least inside the novel’s diegesis) and not a projection on the screen, can look back and interrupt the narcissistic process of scopophilia, but there is also another element to consider.

As Mulvey points out, in mainstream films the presence of women always threatens to freeze the action in moments of erotic contemplation, therefore the woman must be reintegrated into narrative in order to avoid stopping the narrative flow. This reintegration into narrative occurs through the combination of the spectator and the male character’s looks. If it

does not occur, what is not reintegrated into narrative is a moment in which “the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no-man's-land outside its own time and space” (19-20) that the cinema tries to conceal by “controlling the dimension of time (editing narrative) and [...] of space (changes in distance, editing)” (25), with the result that “One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen” (20). In other words, the failed reintegration destroys the impression of reality on which the cinematic apparatus rests, exposing the flatness of the screen and the spectator’s lack of control, a process that reawakens the castration anxiety. In a novel where the cinematic apparatus is so pervasive that the narration itself often adopts solutions that would be fitting for the ekphrastic description of a film – passages like “This smaller guy gets the most frames the slowest” (609), or “Everything came at too many frames per second” (896) are representative in this respect – Joelle represents in the diegesis of the novel the same threat to the male gaze as the one embodied by the “giant flawless 2D beauties irides-cent on the screen” when they are not re-assimilated into the narrative flow: that of freezing action.

The same effect in the novel is also attributed to a female archetype at the center of a fictional Quebecois myth, “L’Odalisque de Sainte Thérèse”, whose initials not casually compose the word “lost”.³⁵ This myth is mentioned in a conversation between Steeply and Marathe occurring in the night of April 30, YDAU. Steeply explains the myth by saying that “the Odalisk’s so beautiful that mortal Quebecois eyes can’t take it. Whoever looks at her turns into a diamond or gem” and that she is therefore ‘A Medusa in reverse’ (529), to which there follows a reflection on how Greek mythology would lack examples that depict the fear of beauty – a reflection that is easily contradicted by the aforementioned myth of Actaeon.

³⁵ In a passage in which Marathe and Steeply discuss on the most appropriate word to describe the condition to which the samizdat Entertainment reduces its viewers, Marathe’s suggestion is indeed “Lost” (648).

Although the Medusa and the Odalisque are repeatedly present in the novel, even with particularly implicit allusions as in the passage involving a comparison between Marathe and the mythological slayer of the Medusa, where the constellation of Perseus is described as being “amputated by the earth’s horizon” (507), their most important occurrence in the novel is in Incandenza’s film ‘The Medusa vs. The Odalisque’, where “Mobile holograms of two visually lethal mythologic females duel with reflective surfaces on stage while a live crowd of spectators turns to stone” (en 24, 988). They represent not only the threat embodied by the two sides of the voyeuristic process – the active power and the passive dimension that both voyeurism and exhibitionism possess – but also the double connotation of the woman’s image that Mulvey describes, whereby she designates both pleasure and castration anxiety. If the Odalisque serves as a thematic extension of the processes going on with both Joelle and the Entertainment, the Medusa is its complementary obverse, whose inclusion in the novel follows the reverse mirror structure that I have pointed out in the previous chapter, a structure based on Niels Bohr’s motto that we encounter in Incandenza’s film ‘Blood Sister’, “*Contraria sunt complementa*”³⁶ (713). Although the Medusa is diametrically opposed to the Odalisque insofar as her aspect is obnoxious and she petrifies the onlookers by reciprocating their look, the outcome of her active gaze is the same as the one of the Odalisque’s passive exhibition to the gaze. A complementarity that mirrors the dynamics of the two opposite causes of Joelle’s militance inside the U.H.I.D., for which she has to don a veil: either, as she tells to Don Gately, she is “deformed with beauty” (538), or, as the albeit unreliable Molly Notkin tells the A.F.R., she has been deformed by acid during the Thanksgiving of the year of the Tucks Medicated Pad. Joelle herself sustains the second hypothesis when, toward the end of the novel, she is kidnapped and interviewed by the A.F.R., acknowledging that “it was a kind of joke I’d gotten from one of his [James’s] entertainments, the Medusa-Odalisk thing”

³⁶ This motto, accompanied by a Chinese Yin-Yang symbol, appeared in the coat of arms of Niels Bohr, the 1922 Nobel recipient in physics.

(940). What she had probably borrowed from the film is indeed the complementarity of the mythological figure's effects, an awareness that she demonstrates in the first scene of the novel in which she hosts the radioshow '60 Minutes +/-', when, during an appeal to all the human categories fitting for the U.H.I.D., she proclaims: "The Actaeonizing, side by side with the Medusoid. The papuled, the macular, the albinic. Medusas and *odalisques* both: Come find common ground" (190).

The other female character that exerts a dynamics of power that involves elements of "to-be-looked-at-ness" is certainly Avril Incandenza, the obsessive-compulsive and narcissistic matriarch of the Incandenzas, nicknamed "The Moms" by her sons and arguably one of the novel's central antagonists.³⁷ Various elements suggest that Avril can be considered as a double of Joelle. The erotic rivalry between the two female characters in regard to Orin's perspective is explicitly declared, as we learn through Orin's focalization that Avril "made the Moms look like the sort of piece of fruit you think you want to take out of the bin and but [*sic*]then once you're right there over the bin you put back because from close up you can see a much fresher and less preserved- seeming piece of fruit elsewhere in the bin" (290). An image that on the one hand overtly addresses an Oedipal structure of Orin's subjectivity, whereby Avril remains the idealized model to surpass, on the other hand underscores the cinematic quality of Orin's gaze through the detail of the close up. In addition, the fact that Avril, despite her age – she is 56 in the YDAU – is still able to awaken scopophilic instincts is also underscored by the fact that Mario "gets pleasure out of just getting to look at her face, still" (766).

³⁷ In one of the handwritten drafts of the novel, Wallace left a note that reveals his purpose of conceiving Avril as a despicable character. He wrote: "Mother uncaring of anything besides her view of herself as good mother. Actually not mediating between Jim and kids, but keeping them apart. Uncaring. Jim cares, but is so locked inside himself he cannot show it, except obliquely, as over abstract art" (David Foster Wallace Papers, Box 15.4, emphasis in original).

One of the most suggestive details that links Avril to Joelle and to the scopophilic process analyzed so far is contained in the 1993 original draft of the novel. Here it is clear that Wallace had not yet found a definitive name for the Moms: although she is often called April, almost identical to the francophone Avril (more appropriate given her Quebecois origin), she is often mentioned with the suggestive name “Minovia” (Steven Moore Papers, Box 2.4). This name could contain an interesting clue to discern both the character of Avril and the thematization of scopophilia inside *Infinite Jest*. As a matter of fact, *Mi Novia* – Spanish for “My girlfriend” – was the title of a 1885 painting by a Filipino impressionist artist, Juan Luna y Novicio (1857-1899), which was presented in the Salon of Paris and portrays Luna’s wife. I am aware of the possible hazardousness of this connection, as I lack convincing tools that demonstrate Wallace’s awareness of *Mi Novia*. Nevertheless, the fact that Luna presented in the same Salon a painting titled *L’Odalisque*³⁸ encourages me in drawing this parallel. As a matter of fact, Luna’s painting is a very academic portrait of a lady where, as art critic Eric Torres points out, “the manner is calculated to seduce the spectators by ease, glamorous clichés” and “lack of any ripple of dissonance of [*sic*] tension in the composition only underlines the obvious gimmick: to play on the emotional stock response on the viewer, to set the imagination adrift in reverie through the cuteness of a naturally pretty face” (n.p.). Therefore, the connection between Avril’s provisional former name and the effect of Luna’s painting is revelatory of the thematic continuity between Avril and Joelle, especially in consideration of their mutual relationship with the scopophilic theme.

As a matter of fact, the peculiarly subtle kind of power exerted by Avril employs both the others’ gaze and her own passivity as effective tools of control. We read that “The Moms always had this way of establishing herself in the *exact center* of any room she was in, so that from any angle she was somehow in the line of all sight” (521, emphasis in original) and that

³⁸ See <http://ncca.gov.ph/about-culture-and-arts/in-focus/the-art-of-juan-luna/>

Orin defines her as “the Black Hole of Human Attention” (Ibidem). Moreover, in order to affirm her centrality Avril can easily dominate the whole spectrum of perception, both from a visual standpoint – given that she is “197 cm. tall in flats” (898) – and from an auditive one – since “Avril ’s laugh’s onset was high-pitched and alarming and distinctive” (524).

In this process a central role is played by one of her various obsessive compulsions, which involves the fear of doors and walls and “issues of enclosure” (189) in general, with the result that “HmH [the Headmaster’s house, where Avril lives with her stepbrother Charles Tavis] has no interior doors between rooms, and not even much in the way of walls, and the living and dining rooms are separated only by a vast multileveled tangle of house-plants in pots and on little stools of different heights” (189).

The lack of the fourth wall has profound cinematic implications, given that the fourth wall in the lexicon of cinema is the invisible wall that separates the actors on the screen from the spectators in the auditorium, whose acceptance is indispensable for the impression of reality. Accordingly, “breaking the fourth wall” commonly refers to the actor’s act of staring at the camera, a transgression that disturbs the spectator’s immersion in the cinematic experience. In Avril’s case, the fourth wall is constantly absent rather than broken, and thus eliminates the boundaries between subject and object. For instance, we see through Hal’s focalization that “The absence of a door to the Moms’s office means you might as well be in there, in terms of being able to hear what’s going on” (511).

The effect that Avril engenders in her sons has a mythological name, this time borrowed from Aztec mythology: the “Coatlicue complex” (516).³⁹ This complex is elusively mentioned midway through the novel as a disease that ETA psychoanalyst Dolores Rusk diagnoses in Hal and is accompanied by a peculiar endnote that reads “No clue” (en 216,

³⁹ For an article entirely devoted to this issue, see Staes, Toon. "The Coatlicue Complex in David Foster Wallace's INFINITE JEST." *The Explicator* 72.1 (2014): 67-71.

1036), thus revealing that there are limits to the narrator's omniscience. Interestingly, as a 1975 study by clinical psychologist Julia A. Sherman reveals, the Coatlicue complex is not made up by Wallace.⁴⁰ In her study Sherman investigates the source of the behavior of sex offenders, which leads her to identify a "protocol for script behavior in relationship to women from the early pre-Oedipal mother-child relationship" (Sherman 191). The causes are often ascribed to the fact that the patient "has been encouraged by the parent(s) to behave in a deviant manner" (Sherman 188), a statement that may be fitting to describe the particular influence exerted by Avril on her children through the "politeness roulette" (523), a process of domination that employs a form of extreme and only apparently passive obligingness⁴¹. Sherman also points out that this complex is characterized by a fusional mother-child relationship where "To separate is to die; not to separate is to die as an individual, or perhaps never to exist as one" (Sherman 191). This explains why the complex is named after a goddess of Aztec mythology that presents many features in common with the Medusa, like the presence, in her similarly frightening appearance, of snakes – albeit they decorate her skirt and not her head. Coatlicue is the "Aztec mother of the Gods" and symbolizes "the power of life and death that each mother holds over her infant", along with a "profound fear of women" (Sherman 191).

The Coatlicue complex is therefore important for a more nuanced understanding of the way Wallace channels Mulvey's approach into *Infinite Jest*, as well as of the theoretical underpinnings of the "scopophilic thing", the eponymous film cartridge. As a matter of fact, it is not only connected with the castration anxiety that, according to Mulvey, the cinematic

⁴⁰ See Sherman, Julia A. "The coatlicue complex: A source of irrational reactions against women." *Transactional Analysis Bulletin* 5.2 (1975): 188-192.

⁴¹ The section where the Coatlicue complex is mentioned (508-527) ends with a conversation between Hal and Avril which provides one of the most characteristic examples of the way Avril influences her children through the process that Orin and Hal term "Politeness roulette", whereby she prompts them to take objects from her by telling them that she does not need them while simultaneously implying that she does, engendering in them a complex whereby they feel guilty no matter what they do. As Orin says, she is "a kind of contortionist with other people's bodies" (285). In the aforementioned section the object that Avril pretends not to need and gives Hal is an apple, which connotes her as an Eve-like primigenial figure, an aspect that connects her with Coatlicue.

apparatus permits to tame, but also with the most intrinsic signification of the woman in the patriarchal culture, whereby “Either she must gracefully give way to the word, the Name of the Father and the Law, or else struggle to keep her child down with her in the half-light of the Imaginary” (15). The second option is the one embodied by Avril, who thus becomes a Mother-Death figure whose role is played by Joelle inside ‘Infinite Jest (V or VI)’, an additional aspect that suggests the symmetry between the two characters. As a matter of fact, amongst the various accounts of the film given in the novel, Molly Notkin’s version describes it as featuring

Madame Psychosis as some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death, sitting naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing, hugely pregnant, her hideously deformed face either veiled or blanked out by undulating computer-generated squares of color or anamorphosized into unrecognizability as any kind of face by the camera’s apparently very strange and novel lens, sitting there nude, explaining in very simple childlike language to whomever the film’s camera represents that Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal. I.e. that the woman who kills you is always your next life’s mother. (788)

Therefore, the Entertainment confirms the signification of the woman as the guilty object. This signification constitutes one of the two avenues of escape from the unconscious castration anxiety, the voyeuristic avenue. As a matter of fact, the film is preoccupied with the reenactment of the original trauma. Joelle’s account toward the end of the novel explains that the film produces in the viewer an identification with an infant: the camera, supplied with a lens invented by Incandenza that reproduces a “neonatal nystagmus” through a “slight wobble” and a “milky blur” (939). Moreover, according to the same account, Joelle’s lines in the film consisted in “various apologies: ‘I’m so sorry. I’m so terribly sorry. I am so, so sorry. Please know how very, very, very sorry I am.’ For a real long time” (939). These apologies

are in line with what Mulvey explains concerning voyeurism, where “pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control, and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (21-22). Since the Entertainment enacts the apologies for the most primordial culpabilities of which the woman is charged by the patriarchal signification – where the guilt can be both represented by the separation that gives way to the Symbolic order and by the fusion that keeps the infant “in the half light of the Imaginary” – the resulting pleasure is infinite. Accordingly, ‘Infinite Jest (V or VI)’ can be understood as the utmost expression of the ideological power of the cinematic apparatus that, in virtue of its extreme ideological nature, produces the most regressive effect conceivable.

It is therefore interesting that Incandenza, at the end of a cinematic career that, as we have seen, was devoted to the deconstruction of the “pernicious illusion of realism” releases a “scophiliac thing” that adopts all the tricks of the cinematic apparatus to generate in the viewer a lethally immersive experience. As we will see in the following chapter, this is the result of a failure that is intrinsic to the insufficient answer he had previously sought to the problems of the cinema’s ideological power.

PART 2. THE SYMBOLIC

2.1 The Symbolic Fallacy

In the previous chapters I have analyzed the presence in *Infinite Jest* of a connection with the ideological implications of the cinema proper to apparatus theory. In doing so, we have focused our attention more extensively on the ideological problems linked to the Imaginary order. As we have seen, the Imaginary order is, as Lacan conceives it, an order founded on misrecognition, which provides a sense of completeness and wholeness in both what we see and in ourselves. It accomplishes this by concealing the functioning of the two other intrapsychic categories that constitute our experience, the Symbolic and the Real. The Symbolic order is the order associated with language, with narrative and signification. It is intertwined with the Imaginary insofar as it provides the structure that supports our experience of the visible world. While according to Lacan the Imaginary and the Symbolic function in an inextricable correlation with each other, they are in tension with the Real, which resists representation and signification, marking language's impossibility to signify everything. As Lacan puts it: "I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there's no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it's through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real"⁴².

In this chapter, I will start to focus on the ideological implications inherent in the Symbolic order. These implications, as we will see, were somewhat (dis-)missed by apparatus theory, but are extensively diagnosed in *Infinite Jest*. I will start to introduce some concepts that will constitute the center toward which all the links that I am investigating between *Infinite Jest* and film theory gravitate. As a matter of fact, in this chapter my analysis of the

⁴² Jacques Lacan, *Television*, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, October, no. 40 (Spring 1987), p. 7.

connection between Wallace and film theory will not concern the approach of apparatus theory so much as its failures in channeling properly Lacan's theories both in the field of film studies and in the understanding of the structures of ideology.

In pointing out these misconceptions, which, as we will see, are particularly useful to illustrate some theoretical underpinnings behind Incandenza's filmography – as well as the nature of its evolution – I will not draw on the text that is generally regarded to have decreed the end of Lacanian-based film theory, the already mentioned *Post-Theory* by Bordwell and Carroll that was published in 1996, the same year as *Infinite Jest*. Instead, my analysis will be highly indebted to the works of those theorists who, especially during the 1990s and 2000s, have succeeded in reintroducing Lacanian notions in film theory while taking advantage of a more complete knowledge of Lacan's thought than the one of apparatus theorists. The result of these efforts was a completely different conception of both spectatorship and the way cinema manages to work as an ideological system. Such film theorists are Joan Copjec with *Read My Desire* (1994) and *Imagine There's No Woman* (2002), Todd McGowan with *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (2007), and Slavoj Žižek with his whole pioneering work, but especially with *Looking Awry* (1991), although the latter, differently from the other two, is generally more interested in using film contents as a source of examples to illustrate Lacan's theories rather than in focusing on the process of spectatorship – with the significant exception of *The Fright of Real Tears* (2001).

As previously mentioned, the Lacanian concepts adopted by apparatus theorists draw only on the 1949 essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience”, which belongs to an early stage of the development of Lacan's theory. The works of Copjec, Žižek and McGowan – whom from now on I will refer to using McGowan's self-definition of “new Lacanian film theorists” (McGowan, 2007, 171) – point out how apparatus theorists “conceived of the cinematic experience predominantly in

terms of the imaginary and the symbolic order, not in terms of the real” (7). This general misapprehension of Lacan is especially evident as far as it concerns two concepts: the first one is the idea that the ability to contest the ideological power of the Imaginary order depends on a supposedly anti-ideological quality inherent in the Symbolic order. The second one is the central idea that identifies the gaze as the subject’s (and, accordingly, the spectator’s) deluded look, a concept that, as McGowan points out, “has no significant roots in Lacan’s thought” (McGowan 2007, 4), insofar as Lacan’s most extensive theorization of the gaze appears only later in his *Seminar XI - The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973)⁴³ and presents the gaze as an element belonging to the object rather than to the subject.

The third section of this dissertation will be entirely devoted to the relevance of Lacanian gaze inside *Infinite Jest* and to the way it reveals a “way out” (I’m borrowing the novel’s last words intentionally), that manifests itself both as an avenue of escape from the self-reflexive game of the ideological apparatus and as a crack within the apparatus’s network. In this section I will focus my attention to what I call the “symbolic fallacy”, namely the idea that the cinema’s ideological apparatus involves only the realm of the Imaginary but not necessarily the Symbolic. Or, in other words, that the subject’s alienation into a delusive sense of mastery can depend only on her deluded look and not also on her conscious reflection.

As a matter of fact, apparatus theorists often advocated the spectator’s conscious reflection and critical self-awareness as the most direct antidote to the narcotic power of the cinema. This idea stems from the original premises of the psychoanalytic process itself, where the cure consists in a translation from the demi-light of the unconscious to the light of awareness.

⁴³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1978.

Therefore, according to this approach, the Symbolic would be the order that lies outside ideology. This is especially evident if we consider a passage of *The Imaginary Signifier* where Metz points out that “[r]educed to its most fundamental procedures, any psychoanalytic reflection on the cinema might be defined as an attempt to disengage the cinema-object from the imaginary and to win it for the symbolic, in the hope of extending the latter by a new province” (Metz 1982, 3). Analysis is also the remedy advocated by Mulvey to annihilate the fantasmatic dimension of cinema when she writes that “analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it” (Mulvey 16).

Accordingly, an interesting evolution of this approach is represented by the work of Jean-Louis Comolli, who also insisted on the spectator’s wakefulness as a form of resistance by advocating the ideal of the “well-lit cinema.” He argued: “What modern cinema needs is lighted theaters which, unlike the darkness, neither absorb nor annihilate the clarity which comes from the screen, but on the contrary diffuse it, which bring both the film character and the spectator out of the shadow and set them face to face on an equal footing” (Comolli 214). A position that in *Infinite Jest* seems to be shared by Joelle, who, while watching a film-cartridge, leaves “the living room’s lights up high like she liked them” because she “liked to see herself and everything else in the room with the viewer” (741).

A cinema analogous to these theories would be one that would constantly attract the spectator’s attention towards its own fictionality and that would shock her in order to facilitate a sense of self-consciousness and wakefulness while simultaneously privileging the adoption of a Brechtian alienation effect, the same effect that, as we have seen, Incandenza accomplishes while endeavoring to emulate Robert Bresson (944). It would be, in short, a self-reflexive cinema, totally analogous to the metafictional experiments of the coeval postmodern fiction. This is also what Jean-Louis Baudry points out when he indicates Dziga Vertov’s metafilm *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) as a prime example of a movie

embodying such disturbing (and therefore eye-opening) elements by means of which “[b]oth specular tranquility and the assurance of one’s own identity collapse simultaneously with the revealing of the mechanism, that is of the inscription of the film-work” (Baudry 540). And such a cinema at the time of early Lacanian film theory was indeed produced, the most straightforward example being the experimental films directed by some of the theorists themselves, for example Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s short film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977).

Other examples of this tendency were provided by the so-called “structural” or “materialist” cinema⁴⁴, whose main exponents were avant-garde filmmakers like Hollis Frampton (1936-1984) and Michael Snow (1929-) and whose precursor was Stan Brakhage (1933-2003)⁴⁵, to mention only authors that are, as we will see soon, more or less explicitly mentioned in Foster’s novel as sources of inspiration for Incandenza’s work.

Inspired by goals largely analogous to those of apparatus theory, the structural/materialist filmmakers aimed at a cinema that, as Peter Gidal’s retrospective manifesto “Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film”, published by BFI in 1976, explains, “attempts to be non-illusionist” and “results in the demystification or attempted demystification of the film process” (Gidal 1). To achieve this goal, structural/materialist cinema fractures the illusions of traditional narrative and refocuses the attention to the film’s structure and surface instead of its content. Moreover, its effort to avoid illusion goes to the point of rejecting representation itself. Therefore, the implied viewer of such films is

⁴⁴ For a complete historical overview on the Structural/Materialist cinema, see Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary film: the American avant-garde*. (1974), Oxford University Press, 2002. “Structural film” is a definition coined by Sitney in this text. It is possible that Wallace’s awareness of avant-garde cinema stems from Sitney’s book, especially if we consider a clue present in the novel, the presence of a “Dictionary of Environmental Sciences” attributed to “Sitney and Schneewind” (900).

⁴⁵ Although Stan Brakhage’s films display many features in common with structural cinema, Sitney does not regard him as a structural filmmaker, preferring to categorize his work under the term “lyrical films”. According to Sitney “[t]he major precursor of the structural film was not Brakhage. [...] He was Andy Warhol” (Sitney 349). Nevertheless, Sitney does not completely deny a significant influence of Brakhage’s lyrical films on the most characteristic features of structural cinema.

constantly prompted to be aware of the film “as a film” rather than as a representation, thus confronting herself with a cinema where “the constitutive elements of a film present themselves as what they are (a shot is a shot is a shot, not a fragment of the world; a color is a color, not an object’s quality).”⁴⁶ As Gidal explains, “The Structural/Materialist film must minimise the content in its overpowering, imagistically seductive sense, in an attempt to get through this miasmatic area of 'experience' and proceed with film as film” (Gidal 2).

This is exactly what occurs in what is referred to as “the most hated Incandenza film” (397), namely ‘The Joke’, a film where, as endnote 24 explains,

two Ikegami EC-35 video cameras in theater record the ‘film’s audience and project the resultant raster onto screen — the theater audience watching itself watch itself get the obvious 'joke' and become increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile supposedly comprises the film's involuted ‘antinarrative’ flow. (en 24, 988-989)

It is not a case that the same endnote describes this non-film as a “[p]arody of Hollis Frampton’s ‘audience-specific events’” (en 24, 988). The reference is probably to Frampton's performance art-piece *A Lecture*, which took place at Hunter College in 1968 and involved the projection of a beam of light onto a white screen, along with the registered voice of Michael Snow delivering a “lecture” written by Frampton that asked the audience to contemplate the absence of the image as still an image. Frampton’s goal was the same as Incandenza’s with ‘The Joke’'s real-time projection of the audience itself: making the audience “increasingly self-conscious”, aware of itself as audience, of the film as film and of the image as image, in the effort of accomplishing a supposed reversal of misrecognition.

⁴⁶ Casetti, Francesco. *Theories of cinema, 1945-1995*. University of Texas Press, 1999, p. 215.

The main part of James O. Incandenza's filmography, especially the one resulting from his "involvement with the hostilely anti-Real genre of 'Found Drama'" (398) as well as with the "anti-confluent cinema" (185) of the "middle period" (396) of his career, clearly constitutes an overemphasized parody of this progressive cinema's tendencies. This is also explained in a passage by Orin who, when interviewed by Helen/Hugh Steeply, maintains that his father was part of "the anti-New Wave abstracters like Frampton, wacko Nucks like Godbout, anticonfluent directors like Dick and the Snows" (en 145, 1027), where, apart from Hollis Frampton and Michael Snow, who is paid homage through a sort of duplication into the "Snow brothers"⁴⁷ (996, 1027), the other names are fictional.

Both Found Drama and anticonfluentism emerged in a "brutal winter night" that James, depressed over the fact that critics generally contended that his "fatal Achilles' heel was plot, that Incandenza's efforts had no sort of engaging plot, no movement that sucked you in and drew you along" (375), spent talking the weight-room guru (and sweat-leaker) Lyle. The result of that discussion was paradoxically the invention of these two even more proudly conceptual and plot-defying cinematic movements. Found drama, defined by Orin in the interview with Steeply as "this supposedly ultimate Neorealism thing" (en 145, 1027), includes three films that are so conceptual to figure in James's filmography as "conceptual, conceptually unfilmable. UNRELEASED" (en 24, 989) and that eventually took shape only as a series of "turgid theoretical deadly-serious lectures on this Found Drama" (en 145, 1027). As a matter of fact, James "made" found dramas by selecting randomly a name from the phonebook. Whatever happens to that person in the next hour and a half constitutes the found drama, although it was neither filmed, nor known by anybody. Therefore "Found Drama" is not only a result of Wallace's self-proclaimed "grossly sentimental affection for gags" (McCaffery 24), but the very end point of the logic of structural/materialist cinema, whereby,

⁴⁷ Although none of the brothers is named Michael: they are mentioned in an endnote attached to endnote 24 as "E. and K. Snow" (en24, 985).

at its most radical, the rejection of the cinema's illusory power leads to the nonexistence of the film itself, insofar as "[t]he joke's theory was there's no audience and no director and no stage or set because, The Mad Stork and his cronies argued, in Reality there are none of these things" (1028).

The other cinematic movement invented by Incandenza, anticonfluentism, contains further significant clues to understand the relationship between Incandenza and structural cinema. In addition, on the formal level it displays many features in common with the novel itself. Endnote 61 describes it as follows:

An apres-garde digital movement, a.k.a. 'Digital Parallelism' and 'Cinema of Chaotic Stasis,' characterized by a stubborn and possibly intentionally irritating refusal of different narrative lines to merge into any kind of meaningful confluence, the school derived somewhat from both the narrative bradykineticism of Antonioni and the disassociative formalism of Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton, comprising periods in the careers of the late Beth B., the Snow brothers, Vigdis Simpson, and the late J. O. Incandenza (middle period). (en 61, 996)

The refusal of a convergence of the different narrative lines is certainly a feature displayed in the novel *Infinite Jest* itself, where the two protagonists Hal and Gately, leaving aside the mysterious grave-digging scene, never meet. Therefore, anticonfluentism is one of the many hints at the presence of a mise-en-abyme between Incandenza's works and the whole novel, whose most obvious hint is certainly the homonymy between *Infinite Jest* and Incandenza's last cartridge. In other words, the features that endnote 61 attributes to anticonfluentism work well to describe *Infinite Jest* itself, thus suggesting that the whole novel can be conceived as a film by Incandenza. Another feature that confirms this hypothesis is the "bradykineticism", ironically attributed to a more narrative director like Antonioni, who is mentioned as one of the directors Joelle is passionate about (185) and hinted at in a passage

where Hal pronounces a phrase famously uttered by Monica Vitti in *Red Desert* (1964): “...my hair hurts” (40).

Regarding slow temporality, in structural the “durational equivalence” served the purpose of an anti-illusionist assertion of the materiality of the cinema, not differently from the other equivalences that we have seen thus far (the film as film, the image as image). As structural filmmaker and theorist Malcolm LeGrice puts it: “In a form of cinema based on confrontation with the material aspects of the medium this unbroken, durational equivalence provides the only counteract to illusion in the representation of time” (LeGrice 94). And it is undeniable that a slow narrative temporality characterizes the majority of *Infinite Jest*'s sections, the most straightforward examples being the moving of the mattress in the section set in 1963 (491-503) and the twenty-pages long section revolving around Hal and other ETA students (Pemulis, Axford and Ann Kittenplan) in the headmaster's waiting room, preparing for an official scolding (508-527), although this tendency will become more radical (and thematically relevant) in Wallace's post-*Infinite Jest* production, especially in *The Pale King*.

What is at stake with slowness and durational equivalence is not only a contact with the materiality of the film, but also the subject's sense of unity. As apparatus theorist Stephen Heath, in analyzing structural/materialist cinema, puts it, the effect intentionally produced by those films is “the boredom which is the loss of the imaginary unity of the subject-ego and the very grain of drive against that coherent fiction, the boredom which Barthes sees close to jouissance” (Heath 1981, 167).⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Heath's reference is to Roland Barthes's claim that “Boredom is not far from bliss: it is bliss seen from the shores of pleasure”, qt. in Barthes, Roland. “The Pleasure of the text, translated by Richard Miller.” New York: Hill and Wang (1975), p. 26. There is a striking similarity between Barthes's claim and the note discovered after Wallace's death and collected in the appendix to *The Pale King* that reads: ““Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (Tax Returns, Televised Golf) and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Instant bliss in every atom” (Pale King 546).

Once outlined the theoretical coordinates and the cinematic models of the main part of Incandenza's filmography, it is worth noticing that the latest part of Incandenza's career is characterized by an equally overemphasized turn to every element the structural/materialist cinema (and apparatus theory alike) relentlessly opposed. As Hal explains, while lying on his back toward the end of the novel in an advanced phase of his marijuana withdrawal, "in his [Himself's] last several projects he'd been so desperate to make something that ordinary U.S. audiences might find entertaining and diverting and conducive to self-forgetting" (944). The key-word of this shift is the term "self-forgetting", which, as endnote 378, explains, is "opposed to self-confronting, presumably" (en 378, 1078). As a matter of fact, the shift concerns a different answer to the issue of how to overcome the imaginary coherence (and mastery) of the subject: from self-consciousness (constant "self-confrontation") to "self-forgetting." It is a movement that, albeit somewhat cryptically, was already present in JOI's filmography before becoming more explicit at the end of his career. As a matter of fact, Joelle starts noticing it while re-watching a film that predates *Found Dramas* and anticonfluentism, 'Pre-Nuptial Agreement of Heaven and Hell', where she starts detecting "an unironic, almost moral thesis to the campy abstract mordant cartridge: the film's climactic statue's stasis presented the theoretical subject as the emotional effect—self-forgetting as the Grail" (742).

The change of what stands for the "grail" in Incandenza's cinematic quest (from self-consciousness to self-forgetting) is animated by a shift of awareness that is quite similar to the one that separates early Lacanian film theorists from the "new" ones.⁴⁹ As a matter of fact, for

⁴⁹ While in the previous section I have provided some evidences of Wallace's awareness of early Lacanian film theory, it is more arduous to demonstrate that, in the process of writing *Infinite Jest* (between 1991 and 1994), Wallace knew the works of new Lacanian film theorists, of which at the time only some works by Žižek such as *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) and *Looking Awry* (1991) had already come out. Nevertheless, it is easier to demonstrate Žižek's influence on Wallace in the post-*Infinite Jest* period. An example is the Slovenian philosopher's much quoted explanation of ideology through the difference between French, German and Anglo-Saxon toilets in *The Plague of Fantasies* (Verso (London/New York: 1997) pp. 4-5), which is simply identical to a dialogue present in Wallace's short story "The Suffering Channel" (Oblivion, pp. 264-265).

new Lacanian film theorists self-consciousness and critical distance turn out to be imbibed by ideology to the same extent as the fantasmaticization of subjectivity that arises from the cinematic experience. Rather than forestalling an illusory sense of mastery, the alienation effect of progressive cinema produces another one, leaving the spectators secure (and alienated) in their own self-consciousness. As Todd McGowan puts it:

What this position misses is an understanding of the relationship between consciousness and ideology. One does not resist ideology through the act of becoming conscious; instead, consciousness is itself a mode of inserting oneself into ideology and avoiding one's unconscious desire. Ideology operates not only in unconscious ways, but also through the illusions of consciousness itself—namely, the assumption of mastery implicit in consciousness. (McGowan 2007, 13)

There are indeed many hints in the novel that for Wallace the Symbolic order is an integral part, and not an external antithesis, of the ideological apparatus. A major example is the character of Avril Incandenza, who, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is a domineering, fusional mother who keeps her children with her in what Mulvey calls “the half light of the Imaginary” (Mulvey 1989, 15), but is also a luminary in “prescriptive grammar.” Hence, she metaphorically embodies elements of both the Imaginary and the Symbolic order, and maybe that is a possible explanation of her plural nickname “the Moms”: it not only indicates that she takes over the paternal role, but that she embodies both these intrapsychic orders. Which, following Lacan's use of the maternal and paternal imagoes, is the same thing.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ I'm referring to Lacan's concept of the “Name-of-the-Father”, which is used in his poststructuralist rereading of Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. In French, it is a paronomasia between “le nom du père” (the name of the father) and “le non du père” (the no of the father). It is linked with the concept of the symbolic order, which coincides both with the state of culture and with the law. According to Lacan, the Symbolic father, who is not a real father, but an imago, performs the function of creating a distance between the child and the mother, preventing the child from fulfilling his (or her) desire to perpetuate a fusional relationship with her, which keeps him or her in the Imaginary order. The Name-of-the-Father is thus the great signifier that allows the subject to

Also, the fact that *Infinite Jest*'s ideological apparatus encompasses both the Imaginary and the Symbolic order can be read from two different perspectives. The first one concerns the idea that the neo-capitalistic ideological apparatus of the novel's near-future has embedded also the tools of its own deconstruction. An idea that Wallace extensively demonstrated in "E Unibus Pluram" in regard to the state of the art between the late eighties and the early nineties, pointing out how televisual culture had evolved to the point of "absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very cynical post-modern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass marketed narrative" (Supposedly, 52). The second perspective, which is less rooted in Wallace's oeuvre but follows Lacan, is that the tools of deconstruction have always been embedded in the ideological apparatus, for the simple reason that these tools, as McGowan points out, represent "a political alternative that leaves spectators secure within their conscious reflection" and therefore "alienates them into increased self-consciousness and critical distance" (McGowan 2007, 14-15).

Accordingly, it is interesting to notice how *Infinite Jest* does not only portray a local culture where, as it has been extensively pointed out in the majority of the studies on the novel, postmodern irony has been so institutionalized to pervade the whole spectrum of human relationships, but also one where a similar process has taken place in regard to both apparatus theory and structural/materialist cinema. This would explain why James O. Incandenza in the novel's academic culture is labeled as an "après-garde Auteur" (788), as opposed to an innovator: instead of being countercultural, the self-consciousness sought by his films has been long absorbed by the novel's local culture without thus interfering with the

achieve an identity and a position within the Symbolic order, and manages to do so through a legislative and prohibitory function. As Lacan writes: "It is in the name of the Father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law" (Lacan, Jaques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977, p. 67). For a strictly Lacanian reading of *Infinite Jest*, see Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, *Understanding Contemporary American Literature*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003, pp. 128-56.

equally spread proneness to escapism and addictions of any sort. As a matter of fact, a point that is repeatedly emphasized in the novel is that thought itself can produce addiction. As it is stated in a section where the narrator lists all the “exotic new facts” (200) that is possible to get to know only if one spends a little time in the substance recovery facility Ennet House, “most Substance-addicted people are also addicted to thinking, meaning they have a compulsive and unhealthy relationship with their own thinking” (203). An addiction that in the novel’s fictional Boston jargon is called “*Analysis-Paralysis*” (203, 1002, emphasis in original), and through which Wallace debunks the myth of the opposition between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, which in the novel’s local culture takes the (further) shape of the “queerly persistent U.S. myth that cynicism and naïveté are mutually exclusive” (694).

Accordingly, there is no mutual exclusion between delusion and awareness inside an apparatus that shapes regressive and solipsistic subjectivities. Nevertheless, in the following chapter we will see that the novel does points out to an exit to this self-reflexive game, which will become more clear as we will start to introduce the concept of the “gaze” as it was truly conceived by Jacques Lacan.

2.2 Beyond the Symbolic

M. Pemulis is, in the best Allston MA tradition, a good friend and a bad-news enemy, and even E.T.A.s who don't like him are careful not to do or even say anything that might call for score-settling, because Pemulis is a thoroughgoing chilled-revenge gourmet, and is not one bit above dosing someone's water-jug or voltaging their door-knob or encoding something horrid in your E.T.A. med-files or dickying with the mirror over the bureau in the little recessed part of your subdorm room so that when you look in the mirror in the A.M. to comb or tend to a blackhead or something you see something staring back at you that you'll never entirely get over, which is what took over two years to finally happen to M. H. Penn, who afterward wouldn't say what he'd seen but stopped shaving altogether and, it's agreed, has never been quite himself since.

(Infinite Jest, en 129, 1025)

The endnote that the above epigraph quotes at length is attached to a passage (333) which is in turn buried amongst the intricate set of details that accompany the narration of the Eschaton game. Eschaton is a convoluted nuclear war-simulation based on an interplay between tennis and calculus that some ETA students embark on about one-third through the novel. Immediately after endnote 129 there is a key moment that, according to Stephen Burn, introduces "a crisis point" that will instigate "a number of chains of cause and effect that lead into the novel's climactic last days" (Burn 2003, 23). This moment revolves around a quarrel about the game triggered by the intrusion of the "real" element of the snow. Nevertheless,

there is an equally relevant detail contained – or better, given the surrounding bombardment of elaborate information, “hidden”—in the apparently trivial content of an endnote devoted to the explanation of Pemulis’s penchant for pranks. The last-mentioned of the pranks listed in the endnote, the “dickying with the mirror over the bureau” produces in M.H. Penn, Pemulis’s “sworn foe” (333), a traumatic effect whose consequences are disproportionate for a joke belonging to the same classic fraternity or military repertoire of the above listed ones (“dosing someone’s water-jug or voltaging their door-knob”). In addition, the “something” that triggers such a reaction remains unknown to the reader as well as to the other characters, given that we read that Penn himself has been unable ever since to put it into words: he “afterward wouldn’t say what he’d seen.” A further hiddenness – which adds up to the fact that the bureau is already concealed “in the little recessed part of your subdorm room” (as well as in the endnotes, the “recessed part” of the novel) – that supposedly triggers, as long as it frustrates it, the reader’s desire to know that “something” which is not only hidden in the mirror, but also left unrevealed in the text. What we know is what this “something” does: “staring back at you.” The “thing” seems able to exceed the mirror’s passive act of pure reflection, which insinuates an uncanny feeling of loss of control.

A key to understand Penn’s trauma as well as the fact that he “has never quite been himself since” is that he experienced an encounter with the “gaze” as it has been conceived by Jacques Lacan during the mature phase of the development of his thought. As a matter of fact, the conception of the gaze as the subject’s deluded and seemingly omnipotent eye that we have encountered so far in the formulations of early Lacanian film theorists has, as Todd McGowan points out, “no significant roots in Lacan’s thought (beyond the mirror-stage essay)” (McGowan, 2007, 4), although as we have seen, it constitutes the key-concept of that theoretical approach. On the contrary, Lacan never uses the term “gaze” (*régard*) in the mirror-stage essay, while he will mention it extensively within *Seminar XI: The Four*

*Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*⁵¹, a sequence of four lessons delivered in 1964 and published in Paris in 1973. Of these lectures, the sessions collectively entitled “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*” are especially important in order to understand how Lacan conceives of a neat difference between the eye and the gaze. The former (the eye) belongs to the subject and corresponds to the self-reflexive sense of mastery that we have over what we see as long as we are in control of where and how to look. Lacan describes it as “that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness” (Lacan 1978, 74), a consciousness which, in this process, “may turn back upon itself” (Ibidem) – a choice of words that is echoed in *Infinite Jest* by Marathe’s refusal of everything that “bends back in on the self” (107). On the contrary, the “gaze” is exactly the function in the field of the object that the process described above avoids and conceals.

As a matter of fact, simultaneously influenced by French phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and by Lithuanian art historian Jurgis Baltrušaitis, author of a 1955 book on anamorphoses and optical deformations⁵², Lacan came to conceive the gaze as something that does not belong to the subject, but to the object. As Todd McGowan explains, the Lacanian gaze is “something that the subject (or spectator) encounters in the object (or the film itself)” (McGowan, 2007, 5). Inside the visual or scopic field, the gaze is the visual version of what Lacan terms, using an untranslatable neologism, “*objet petit a*.” Situated outside the field of visibility, “the *objet petit a*” is that something that the subject separates from before entering the fields of language and representation, and it does not exist before its being lost. Or, to put it better, the “*objet petit a*” depends on its being lost, which amounts to say that its existence is predicated on an absence not in the sense of emptiness but in the sense of loss.

⁵¹ Lacan, Jacques. *The four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis*. Vol. 11. WW Norton & Company, 1998.

⁵² Baltrušaitis, Jurgis. *Anamorphic art*. Translated by WJ Strachan. Cambridge, England: Chadwyck-Healey, 1977.

Its name indicates that it is a “little other” (*petit autre*), as opposed to the “big Other” that stands for signification, the collective symbolic order. Being the “objet petit a” of a scopical drive, the gaze is not a positive entity that the subject sees as much as a gap in the subject’s look, something that is irreducible to the visual field and marks the spectator’s loss of mastery over what he or she looks at. It is something that disrupts the viewer (or the spectator)’s possibility to remain the “all-perceiving” and “absent-as-perceived” entity that Metz describes. As Joan Copjec explains: “This point at which something appears to be invisible, this point at which something appears to be missing from representation, some meaning left unrevealed, is the point of the Lacanian gaze” (Copjec, 1994, 34). Therefore, the gaze is not only different from the omnipotent look: it is its exact obverse. As McGowan puts it, the gaze is “the gap within the subject’s seemingly omnipotent look” (McGowan 2007, 6).

Lacan in *Seminar XI* provides a much-quoted example of the gaze by discussing Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) (Lacan 1978, 85-90). The painting depicts two wealthy-looking ambassadors surrounded by the objects they have accumulated during their travels. In the foreground of the painting, in a position that seems to defy the laws of gravity, there stands an oblong and deformed figure. Looking directly at the figure, one does not see anything discernible, only an unintelligible blot, but looking on the figure downward from the left one sees distinctly that it is a skull staring back at the viewer. Not only does the skull represent a memento mori that underscores the fugacity of the riches displayed in the painting: it also indicates the site of the gaze. This occurs because the viewer experiences a point that resists the mastery of vision: instead of exerting control over that point, the subject is accounted for and therefore controlled from within the object. You cannot look at the object directly, but must move your body and turn your head in order to see it. At the same time, you cannot integrate it into the rest of the visual field. This is an experience of how the spectator’s perspective distorts the field of the visible: once the viewer turns his head

and makes sense of what from his default perspective was unintelligible, all the other represented objects become distorted and undecipherable. As McGowan explains: “The skull says to the spectator, ‘You think that you are looking at the painting from a safe distance, but the painting sees you—takes into account your presence as a spectator’—[...] The gaze is the point at which the subject loses its subjective privilege and becomes wholly embodied in the object” (McGowan, 2007, 7). As such, the gaze is an indicator of the Real because it shows the objective absence of a “safe distance” from which to look at the object: the subject is inscribed in the object in the form of a blank stain. Thus, this uncanny experience functions as a form of castration which, as Lacan puts it, “makes visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated” (Lacan 1978, 88).

With these concepts in mind, new Lacanian film theorists decided to rebuild the theory of film spectatorship taking into account the Lacanian order that was absent inside apparatus theory, the Real. Conceived as Lacan actually theorized it, in the field of cinema the gaze becomes “not the spectator’s external view of the filmic image, but the mode in which the spectator is accounted for in the film itself” (McGowan, 2007, 7-8). Hence, by analyzing the gaze in these terms, new Lacanian film theorists do not have to worry about not taking into account the diversity of flesh and blood spectators, because they are dealing with an element that concerns the content of the film: their focus becomes the way the film-object “looks back” at the spectator and inscribes him or her in its field rather than the inverse. More importantly, if they do not focus on the variety of spectators, they nonetheless pay attention to the diversity of films. Therefore, they stop projecting an exclusively sinister connotation onto the cinematic experience: cinema comes to be understood as a machine that embodies both the power to insert individuals into ideology and the possibility to disrupt ideology itself. This function entirely depends on the specific way a given film unfolds in order to conceal, domesticate or overtly deploy the traumatic experience of the “gaze.”

What is at stake here is also, as with apparatus theory, a political reflection. For Lacanian film theorists, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the stability of the social order safeguarded by ideology depends not only on the illusion of wholeness and coherence (pertaining to the Imaginary), but also on the supposed possibility to account symbolically for everything (the big Other). The encounter with the point where the explanatory power of this symbolic authority fails demonstrates the fragility of the big Other. An interesting point supported by new Lacanian film theory is that the recognition of this point forms the basis for the true foundation of the subject rather than its annihilation, for the reason that it “transforms the ideological subject into a politicized and free subject” (McGowan 2007, 17). The subject is founded by the act of recognizing the point where a void hidden by ideology manifests itself because, as Žižek explains, “this original void, this lack of symbolic structure, is the subject” (1989, 175).

Now let us go back to *Infinite Jest* and to endnote 129. Although it is impossible to understand how Pemulis had been able to prompt his sworn enemy Miles Penn to encounter the gaze – a lack of explanation that constitutes one of the various voids left unfilled by *Infinite Jest*’s seemingly omniscient narrator – it is clear that the endnote illustrates that exact experience. If the reason of Penn’s trauma is that the hidden and undescribed “something” was “staring back” (1025) at him, which is exactly what Lacan’s gaze does, the “something” is left undescribed (and Penn will never be able to describe it) because it is impossible to describe it, to account symbolically for it: it is a blank stain in the visual field, irreducible to signification as well as to representation. Therefore, after this traumatic experience Penn “has never quite been himself since” (1025) because he experienced a traumatic encounter with the Real that undermines his sense of mastery. Although we learn that he has tried to avoid that experience ever since (“stopped shaving altogether”), the loss of stability produced by that moment results in a marginalization inside the social order of ETA: during YDAU his

position in the field of tennis is particularly low, given that he is “flailing away on the grim Third-World Satellite pro tour, playing for travel-expenses in bleak dysenteric locales” (333).

The relevance of the gaze in interpreting *Infinite Jest* and the way the novel conceives of a “way out” of the self-reflexive game of the neo-capitalistic ideological apparatus it portrays can be demonstrated through the presence of several other significant clues. The most basic clue is the title itself, which quotes the moment of Hamlet’s recognition of Yorick’s skull, a memento mori that is certainly analogous to the one contained in Hans Holbein’s painting. Another evidence is the recurrent reference to optical deformation. As a matter of fact, not only is James an expert of optics, but the lexicon relating to optical deformation effects is spread throughout the whole novel. Two examples are the recurrent mention of the phenomenon of “halation” (Hal’s nickname, also referred to “that most angelic of distortions” (97)) and a description of Mario’s intellectual abilities where the narrator claims that Mario is not “retarded or cognitively damaged” but “more like *refracted*, [...] a pole poked into mental water and just a little off and just taking a little bit longer, in the manner of all *refracted* things” (314, emphases mine).⁵³ Furthermore, the phenomenon of anamorphosis is mentioned twice in the novel, both times used by Molly Notkin in her interview with the Wheelchair Assassins to describe the content of the Entertainment, which in her (pretty unreliable) account results as deploying “anamorphic fragmentation” (791) as one of its aesthetic features. In addition, the same account claims that Joelle’s face in the film is “either veiled or blanked out by undulating computer-generated squares of color or *anamorphosized* into unrecognizability as any kind of face by the camera's apparently very strange and novel lens” (788, emphasis mine).

Nevertheless, the most important role played by the word “anamorphosis” occurs in a

⁵³ A comparison between anamorphosis and refraction takes us back to the interplay between reflection and refraction that we have analyzed in relation to the reference to Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, a painting that Lacan elaborated on in *Seminar XIII* (1965-1966).

passage where it is just about to be pronounced, but eventually goes unpronounced. On the one hand this absence/presence follows the logic of the gaze, which, as we have seen, is what is lacking in the image, the intrusion of the unseen in the scopic field. On the other hand, the episode of the omitted word that I am about to illustrate constructs an experience of a contact with the Real that seems to involve simultaneously both the visual field and the realm of language, and thus entails a simultaneous experience of both the object-gaze and the object-voice. As a matter of fact, as Jacques-Alain Miller stressed in his article “Jacques Lacan and the Voice” (1989) the object-voice is, by way of analogy with the object-gaze, that which is subtracted from the field of the audible and the ear cannot grasp. As Miller explains:

If the voice as object does not in the least belong to the sonorous register, it remains that potential considerations on the voice – in connection with sound as distinct from sense, for example, or on all the modalities of intonation – can only be inscribed in a Lacanian perspective if they are indexed on the function of the voice as *a-phonic* [*a-phone*], if I may say so. (Miller 1989, 139, emphasis in original).

This concept will be fundamental to understand the role of aphasia inside the novel, but let us proceed with order. The episode of the omitted word occurs towards the end of the novel when Hal is experiencing a very advanced stage of marijuana withdrawal. The symptoms of this process are an increased inability to communicate that will (probably) culminate in the aphasia in front of the admission committee of the University of Arizona narrated in the novel’s first section, set in the year of Glad (the last event of the novel in terms of *fabula*). In the second to last section where Hal appears (in terms of *sjuzhet*) he is leaning on the floor, almost completely unable to move, with a glass labeled “NASA” – which he always carries with himself to spit into it – on his chest. This section of the novel, like other sections toward the ending, are narrated by Hal, who as a narrator demonstrates a surprising awareness of several details about his parents and relatives that contradict what the reader has learned

before from the omniscient narration of the sections focalized on him – above all, that Hal has an “odd blankness about his family” (517). What occurs is therefore a kind of Moebius-strip-like reversal⁵⁴ between inside and outside, whereby the “odd blankness”, the void of Hal’s interiority becomes external, invading every relationship with the exterior and transforming it into an exteriorized version of his interior blankness. A process that does not involve only his voice (which Lacan calls the “invocatory field”), insofar as at the beginning of the novel he says to be “staring with all the blankness I can summon” (13). Simultaneously, deep within himself, the blankness about his family gets substituted with an unsuspected awareness in a process that coincides with his promotion to narrator of his story. The very center of this process is the gradual annihilation of Hal’s almost omnipotent ability with language and signification that, before those moments, the novel has repeatedly stressed (he has “for a long time identified himself as a lexical prodigy” (155), “reads like a vacuum” (15) and has memorized the whole Oxford English Dictionary in its integral version, etc.) The point of no return of this process coincides with his inability to find a word to define a concept in the moment where he is lying on the floor with the NASA glass on his chest. While staring at the NASA glass from this particular perspective, Hal is suddenly struck by the way the object is altered by his change of position. He tries to recall the concise word that denotes that phenomenon, which surprisingly requires a lot of effort. He says:

My trusty NASA glass still rested on my chest, rising when my rib cage rose. When I looked down my own length, the glass’s round mouth was a narrow slot. This was because of my optical perspective. There was a concise term for *optical perspective* that I again could not quite make resolve. (953, emphasis on the original)

The narration proceeds with Hal reconsidering many aspects of his family and his story in

⁵⁴ One of James O. Incandenza’s films is “hetero-hardcore *Möbius Strips*” (954). In addition, a passage describes the wind that “keeps blowing the banners sideways, *möbiusizing* them” (622, emphasis mine).

general demonstrating an unsuspected knowledge of the many secrets scattered throughout the novel, such as his mother's affairs with John Wayne and with her half-brother Charles Tavis (which he imagines as being "a kind of doomed timeless Faulknerian feel to it" (957)) or more explicit hints to the fact that Mario was born from that semi-incestuous relationship. As Hal's reflection on his family proceeds, it is often disrupted by the attempts to recall the "concise term" for "optical perspective", with guesses like the following: "*specular* is what refers to optical perspective; it came to me after I stopped trying to recall it" (953, emphasis in original) or "the word that best connoted why the glass mouth looked slotty was probably *foreshortened*" (954, emphasis in original).⁵⁵ Although these attempts to find the concise name may pass unobserved, insofar as they appear in a section dense of apparently much more important discoveries on the part of the reader about Hal's awareness of the secrets surrounding his family, the unsuccessfulness of these attempts – since the word Hal is fishing for is clearly not "specular", nor "foreshortened" – constitutes an unprecedented exception to Hal's ability to use language: for the first time Hal does not manage to find a word to define something.

The missed word in my opinion may be exactly "anamorphosis", as it is hinted at by the annotation of the "glass's round mouth", which from this perspective becomes a "narrow slot" (953), a description that would be fitting to describe Holbein's skull, which, let alone its being narrow, cannot be integrated into the visual field of the painting, manifesting itself as a slot in the surface of the visible. Although another candidate for the missed word can certainly be "parallax", a very close concept whose most common definition is, as Žižek puts it, "the apparent displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a

⁵⁵The adjective "foreshortened" in the novel is also used to describe Charles Tavis's appearance: he looks "as usual oddly foreshortened and small" (519) because "his smallness resembles the smallness of something that's further away from you, plus it's receding" (519). His being "always foreshortened" (en 218, 1036) inspires James's "development of those weird wide-angle rear-view mirrors on the sides of automobiles that so diminish the cars behind you that federal statute requires them to have printed right on the glass that Objects In Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear" (en 218, 1036).

change in observational position that provides a new line of sight” (Žižek 2009, 17).⁵⁶

Therefore, what is at stake with this passage is a double experience of the Real, which simultaneously involves the gaze and the voice. Hal’s confrontation with the deformity of his own eye and with the way a change of his position can morph and alter the object was anticipated by another moment of significant importance for the thematic economy of the novel. Halfway through *Infinite Jest* Hal, while waiting for the official scolding concerning the Eschaton debacle outside the Headmaster’s office, stares at a blue wallpaper that communicates to him an increasingly uncanny feeling. This unsettling feeling is provoked by the fact that “the wallpaper scheme is composed by “fluffy cumuli arrayed patternlessly against an overenhancedly blue sky” (509), a feature that contributes to making the wallpaper “incredibly disorienting” (509). This sense of disorientation drives Hal to the point of loathing the sky-and-cloud wallpaper – an object whose importance could be easily overlooked if it was not signaled by the fact that the sky-and-cloud wallpaper serves as the book cover of the novel’s first and second editions. We read that “Hal loathes sky-and-cloud wallpaper because it makes him feel high-altitude and disoriented and sometimes plummeting” (509). Anyway, the unpleasantness of the object is more easily linked to Hal’s inability to make “fluffy cumuli” fit a pattern than to the depiction of the sky: it is not coincidental that the narration, focalized on Hal, introduces the description with the words “the wallpaper’s scheme.” The clouds are formless spots that defy a scheme (they are “arrayed patternlessly”) and therefore disturb Hal’s sense of mastery, which requires a pattern. He cannot simply look straight at them to find the pattern, but must deform them by changing his view. Again, shapelessness functions as the way the gaze is inscribed in the object which, as Žižek explains, “assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it ‘at an angle,’ i.e., with an ‘interested’ view” (Žižek 1992, 12, emphasis in original). Accordingly, the wallpaper scene introduces a contact

⁵⁶ A passage focalized on Joelle that illustrates James’s ability at hailing Boston cabs describes an “oncoming taxi undergoing a sort of parallax” (225).

with a break in the possibilities of representation, instilling a process of gradual contact with the deformity of his own look of which the optical perspective of the NASA glass is a culmination.

A similar process, although with significant variations, concerns the realm of language and signification. As a matter of fact, Hal's aphasia in the first section can be read as an imposition of the silence of the Real beyond ideology's possibility to symbolize and "say" everything. If his loss of linguistic omnipotence epitomized by the inability to find the concise term for "optical perspective" is the turning point of this process, it is possible to find an anticipation of that moment also in this case. In the section (not much earlier in the novel) where Hal drives to what he thinks is a Narcotic-Anonymous meeting, but will turn out to be a surreal gathering focused on the nurturing of the "Inner Infant" (795-808), Hal is trying to kill the time of the "dull drive" (796) by trying to reconstruct "the probable etymological career of the word *Anonymous*" (Ibidem, emphasis in original). We read that:

...all the way he supposed from the Æolic *δνμγα* through Thynne's B.S. 1580s reference to 'anonymall Chronicals'; and whether it was joined way back somewhere at the Saxon taproot to the Olde English on-ane, which supposedly meant All as One or As One Body and became Cynewulf's eventual standard inversion to the classic anon, maybe. (796-797)

There are two aspects in this passage that are particularly meaningful in relation to the process I want to emphasize. On the one hand, this etymological excursus links the word "name" with the concept of the illusion of integrity founded on misrecognition (the "Olde English" word "on-ane" means "All as One or As One Body"). It also links the word with self-reflexivity, given that "on-ane" is blatantly a homophone with ONAN, the name of the political configuration of the novel, which encompasses USA, Mexico and Canada, and, needless to say, is a reference to the onanistic essence of the solipsistic neo-capitalist ideology

satirized in the novel. These connections, although overtly fictional and parodic, are crucial in pointing out a radical correlation between language, misrecognition and self-reflexivity, which again leads us to the Althusserian idea that it is through the name that a subject is ideologically constituted “As One Body.”

The other element of this passage that is worth noticing concerns the Greek word mentioned by Hal, which is completely misspelled: he refers to the nonexistent (and unpronounceable) ὄνμγα (onmga) instead of the Aeolic ὄνομα (onyma). On the one hand this misspelling is certainly a demonstration of the way Wallace plays parodically with his ostentation of erudition, blurring the boundaries between elements that are based on an impressively thorough research and others that are utterly made up, on the other hand it can be read as a clue of Hal’s incipient loss of linguistic mastery: he fails to pronounce the name of a word whose meaning is, indeed, “name.” And it is exactly this process of progressively receding mastery over words that leaves room for a contact with the Real.

A comparison between the beginning and the ending of the novel makes it particularly clear how the above-mentioned process of imposition of what McGowan in his book on David Lynch calls “the traumatic silence of the Real” (2007, 218) constitutes the very center not only of Hal’s experience, but also of the novel. As a matter of fact, if there is a specularity between Hal’s aphasia before the admission committee and Gately’s awakening in a cold beach in Gloucester (the novel’s very ending, following Gately’s loss of consciousness the night before during the episode of Fackelman’s horrific punishment), this specularity concerns exactly the issue of aphasia.

Keeping this in mind, it is important to pay attention to a detail that, in a supposed second reading of the book, reveals a subtle implication of the novel’s final sentence (“And when he came back to, he was flat on his back on the beach in the freezing sand, and it was raining out of a low sky, and the tide was way out” (981)). As a matter of fact, in the whole

bulk of the novel there is only one other passage where this precise “hitting the bottom” moment experienced by the then-twenty-four-year-old Gately is mentioned. While Gately lies immobilized and mute in a bed of St. Elizabeth Hospital and is heroically fighting to refuse Demerol (the drug he was addicted to) as a pain killer, he stoically tries to evade from the temptation by recalling episodes of his life, which gives way to a series of flashbacks that constitute the main part of the narration concerning him as the novel draws to an end. Most of these flashbacks seem to parallel his present condition by exposing episodes where Gately failed to be more than a spectator, or a “figurant”⁵⁷ when confronted with several episodes of oppression and abuse (his mother beaten by the MP, his neighbor Mrs. Waite’s suicide or the bullyings of the “North Shore violin-playing kids” (829) and of a “so-called homosexual kid” (973)). There is only one flashback that originates from a reflection on the mutism rather than on the stasis Gately is forced to. It occurs in a passage where we learn that Gately had experienced this impossibility to speak only once before, and it is the passage that references to what happens in the novel’s final lines. The passage reads: “This is the only time he’s ever been struck dumb except for a brief but nasty bout of pleuritic laryngitis he’d had when he was twenty-four and sleeping on the cold beach up in Gloucester, and he doesn’t like it a bit, the being struck dumb” (833). The cold beach where Gately slept on that occasion is clearly the one mentioned by the novel’s last sentence, thus this anticipation of the ending makes it possible to project what happened afterwards. Immediately after sleeping on the “freezing sand” (981), Gately fell ill with pleuritic laryngitis, which left him unable to speak for a while. This detail is important because it shows how in *Infinite Jest* the traumatic contacts with the Real – often coinciding with traumatic hitting-the-bottom moments (as it is

⁵⁷ “Figurants”, as revealed by JOI’s wraith when appearing to Gately at the hospital, are the one of James’s obsessions, namely the “myriad thespian extras” (834) employed in sit-coms whose “faces would animate and mouths move realistically, but without sound” (834) and whose purpose is to provide the scenes with a “concessions to realism” (834). Therefore, they serve the purpose of that “pernicious illusion of realism” that James wants to deconstruct, by giving voice to the figurants, a solution that the novel, by giving space to every single minor character, seems to reproduce.

especially evident in the numerous testimonies of Ennet House ex-addicts) – are often meaningfully accompanied by the inability to speak, therefore by the annihilation of language. Or at least that is what happens with the two main protagonists of the novel, whose hitting-the-bottom moments coincide with the beginning and the ending of the novel.

Therefore, Gately's past condition of being "struck dumb" (833) after awakening in the cold beach of Gloucester can be helpful, by way of analogy with Hal's aphasia, to project a possible positive continuation to Hal's incident with the University of Arizona admission committee. Considering the specularity between the two moments (given that they do not occupy the two extreme poles of the novel incidentally), it is possible to conceive Hal's aphasia as being both temporary and the precursor of a rebirth, which is what happened to Gately, who, shortly after recovering from pleuritic laryngitis will join Ennet House. This is also what happened to the ex-addicts who report their testimonies in the narration devoted to Ennet House when they, as the novel's AA lexicon puts it, "Surrender" (465).⁵⁸ This experience, which constitutes the transformation of the ideological subject into a free subject (therefore the 'actual' birth of the subject, symbolized by Hal's promotion to narrator), involves the characters' contact with the silence of the Real.

In this respect, it is also meaningful that page 982, the last page of *Infinite Jest* (if one reads the endnotes in conjunction with the text) which separates the ending from the "Notes and Errata", is a completely blank page, devoid not only of content, but also of the page number. This intentionally blank page may certainly be the simple result of a printing convention, nonetheless, in light of what we have seen so far, it may also be interpreted as an immersion into the silence of the Real that the novel intentionally leads to. It is that silence that, as Todd McGowan puts it, allows us to experience "the moment of loss that generates

⁵⁸ As endnote 132 explains, all the words to which "Boston AA places enormous emphasis" (en 132, 1025) are capitalized.

subjectivity itself and yet which all the actions of the subject attempt to escape” (Impossible, 218), namely the moment of the loss of the privileged object (objet petit a) that gives birth to the subject. Sustaining contact with this moment would entail for McGowan a freedom from “the illusory promises of ideology and the blandishments of capitalist accumulation” (Impossible, 218) insofar as it would show us that “enjoyment derives from not having the object rather than having and thus avoid the struggle to have more” (Impossible, 218-219). As a matter of fact, it is significant that the blank page immediately follows the novel’s very last words “way out” (981). It may be read as representing a point outside ideology, what ideology prompts us to perpetually escape from, the point of pure loss that indicates the incompleteness of the Symbolic structure. And it is exactly a contact with this lack that frees the subject.

To sum up, we have seen how *Infinite Jest* embraces the theory of the object-gaze in order to conceive of a “way out” of the ideological apparatus. Since the novel portrays an ideological apparatus that deploys tools that pertain to both the Imaginary and the Symbolic order, Wallace applies the same process (the encounter with moments where representation and signification fail) to language, whose annihilation gives way to the imposition of the silence of the Real. The most perfect synthesis of both these experiences is represented by the moment where Hal, confronting the anamorphic distortion given by the NASA glass, fails to find the name for this phenomenon. Further implications of the presence of the object-gaze inside *Infinite Jest* will be explored in the next part, which will be entirely devoted to the Real.

PART 3. THE REAL

3.1 The Gaze of the Objects

While I lack evidence to demonstrate Wallace's awareness of Copjec and Žižek's works at the time when he wrote *Infinite Jest*, it would not be too arbitrary to suppose that a decisive bridge between Wallace and the issue of the object-gaze might have been represented by the cinema of David Lynch. In September 1996 David Foster Wallace published an essay for the magazine *Premiere* based on a three-day visit of the set of David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (8-10 January 1996), "David Lynch Keeps His Head." Later, after watching the film, he will express in a letter to De Lillo a certain regret for writing the piece, defining it "a particular cringer only because *Lost Highway* turned out to be ghastly, Lynch at its worst" (6-25-97, Don DeLillo Papers, Box 101.10). Nonetheless, his article succeeds in capturing some salient aspects of what "Lynchanism" (Supposedly, 162) consists of, although from the partial perspective of a self-proclaimed "fanatical Lynch fan from way back" (Supposedly 146) who anyway fails to get "closer than five feet away" (Supposedly, 147) from the director of *Blue Velvet*. Among the aspects that Wallace highlights as delineating the essence of "Lynchanism", two emerge with particular emphasis. The first one, provided as an academic definition, is that the term would refer to a deconstruction of an "irony of the banal" (Supposedly, 162) whereby "the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter" (Supposedly, 161). The second aspect is Lynch's collocation in the tradition of Expressionism⁵⁹, which entails that in

⁵⁹ Another artist that Wallace in more occasions indicate as "expressionist" is Franz Kafka. In his review of Edwin Williamson's *Borges: a Life*, entitled "Borges on Couch" (New York Times, 11-7-2004), Wallace writes that "Kafka's fictions are expressionist, projective, and personal; they make artistic sense only as manifestations of Kafka's psyche." A description that is very similar to the analysis of Lynch's style contained in the 1996 essay, where a passage reads: "in terms of literature, richly communicative Expressionism is epitomized by

his films the abundance of symbols, intertextual references, archetypal figures – which in this case are all blatant to the point of crudeness, plus unmediated by self-reflexive irony – does not lend itself to be analyzed or interpreted, but to purely “express” the projections of a mental state. Deprived as they are of meta-textual sophistication, these symbols seem to serve the purpose of a sincere act of communication (one of Wallace’s well-known obsessions) of an author’s mental state, a “personal expression” (Supposedly, 199) that resists “the film-interpretative process by which movies’ (certainly avant-garde movies’) central points are understood” (Supposedly, 170). As Wallace explains:

[T]hese very heavy Freudian riffs are powerful instead of ridiculous because they’re deployed Expressionistically, which among other things means they’re deployed in an old-fashioned, pre-postmodern way, i.e. nakedly, sincerely, without postmodernism’s abstraction or irony. (198)

The discovery of Lynch’s Expressionism – and especially the way it is used in *Blue Velvet* (1986) – was of particular importance for Wallace’s oeuvre because it showed him that it was possible to find an avenue to solve the double bind between postmodern self-consciousness and commercial realism that we have analyzed in chapter 1.2. Or, in Wallace’s own words, it showed that the author of his generation could “get experimentally better without caving in to loathsome commercial-Realistic pressure” (Supposedly, 200), that they could produce experimental fiction without getting stuck in the dead-end of postmodernism analyzed in “e Unibus Pluram.” Although Lynch’s films obey completely to a “dream logic”, it seems exactly through this trajectory that they feel, in Wallace’s words, “*true, real*” (Supposedly, 200). As Wallace explains with regard to *Blue Velvet*: “the movie helped us realize that first-rate experimentalism was a way not to “transcend” or “rebel against” the truth but actually to honor it” (Supposedly, 200). As a matter of fact, odd as it may seem, there are many hints in

Kafka, bad and onanistic Expressionism by the average Graduate Writing Program avant-garde story” (Supposedly, 200).

Wallace's article that Lynch could have embodied for the author the model for the "next literary rebels" (Supposedly, 81) whose emergence is prophesized (or simply hoped for) in the closure of "E Unibus Pluram": the "anti-rebels" who "have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles" (Ibidem) – an aspect that is possible to compare to the literality of Lynch's Expressionist use of symbols – and in addition are "artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists" (Ibidem). This is exactly what Wallace underscores about Lynch when he writes that "Lynch's lack of irony is the real reason some cinéastes – in this age when ironic self-consciousness is the one and only universally recognized badge of sophistication – see him as a naïf or a buffoon" (Supposedly, 199). Furthermore, Lynch's similarity to Wallace ideal anti-rebels is highlighted by the fact that the author repeatedly compares the filmmaker to a child, underscoring for instance how Lynch's movies contain expressions of the author's mental state that are "presented with something like a child's ingenuous (and sociopathic) lack of self-consciousness" (Supposedly, 166) or how "his passionate inwardness is refreshingly childlike, but I notice that very few of us choose to make small children our friends" (192).

This characterization (let us not forget that Wallace is considering Lynch from the perspective of a writer and not of a film scholar) inevitably ends up transforming the filmmaker into one of Wallace's idealized characters, closely related to the severely deformed Mario, the character – probably modeled on the Dostoevskian "idealized and all-too-human Myshkin and Alyosha" (Consider 265) – that rejects double-entendres and brings up "real stuff" (592), ignoring the common unwritten rule spread among his peers "that real stuff can only get mentioned if everybody rolls their eyes or laughs in a way that isn't happy" (Ibidem). It would therefore be possible to see against the grain how Wallace in his article uses Lynch to reflect on his own art, while the director remains both literally and metaphorically out of reach. It is important to notice that what is at stake with Wallace's admiration for Lynch is a

discourse involving a relationship with the Real. As a matter of fact, Wallace's passion for Lynch can constitute an important clue to what I am elaborating on in these chapters, namely the presence inside *Infinite Jest* of a thematization of the gaze analogous to the formulation provided by Lacan in *Seminar XI* and inserted by new Lacanian film theorists into the field of film studies.

As a matter of fact, David Lynch is not incidentally the filmmaker new Lacanian film theorists have turned their attention to more than anyone else.⁶⁰ As McGowan points out, "there is a homology between the emergence of Lynch's filmmaking and this innovation in psychoanalytic film theory"⁶¹, a homology that can possibly constitute the explanation for the strong analogy between the characterization of the ideological apparatus and the gaze present in *Infinite Jest* and the approach of these theorists.⁶² In particular, *Blue Velvet*, the film that Wallace mentions as having been one of the artworks that played the most influential role in helping him find his own artistic voice, has been pointed out as containing one of the purest examples of the enacting of the traumatic encounter with the gaze inside the cinematic art.

As McGowan formulates it, *Blue Velvet* belongs to a category called "cinema of intersection", a cinema whose peculiarity consists in representing a complete separation between the world of desire and the world of fantasy. While the world of desire is structured on the absence of the impossible object (the "objet petit a", that structures us as desiring subjects only insofar as it is lost), the world of fantasy is the realm where it is possible to encounter the impossible object (and, accordingly, the gaze). In the cinema of intersection, the

⁶⁰ See, for instance, Žižek, Slavoj. "The Lamella of David Lynch." 1995. in Feldstein, Richard, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus, eds. *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Paris Seminars in English*. SUNY Press, 1995, pp. 205-222.

⁶¹ See <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Independent-Film-Road-Movies/Psychoanalysis-REDISCOVERING-THE-GAZE.html>.

⁶² Although I have already quoted it in some occasions, it is worth mentioning here that Todd McGowan has authored a whole monography on David Lynch. See McGowan, Todd. *The Impossible David Lynch*. Columbia University Press, 2007. This monography succeeds in demonstrating the "homology" between Joan Copjec's take on the gaze and its deployment inside Lynch's oeuvre.

separation between these two realms – a possibility that pertains only to the cinematic art – is enacted in the perspective of revealing what happens when they collide. When the collision (intersection) between the two worlds occurs, the films of intersection enact an experience of the gaze insofar as “as spectators, we encounter an object that does not fit within the filmic field of representation and yet by that very fact indicates our involvement in that field” (McGowan 2007, 163).

This cinema is opposite to the predominant cinema, which McGowan calls “cinema of integration.” The cinema of integration, which “works hand in hand with the functioning of ideology” (McGowan 2007, 115), produces an overlapping between the worlds of desire and fantasy, that “offers subjects the opportunity to experience the traumatic excitement of the gaze while remaining safely within the structure of fantasy” (Ibidem). Thanks to this integration these films “produce desire through presenting the gaze as an absence, and they depict a fantasmatic scenario that allows us to relate successfully to this absence” (McGowan 2007, 116). In the cinema of integration, the impossible object becomes an empirical object of desire that can be experienced in the field of vision. This effort to eliminate the disruptiveness of the gaze by turning to a fantasy that integrates it into the visual field eventually obfuscates the gaze. On the contrary, in the cinema of intersection “the gaze and the field of vision cannot simply coexist: the emergence of one implies the shattering of the other” (McGowan 2007, 165), which is exactly what occurs with Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, where the subject, in the act of recognizing the blot as a skull, shatters the rest of the painting. The gaze and the field of vision are impossible to integrate and this impossibility highlights a hole in representation that reveals that we are included in the picture in that non-specular point, the point of the gaze. In representing a complete distinction between the world of fantasy and the world of desire – which in our regular experience of social reality are blended together – it is possible to uncover the structure of fantasy.

It would be difficult to find in the history of cinematic art an example to describe the cinema of intersection more suitable than *Blue Velvet*. The film enacts on the aesthetic level a complete separation between day and night (the pastoral public world of Lumberton and its perverse nocturnal underworld), a binary opposition whose function is not to separate the world of reality from the realm of fantasy, but to show two “equally fantasmatic worlds” (Impossible, 91), or “the fantasy in its two poles, in its pacifying aspect (the idyllic family life) as well as in its destructive/obscene/excessive aspect” (Žižek 2000, 49). According to McGowan the actual divide expressed by the film does not concern these two fantasmatic structures, which are two sides of the same coin, but their separation from a space of pure desire (therefore structured on a lack), embodied by the apartment of Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini), where the protagonist Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan) ends up driven by the suspicion that she might know something about the mystery surrounding a severed ear he has found in a field. The complete separation between the space of desire and the fantasmatic world of the movie collapses when, towards the end, the naked and injured body of Dorothy suddenly appears in the idyllic suburban neighborhood, entering gradually in the frame from the left side, as if out of the blue, in a way that neither the spectator, nor the characters at first notice her. The effect of the slightly delayed recognition – on the part of both the characters and the spectators – of Dorothy’s presence in the frame is particularly disturbing, and this occurs because she has no place in the visual field, and thus shatters the fantasmatic picture wherein she is a foreign, non-integratable body. Therefore, Dorothy embodies the gaze, and the anxiety that this scene produces indicates that the spectator is not looking from a safe distance, but is implied in the film.

The importance within Lynch’s cinema of the objects that do not fit within the field of vision has not been missed by Wallace’s analysis of the director. In comparing Lynch with a generation of directors who according to him have both channeled and domesticated Lynch’s

innovations (this is especially Wallace's opinion on Quentin Tarantino), he points out that "Quentin Tarantino is interested in watching somebody's ear getting cut off; David Lynch is interested in the ear" (Supposedly 166), an insightful comparison between the famous 'cutting off ear' scene in *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and the protagonist's discovery of the severed ear in the field with which *Blue Velvet* begins. For Wallace Lynch's influence on Tarantino and on a heterogeneous group of other filmmakers of the nineties (from the Coen brothers to Jim Jarmush, up to Arnaud Desplechin) is mainly expressed by the deployment of Lynch's aforementioned "irony of the banal", which reveals the coexistence of (and mutual containment between) the "very macabre and the very mundane" (Supposedly, 161). This coexistence is mainly expressed through an incongruous representation of very ordinary and banal objects, a tendency of which the "Band-Aid on the neck of Pulp Fiction's Marcellus Wallace – unexplained, visually incongruous, and featured prominently in three separate set-ups" (Supposedly, 163) is for Wallace a blatant example (to the extent of defining it "textbook Lynch" (Ibidem)). Nevertheless, the fact that Wallace explains how these elements in Lynch's films remain "ragged and distinctive and menacing" (Supposedly, 164) while they become "homogenized" (Ibidem) in Tarantino's by using the example of the ear reveals a subtle recognition of what is disruptive in Lynch's use of objects. As a matter of fact, the anxiety that Lynch's ear engenders derives from the uncanny misplaced object (the severed ear in the field) rather than from the depiction of an act of violence. The misplacement of the objects, the sense that it does not fit within the field of vision, constitutes the disturbing element of Lynch's aesthetics, an element that as we have seen is strictly linked with the films' deployment of the gaze.

The issue of the misplaced objects is also particularly important inside *Infinite Jest*, to the extent that it constitutes the very center of an important subplot concerning a series of turbulences generated by several objects that start appearing in incongruous places all around

E.T.A.. This disturbance, which hits especially Ortho “The Darkness” Stice, whose bed is frequently moved across the room at night (he “goes to sleep with his bed against one wall and then but wakes up with his bed against a whole another wall” (394)) has often been agreed upon by the studies on the novel as being the result of James’s wraith action; Marshall Boswell for example writes that “Himself’s ghost seems to be responsible for moving around the objects in Ortho Stice’s room” (Boswell 166). Nevertheless, I suggest that the novel leaves the issue much more open. As a matter of fact, James is not the only wraith in the novel, insofar as several clues hint at the fact that the weight-room guru Lyle is a wraith, too (he will even appear in Gately’s hospital in company of Himself (933)). Lyle is also the person that Stice asks for advice regarding his moving bed and who provides the cryptic answer: “Do not underestimate objects!” (394), which mysteriously seems to suggest that the initiative comes from the objects themselves, underscoring an active role of the objects that is also implied in the concept of the object-gaze. Therefore, the mystery of the objects appearing in incongruous places in the novel remains (almost) unexplained, which is more in line with the Lynchian influence that I am pointing out. The influence is also confirmed by the overemphasized collective anxiety that the appearances of the mundane objects engender. We read that:

there's dinette sets in the tunnels and acoustic tiles in the halls and lawnmowers in the kitchen and tripods in the grass and squeegees on the wall and Stice's bed moves around, and there's a ball machine in the girls' lockers [...] The Husky VI tripod of Mario's near-fatal encounter with the U.S.S. Millicent Kent was only the beginning. Starting with the mysterious and continuing fall of acoustic ceiling-tiles from their places in the subdorms' drop ceilings, inanimate objects have either been moved into or just out of nowhere appearing in wildly inappropriate places around E.T.A. for the past couple months in a steadily accelerating and troubling cycle. (632)

The passage, which goes on mentioning other analogous episodes, contains some significant clues for an interpretation of the role of the objects appearing “in wildly inappropriate places.” The most significant detail is in the description of Millicent Kent’s discovery of Mario’s tripod in the grass, described as the “The Husky VI tripod of Mario's near-fatal encounter with the U.S.S. Millicent Kent.” The word “encounter” suggests the idea of reciprocity. It is clearly a description of the gaze: Millicent is being gazed by the tripod, insofar as the object does not fit the visual field where it is placed, and thus shatters it. Like Dorothy toward the end of *Blue Velvet*, these objects appear “out of nowhere” and in “wildly inappropriate places” wherein they are foreign bodies. And the fact that these misplaced objects point at the experience of the gaze is especially clear in view of the reactions that they bring about. If Millicent’s encounter with the tripod (or the other way round) was already described as being “near-fatal”, the narrator wants to be even more explicit. We read that “[t]he inappropriate found objects have had a tektitic and sinister aspect: none of the cheery odor of regular pranksterism; they're not funny. To varying degrees they've given everyone the fantods” (632). It is as if the narrator is really concerned that the reader could mistake the issue of the “inappropriate found objects” for an ongoing joke: he or she⁶³ insists to the point of redundancy that the effect is a strongly uncanny feeling, resorting to one of the words that most recognizably typify Wallace’s vocabulary, “fantods”, meaning “a feeling of deep fear or repulsion” (D.T. Max, 2)⁶⁴. Moreover, like Hans Holbein’s skull-blot, these objects seem to defy the laws of gravity, given that the narrator underscores how “[u]nmentioned is the fact

⁶³ The narrator is more likely a “he”. The issue of the identity of narrator of the main part of *Infinite Jest* is very complex and open to debate, but in a letter to Michael Pietsch Wallace wrote that “this little piece [the section narrated by James’s father set in 1960], the bed thing in the middle, and Hal’s long first-person at end make it clear that the narrative voice of the book is pretty much the same as Jim and Hal’s voice; for some reason this is important to me” (Little Brown/Wallace Papers, Box 3.3). The implications of this claim are still not very clear and worth exploring.

⁶⁴ D.T. Max’s biography *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*. (Penguin, 2012) explains how the true inventor of many of the unusual words used by Wallace was his mother, Sally Foster Wallace. As Max explains: “She loved the word ‘fantods,’ meaning a feeling of deep fear or repulsion, and talked of ‘the howling fantods,’ this fear intensified. These words, like much of his childhood, would wind up in Wallace’s work” (D.T. Max, 2).

that Schacht and Tall Paul Shaw at lunch went over the whole part of the north wall the black girls said they found the squeegees on and could find neither nails nor holes from nails, as in no visible means of attachment” (632). A feature that Wallace himself points out as being one of Lynch’s recognizable tropes when in a footnote of his article he mentions “Lynch’s fetish for floating/flying entities” (Supposedly, 204).

In the novel, there is only one moment where the narration of an encounter with one of the “inappropriate found object” is filtered through the internal focalization of the characters who directly experience it (in this case a collective focalization on a group of characters). It occurs when, during the match between Hal and Ortho Stice, some of the sub-14 male E.T.A. students are fulfilling a punishment (due to their participation in the recent Eschaton Debacle) consisting of cleaning the underground tunnels, removing trash and making note of “the location of any boxes or objects too bulky for them to move out of the way” (667). While they are in the tunnels (and thus have become part of the “Tunnel Club”, given that “the sub-14 E.T.A.s historically have a kind of Tunnel Club” whose “unifying raison-d’être is kind of vague” (667)), they decide to change the goal of their mission and embark in a search for “feral hamsters”, an example of the many legendary creatures that populate the toxic “Great Concavity” to which a small earlier section of the novel (93) is dedicated. The purpose of a similar discovery would be to “distract the Headmaster’s office from post-Eschaton reprisals” (671) because “hamster-incursions could be posited to account for the occult appearance of large and incongruous E.T.A. objects in inappropriate places” (Ibidem). Finding an explanation for the mysterious apparitions would produce the effect of easing “the communal near-hysteria the objects have caused among aboriginal blue-collar staff and sub-16 E.T.A. alike” (671) a pacifying result that “would make the Tunnel Club guys something like heroes, foreseeably” (671). What the members of the Tunnel Club look for is therefore a strategy to naturalize the trauma, to integrate it into a universe of meaning, which entails that even an

absurd or horrific explanation (the incursion of feral hamsters in this case, like the cutting off of the ear in *Pulp Fiction*) would domesticate (and eventually cancel) the traumatic impact of the gaze, which on the contrary remains intact as long as the “incongruous E.T.A. objects in inappropriate places”, like *Blue Velvet*’s severed ear, remain unexplained. In this respect, it is interesting that Greg Carlisle in his landmark study of the novel, *Elegant Complexity*, points out how the “eerie quality” of this scene and the way it is played in the dark connect it to the “scenes from *Twin Peaks* in which characters visit the woods” (Carlisle 342) whose purpose is very similar.

In the end of the section, the search for the feral hamsters and the plan for their exploitation in the fabrication of a reassuring metanarrative will be brutally disrupted by the traumatic discovery of an open refrigerator full of rotting food. Far from simply pointing at the hidden rottenness that lies at the core of Enfield Tennis Academy – although the tunnel is full of elements pointing at the hidden family secrets of the Incandenzas, such as the “sweet stale burny smell none of them can place” (668, a nod to Hal’s use of marijuana the day before for the last time before quitting⁶⁵) and a “a bulky old doorless microwave oven” (presumably the instrument of JOI’s suicide) – both the refrigerator and its decaying content embody, with their traumatic impact, the eruption of the abjected Real. Again, this experience passes through the encounter with an “incongruous” object that does not fit the context where it is placed, and thus disorients (to say the least) the traditional Renaissance perspective, that of a single viewpoint. As a matter of fact, it is meaningful that the boys, when confronting the object, seem unable to discern the object’s size, which causes a small dispute (“Chu, it's a room fridge, that's all.' 'But it's bigger than the room fridges.' 'But it's not as big as a real fridge.' 'It's in-between.'” (672)). Moreover, among the boys’ exclamations of horror when they discover the content of the refrigerator, there is one, pronounced by an undistinguished

⁶⁵ See p. 635.

member of the crew, that contains a clue that might confirm my interpretation of this passage. It is a parodic Biblical quotation that reads: “This is Death. Woe unto those that gazeth on Death. The Bible” (673). Beyond the mocking tone, the fridge is interpreted as a memento mori, a function in all and for all identical to Hans Holbein’s skull, an interpretation that, given the presence of rotten meat, is quite straightforward. In addition, the boy uses the word “gaze”, although in the old-English third-person plural version of the verb (“gazeth”). All elements that clearly suggest how the refrigerator is a further embodiment, inside *Infinite Jest*, of the experience of the gaze. What is also meaningful in this respect is the tunnel imagery, an element that, according to Janet Preston’s Dantean analysis of *Blue Velvet*, is particularly dominant inside Lynch’s masterwork, especially as far as it concerns Dorothy’s apartment, whose “entry into the interior is accompanied by the repeated sounds of turbulent water suggesting an underground stream, and of groaning metal echoing of tunnel walls” (Preston 1990, 169), an image that “illuminates the theme of initiation into knowledge which coheres much of the film’s imagery” (Ibidem). While in *Blue Velvet*, as McGowan points out, this site of initiation (a space of openness and void) does not provide knowledge to Jeffrey (Impossible 97), the episode of the “Tunnel Club” registers a movement from the search for a pre-fabricated, ideological truth filling the gaps of what resists symbolization to a contact with the Real in the form of the abject, namely the “jettisoned object” which according to Julia Kristeva “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 1982, 2)⁶⁶. As

⁶⁶ Kristeva’s notion of abjection, involving “the acts of psychic, social, and corporeal exclusion and expulsion by which symbolic order, cultural identity, and personal hygiene are maintained” (C. Thomas 2013, 78), is an elaboration on the Lacanian Real. The centrality of abjection inside *Infinite Jest* is indisputable, to the extent that it would require a whole study to adequately analyze it. If on the one hand the most explicit formulation of this theme is represented by the politics of the Crooner-turned-President Johnny Gentle, leader of the Clean United States Party (C.U.S.P.), and responsible for the Great Concavity (or Convexity, if seen from Canada), the gigantic toxic wasteland that replaces New England and the southeast part of Canada, on the other hand in the novel images of body secretions are almost obsessively recurrent. As far as this study is concerned, I limit myself to considering the importance of abjection in *Infinite Jest* as a further evidence of the presence, inside the novel, of a conception that sees the Real as the point where the Symbolic order fails. For an essay that analyzes the theme of abjection in *Infinite Jest*, see Hayles, N. Katherine. “The illusion of autonomy and the fact of recursivity: Virtual ecologies, entertainment, and Infinite Jest.” *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999): 675-697. For an essay on the presence of the theme in the short story “The Suffering Channel”, see Thomas, Calvin. “Art is on

a matter of fact, it is not incidental that the boys' original task was to remove trash from the tunnels, an action that, in light of the theme of abjection, prefigures their attempted construction of a master narrative.

Besides Lynch, another important reference for the role of the misplaced objects within *Infinite Jest*'s narrative framework is Maya Deren's 1943 experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (co-directed by Deren's husband Alexander Hammid), which is significantly referenced on a number of occasions in the novel.⁶⁷ Aside from embracing a series of themes that are of absolute relevance in *Infinite Jest* (narrative loops, circularity, mirrors, even veils)⁶⁸, Deren's film is set in a household whose atmosphere is rendered uncanny by the presence of several mundane objects that appear and disappear in incongruous places⁶⁹, following a dream-logic that certainly resonates with David Lynch's cinema. Among the objects, the ones that are most repeatedly presented are a key and a knife. The knife is also one of the recurring objects in *Infinite Jest*, given that Hal in his meditations in the beginning of the book remembers "I once saw the word KNIFE finger-written on the steamed mirror of a nonpublic bathroom" (16) and towards the end (while lying on the floor) is hit by a "surreal memory of a steamed lavatory mirror with a knife sticking out of the pane" (951) – almost the same scene, with the interesting variation of the object's substitution with written word designating it – not to mention the fact that in Molly Notkin's account of the Entertainment

the way: from the abject opening of *Underworld* to the shitty ending of *Oblivion*." in *Abject visions: Powers of horror in art and visual culture* (2016).

⁶⁷ Although Joelle Van Dyne in her radio show confesses a distaste for Deren and Hammid ("Thumbs-up on Peterson/Broughton and Dali/Buñuel and -down on Deren/Hamid" (185)), she evokes the title of their most famous film in the stream of consciousness preceding her attempted suicide (as a matter of fact, *Meshes of the Afternoon* represents the transfiguration of a woman's psychic state before her suicide): "What looks like the cage's exit is actually the bars of the cage. The afternoon's meshes. The entrance says EXIT" (222). Moreover, among Molly Notkin's chairs "molded in the likeness of great filmmakers" (219) there is "a chair of Maya Deren brooding avant-gardedly in vivid spun-glass polymers" (228).

⁶⁸ In the final scene of *Meshes of the Afternoon* a repetitive narrative loop is disrupted by the breaking of a mirror which replaces the face of a mysterious cloaked figure. The hole in the broken mirror reveals the image of a beach. David Hering links this scene to the ending of *Infinite Jest*, where Garely's lowest point, surrounded by mirrors, is immediately followed by his awakening on a beach (Hering 177).

⁶⁹ In Deren's own words: "cinematic techniques are employed to give a malevolent vitality to inanimate objects" (qt. in Keller 2014, 46).

Joelle “may or may not have been holding a knife during this monologue” (788). An obvious symbol of castration, the knife can be easily associated from a Lacanian standpoint with the entrance into the Symbolic order, which for Lacan is a symbolic castration that the gaze renders visible insofar as it “makes visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated” (Lacan 1978, 88). Therefore, the symbology of the knife is strictly linked with the symbology of the mirror, given that, as Mladen Dolar suggests, “[t]he mirror double immediately introduces the dimension of castration— the doubling itself already, even in its minimal form, implies castration” (Dolar 1991, 12). The mirror of Hal’s memory is also steamed and therefore, like the mirror in Deren’s *Meshes* – where it replaces the face of an eerie cloaked figure that, running, renders the reflection impossible – cannot reflect. While the fact that the knife sticks “out of the pane” (981) suggests the duality between mirror and window that, as we have seen, is always been at stake in the cinema (and particularly in Deren’s film). Aside from all these considerations, what also links Hal’s memory to Deren’s *Meshes* is the adjective “surreal” (981) attributed to the memory. As a matter of fact, both in Deren’s film and in the novel (as well as in *Blue Velvet*) the sense of surrealism is strongly communicated by the unexplained misplacement of the object that undermines the sense of subjective coherence, of which the mirror is an evident symbol. Again, in both cases the impossibility of reflection is counterbalanced by the disquieting gaze of the objects.

In conclusion, we have seen how *Infinite Jest*, through the issue of the misplaced objects, channels a cinematic tradition that, from Maya Deren to David Lynch, gives artistic form to a conception of the cinema as a way to question the subject’s ideological sense of mastery and to seek for an enactment of the experience of the gaze. The next chapter will continue in this direction, exploring other ways *Infinite Jest* thematizes the gaze and even tries to enact a literary version of that experience.

3.2 Anamorphic Fragmentation

It might come up as a surprise that, inside Wallace's personal copy of Pam Cook's *Cinema Book*, one of the films to which the author's markings seem to devote the most constant attention is *The Haunted Palace*, a 1963 horror film directed by Roger Corman, known by many as the "king of B-movies". A mash-up between Poe and Lovecraft – borrowing the title from the former and the story from the latter –, the film seems to interest Wallace especially as far as concerns two issues: the "themes of psychic possession and physical deformity" (Cook 145). This sentence is the only one marked inside the paragraph devoted to the synthetic synopsis and critical analysis of the film. Besides connecting two themes that are not necessarily linked (or, better, not at all), the sentence returns identical one page later (Cook 146), this time as a comment to a photogram of the film showing a group of deformed characters, and is again underlined. Moreover, Wallace marks the film's title also when it appears again in the appendix of the book (Cook 290). While it is difficult to grasp the connection of thoughts that might have triggered Wallace's interest for *The Haunted Palace*, both the issues of "psychic possession" and "physical deformity" certainly ended up in *Infinite Jest*.

The "psychic possession" manifests itself in wraith's action of inserting ghost words in Gately's head at the St. Elizabeth hospital (832), if not in the entire act of communication between the two characters, given that we learn that a wraith "could never speak right to anybody, a wraith had no out-loud voice of its own, and had to use somebody's like internal brain-voice if it wanted to try to communicate something" (831). It has often been pointed out how this communicative interaction well describes the relationship of reciprocity between author and reader often advocated by Wallace. At least this is clear if we consider Wallace's

article “Greatly Exaggerated”, a 1992 review of H.L. Hix’s book *Morte d'Author: An Autopsy*, where Wallace sides with “those of us civilians who know in our gut that writing is an act of communication between one human being and another” (Supposedly, 144). Tom LeClair supports this understanding of the wraith sections to the extent of maintaining that “Wallace enters his narrative as a tall, lexically gifted, and etymology conscious ‘wraith’” (Prodigious 32). Similarly, Timothy Jacobs’s 2003 dissertation, which argues that the wraith might be the narrator of the whole novel, or the mediator of the novel’s multiple perspectives, points out that “[t]he wraith [...] serves as a transmission of the author’s embedded consciousness” (Eschatological 62). As David Hering similarly explains, “the appearance of James Incandenza’s wraith to the hospitalized Don Gately is a concretization of the tropes of possession, inheritance and authorship that have obliquely haunted Wallace’s fiction since his first novel” (Hering 27). Overall, these interpretations implicitly justify the wraith’s choice of Gately, who in that specific predicament shares the same features of every person involved in the act of reading: silence and immobility⁷⁰.

Nevertheless, the notion of psychic penetration (or possession) for Wallace was not a prerogative of literature, although he considers its occurrence in the cinematic art as being exceptional and as not “normally” pertaining to that art. The rare occurrence of psychic penetration in the cinematic field for Wallace occurs, perhaps unsurprisingly, with the cinema of David Lynch. In “David Lynch Keeps His Head” he explains how “[t]his could be Lynch’s true and only agenda: just to get inside your head” (Supposedly, 171), a goal that is achieved with the aid of that resistance to meaning that we have pointed out in the previous chapter, insofar as “[t]he absence of point or recognizable agenda in Lynch’s films, though, strips these subliminal defenses and lets Lynch get inside your head in a way movies normally

⁷⁰ The connection between the tropes of authorship and psychic possession is further underscored by the fact that, in Cook’s *Cinema Book*, the analysis of *The Haunted Palace* is present in a chapter entitled “The auteur theory” (Cook 135-146).

don't" (Supposedly, 171). Again, this entails that the act of penetrating the spectator's head is linked to the loss of mastery that Lynch's films produce in the viewer, a connection that is made especially clear by Wallace's claim that "in the absence of such an unconscious contract [the "recognizable agenda"] we lose some of the psychic protections we normally (and necessarily) bring to bear in a medium as powerful as film" (170).

As far as it concerns the other theme that solicited Wallace's interest for *The Haunted Palace*, that of "physical deformity", in the novel it is not only present, but ubiquitous. If Mario Incandenza, who according to Joelle "looked like a cross between a puppet and one of the big-headed carnivores from Spielberg's old special-effects orgies about reptiles" (746) and whose deformities and physical limitations require five pages (312-317) – plus some endnotes – to be described, is certainly the most important deformed character in the novel, he is neither the only one, nor the most damaged. Many of these characters are victims of the toxic Great Concavity (or Convexity, if seen from Canada), namely the result of the political move that, marking a shift from Imperialism to "Experialism", contemplates first the transformation of the Northern New England and Southern Ontario into a gigantic toxic waste dump and then the concession of this territory to Canada, all with the help of catapults employed as "Waste Displacement vehicles" (en 24, 990). This wasteland – the reference to T.S. Eliot is not concealed in the novel, given that Hal mentions "the barren Eliotical wastes of the western Concavity" (574) – is responsible for the deformities of a conspicuous number of characters. Among them we find Marathe's "skuldeprived and heartdefective" (529) wife Gertraude, the prospective male ETA student Dymphna (who, besides having himself "cranium issues" (518) has also "several eyes in various stages of evolutionary development in his head" (Ibidem), and is "legally blind" (Ibidem)) and the legendary "oversized "Feral Infants" allegedly reputed to inhabit the periodically overinhabitable forested sections of the eastern Reconfiguration" (en 304, 1055), who also appear in the synopsis of a couple of Incandenza's

films. Not to mention “a normal-size and unferal infant but totally without a skull” (559) that Randy Lenz alleges to have seen in a party where the infant gets worshipped and is termed “simply *The Infant*, as if there were only One” (Ibidem).

Despite the possible comprehension of these characters as epitomizing the ecocritical approach of the novel, it would be restrictive to read them only through this approach. As a matter of fact, nor Mario, nor all the adepts to the “Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed” – first and foremost the either “disfigured” (634) or “deformed with beauty” (538) Joelle van Dyne – are victims of the Reconfiguration. Also, as Tom LeClair rightly underscores (Prodigious 34), major or minor deformities seem to be spread among less physically challenged characters: for instance, “Orin’s left leg [deformed] by repetitive punting, Hal’s left arm by tennis strokes” (Prodigious 34) while “The bodies of people at Ennett House, including its stroke-afflicted director, are deformed by their addictions or behavior” (Prodigious 34).

Maybe predictably, I read the ongoing theme of deformity in *Infinite Jest* as linked to the concept of anamorphosis. As a matter of fact, there are several elements that point at a continuity between the presence of deformed characters and the theme of optical deformation. I have already mentioned in chapter 2.2 that, in the section where all Mario’s deformities and impairments are described, the narrator explains that Mario is not “retarded or cognitively damaged” but “more like *refracted*, [...] a pole poked into mental water and just a little off and just taking a little bit longer, in the manner of all *refracted* things” (314, emphases mine). An even more explicit analogy between appearance and optical distortion concerns Mario’s half-uncle Charles Tavis, whom many clues in the text indicate as being his natural father. We read that “Charles Tavis is physically small in a way that seems less endocrine than perspectival. His smallness resembles the smallness of something that's farther away from you than it wants to be, plus is receding” (519). Endnote 218 explains that Tavis’s peculiar

“perspectival smallness” inspired James for the invention of “weird wide-angle rear-view mirrors on the sides of automobiles that so diminish the cars behind you that federal statute requires them to have printed right on the glass that Objects In Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear” (en 218, 1036), the only invention attributed to James that actually exists. Not to mention that, due to this “weird appearance of recessive drift” (519), Tavis is significantly described as “looking as usual oddly foreshortened and small” (Ibidem), an adjective that in the endnote attached in the same page (the above-mentioned endnote 218) assumes the weight of an epithet: “the mirrors had been inspired by the *always-foreshortened* Charles Tavis” (en 218, 1036, emphasis mine). This adjective is important insofar as, as we have seen in chapter 2.2, it is one of the attempted definitions that Hal provides for the distorted perspective of the NASA glass while, toward the end of the novel, he is lying still on the floor. Although, as I have pointed out, “foreshortened” is not the exact “concise term for *optical perspective*” (953, emphasis in original) – as I suggest that the candidates for the right word may be either “anamorphosis” or “parallax” and that Hal’s failure to find the term is important in the novel’s thematic economy – it is still very close to the concept of anamorphosis and can be used to describe that kind of distortion. As a matter of fact, Tavis’s presence seems to have a distorting influence on the supposed onlooker which is described as “a kind of locational panic” (519).

Accordingly, by representing a constant reference to anamorphosis inside the novel, the deformed characters of *Infinite Jest* seem to possess (and also to offer to the other characters) a privileged access to the real, not devoid of mystical undertones⁷¹, which

⁷¹ Aside from Mario’s religious sense, underscored in the novel on scattered occasions, which, differently from the pragmatic and curative one imposed inside Ennet House, seems to be spontaneous (“His nighttime prayers take almost an hour and sometimes more and are not a chore. He doesn’t kneel; it’s more like a conversation” 590), the mystic nuance sometimes emerging in relation to the deformed characters is (rather cryptically) pointed out by the last words of James’s father’s monologue set in 1960 (157-169), which reads: “the drunk and the maimed both are dragged forward out of the arena like a boneless Christ, one man under each arm, feet dragging, eyes on the aether” (169).

confirms the centrality in the novel of what Martin Jay defines as the “anti-ocularcentrism” dominating the Twentieth-Century French thought. This is particularly evident with regard to Mario, who falls in love with Madame Psychosis’s radio-show because “he felt like he was listening to [...] stuff that was real” (592) and complains that in the culture he is embedded in everyone “finds stuff that's really real uncomfortable and they get embarrassed” (592). Mario’s relationship with the real is so solid that even Hal, whose apparently insurmountable analysis-paralysis drives him to think that “[i]t's always seemed a little preposterous that Hamlet, for all his paralyzing doubt about everything, never once doubts the reality of the ghost” (900), seems to exclude doubt when confronted with Mario’s most belief-defying accounts, given that he claims that “...good old Mario says he's seen paranormal figures, and he's not kidding, and Mario doesn't lie” (592).

As a matter of fact, several passages suggest how Mario’s anamorphic quality characterizes not only his appearance, but also his point of view, which is interestingly constantly mediated by a “Bolex H64 camera strapped to his head” (755), a camera “designed and built” (315) by James and given to Mario for his “thirteenth Xmas” (Ibidem). Endnote 327 offers a description of the camera that overtly compares the tool’s look to that of the novel’s “improbably deformed” characters, as we read that “Bolex H64, -32 and -16 models come with a turret that accepts three C-mount lenses, which gives the models a kind of multi-eyed, alien-facial look” (en 327, 1072). A passage in particular underscores the way this mediation shapes Mario’s way of looking at the others. It occurs in a section focalized on Mario, where he is filming a documentary that “consists of Mario just walking around different parts of the Academy” (755). After having recorded bits and pieces of the daily life of the Academy – among them a “study group for Mr. Ogilvie's 'Reflections on Refraction' exam” (756), a title that certainly constitutes a further evidence of the importance of these themes inside the novel – he eventually stumbles upon LaMont Chu, an E.T.A. sub-14 student

and part of that “Tunnel Club” mentioned in the previous chapter. What follows is a very private conversation about the directory’s measures for the Eschaton debacle (unconcerned with the fact that it is being filmed for a documentary), but above all it is a demonstration of the peculiar way Mario has of arranging his gaze (through the gaze of the camera) toward the objects. As a matter of fact, he intentionally manipulates his Bolex (as we read that he “uses the treadle to shorten the focal length and adjust the angle of the camera’s lens slightly downward (757)) in order to achieve an anamorphic view of Chu. We read that “he’s looking through the viewfinder, a lens-eye view, which means when Chu looks down from the lens to look at Mario it looks to Mario like he’s looking down south somewhere along Mario’s thorax” (758) and that “Chu’s face looks slightly oval and convex through the lens’s fish-eye, a jutting aspect” (758). It is exactly when Mario reaches this view that he says: “I should tell you I feel like we’re getting the totally real LaMont Chu here” (758). This sentence further confirms how in the novel the contact with the Real is simultaneously thematized both through the issue optical deformation and through that of deformity, two issues that find a synthesis in Mario’s case.

This anti-ocularcentric view endorsed by the novel is even more explicit in the case of Dymphna⁷², the “allegedly blind” (518) – though multi-eyed – skull-deprived prospective student from “Philo IL” (518)⁷³ whose arrival is often anticipated but who, as Stephen Burn points out, “never actually appears in person anywhere in the novel” (Burn 59). His blindness – which, it must be noted, in the novel is alleged but not confirmed, given that he is said to be only “allegedly” and “legally blind” (518) – according to an “experimental theory of Thorp”

⁷² Dymphna is the name of a female Irish Catholic Saint of the 7th century. It is very likely that Wallace might have stumbled upon this name in Don DeLillo’s *Americana*, where the school attended by the protagonist David Bell during his adolescence is called St. Dymphna and where the story of the Saint, defined as the “patronness of those afflicted with nervous disorder and mental illness” as well as “[t]he Nervous Breakdown Saint” (*Americana* 156) is narrated.

⁷³ Both in the essay “Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley” (Supposedly) and in *The Pale King* the David Wallace persona alleges Philo IL as his hometown, although Wallace never actually lived there. The fact that Dymphna is from Philo can be therefore read as a sign of the importance that this character might have had in Wallace’s mind.

(568) seems to be the key to the secret of his high ranking. A whole section portrays Arslanian and Pemulis wandering blindfolded with the aim of grasping that secret (567-574). Thorpe's theory is based on a supposed superiority of the ear to the eye in easing the anticipation of the opponent's action "because sounds are merely . . . here" (568), a hierarchy between sounds and images that seems to characterize also Mario, who has "an eyelid [...] lower than the other [...] like an ill-tempered windowshade" (314) but is a "born listener" (80). As the conversation between the two blindfolded characters points out, "this blind person is able to judge the necessary spot of landing by the intensity of the sound [...] [i]nstead of watching the contact and then imaginatively extending the beginning of its flight, like those of us hobbled by sight" (568). The adverb "imaginatively" helps connecting the parodically radical anti-ocularcentrism displayed in this section with a more complex discourse: the eye's unreliability is linked to its dependence on the Imaginary and to the Imaginary's action of filling in the gaps ("imaginatively extending the beginning of its flight") and masking the incoherence of the Real. The paradox exposed in this conversation is therefore that imaginary anticipation is exactly what makes anticipation fail, insofar as it projects the subject elsewhere, while on the contrary sounds are "merely...here". On the contrary, Dymphna "appears to always have floated by magic to the necessary spot where a ball is soon to land" (568), a description that would recall the appearances of the "incongruous E.T.A. objects in inappropriate places" (671) if it did not illustrate a case of perfect congruity.

What is at stake with Dymphna is therefore, like in Mario's case, a calling into question of ocularcentrism, or, to adopt another expression used by Martin Jay, of "Cartesian perspectivalism" (Jay 150), a decentralization of sight which in this case passes through both the character's appearance and their visual perspective (or lack thereof). With respect to these characters, it is also interesting that, as Stephen Burn points out (Burn 59, 81), both Dymphna

and Mario present several narrative incongruities, which may very well “derive from the fact that a number of characters in the novel frequently lie, or they may be errors on the part of the publisher” (Burn 81). Still it is suspicious that these incongruities concern exclusively two characters who are too similar one another. As a matter of fact, Dymphna’s age is presented in the Year of Glad as “sixteen but with a birthday two weeks under the 15 April” (17) and then as “nine” in the Y.D.A.U. (518, 567). Similarly, Mario’s “surprise birth” (953), which in itself defies logic as it happens after an invisible pregnancy where Avril “did not show, bled like clockwork” (312), is first indicated as having occurred “in May” (54), then “on a metal-lit November evening” (312), and precisely on “25 November” (589). Moreover, the two accounts of his birth provided by the novel (312-313, 901) describe it as happening in different places, first near the “the maple staircase of the Back Bay brownstone they [James and Avril] were soon to leave” (312), then in a regular hospital (901), although the second account is narrated by Hal on the basis of data provided by Orin, an element that “shrouded the whole thing in further ambiguity” (901). The possibility that these incongruities might be intentional can be understood as the way the text itself tries to defy form and perfection like its own characters. This idea confirms what Fredric Jameson points out about *Infinite Jest* when he singles it out as a prime example of “those texts that, whether by fragmentation and imperfection or by a dizzying multiplication of presences on the page, somehow evade form and reification” (Jameson 2008, 383). It is also in continuity with what New York Times critic Michiko Kakutani points out in one of the novel’s earliest reviews when she defines it “a loose baggy monster.” (n.p.) As a matter of fact, aside from the above mentioned (actually rare) incongruities, the whole novel, though thoroughly structured (as we have seen in chapter 1.4), simultaneously presents various elements that undermine (or resist) form, puzzling the reader’s sense of coherence and thus trying to deprive her of those “subliminal defenses” that the “absence of point or recognizable agenda in Lynch’s films” manage to remove. As Tom

LeClair puts it succinctly, “Wallace has deformed his novel to be a gigantic analogue of the monsters-hateful and hopeful-within it” (36).

Before drawing toward a conclusion, I want to point out how one of the novel’s “deforming” elements also play the anamorphic role of challenging the reader’s point of view and constantly reconsider her own position. One of these elements is an incongruous use of redundant repetition. As a matter of fact, if in *Infinite Jest* it is very recurrent that a scene is presented more than once, from a different point of view, what is more puzzling is that, when the same episode is re-narrated, it is often narrated with plenty of redundant information, as if it was unfolding for the first time. Examples of similar passages are the following: “Hal’s maternal half-uncle Charles Tavis” (516)” and “Avril Incandenza, E.T.A. Dean of Academic Affairs” (521), “The A.F.R. believed Marathe functioned as a triple agent” (529), “Gately’s cognomen growing up and moving through public grades had been Bim or Bimmy, or The Bimulator, etc., from the acronymic B.I.M., ‘Big Indestructible Moron.’” (902), and so on. When all these pieces of information are provided to the reader, she has already encountered them several times. A possible explanation for this use of redundancy may be given by the novel’s supposed circularity, whereby the reader can start reading the novel from a random point without losing the overall sense of the novel. Nevertheless, my claim that the hints at the directional (rather than temporal) implication of the act of “looking back” (and from another perspective) that, in the case of Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, allows the experience of the gaze.

To conclude, we have seen how the theme of deformity in *Infinite Jest* can be considered as an extension of the concept of anamorphosis. Besides pointing at the anti-ocularcentric discourse present in the novel, the widespread presence of deformed characters in *Infinite Jest* – along with the deformity of the novel itself – constitutes a fundamental part of its thematization of the Real. From this perspective, it is finally possible to understand the

hidden connection between the themes of physical deformity and psychic possession that attracted Wallace's attention in relation to Roger Corman's *The Haunted Palace*. If psychic possession appears to be Wallace's favorite metaphor to designate the possibility of reciprocity between author and reader, anamorphosis is, as we have seen, the privileged model to achieve that reciprocity. Or, paraphrasing Wallace, to get inside the reader's head.

Conclusion: Reflections on Refraction

This study has attempted to explore the abundant presence in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* of elements drawn from Lacanian film theory. Its division into three parts, based on the three Lacanian registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real has been useful in order to introduce the presence of Lacanian tropes in the novel while simultaneously reconstructing the evolution of Lacanian film theory itself. While focusing on *Infinite Jest*, I have also attempted to outline the gradual development of Lacan's role in film theory, from the emphasis placed by Apparatus theorists (Baudry, Metz, Mulvey, etc.) on the ideological problems linked to the Imaginary, up to the introduction of the Lacanian Real into the field of film studies on the part of the new wave of film theorists of the 1990s (Copjec, McGowan, Žižek). I have also tried to demonstrate how the theoretical framework of Apparatus theory can be particularly useful to illuminate the way the novel addresses several ideological issues concerning the specular subjectivity that characterizes the majority of its characters. As we have seen, this narcissistic subjectivity is characterized by the illusion of mastery over the image that the subject sees, an illusion that the cinematic screen replicates. In Part 1 ("The Imaginary"), my analysis has been especially focused on the way *Infinite Jest* thematizes and reflects on what Apparatus theorists improperly identified as the "gaze", and which Lacan would speak of using the word "eye": the viewer/spectator's misguided and self-reflexive look. In this part, by analyzing the way *Infinite Jest* represents the ideological implications of cinematic voyeurism, I tried to demonstrate that many elements of film theory – which Wallace learned from Pam Cook's edited *The Cinema Book*, the most important source for my dissertation – inform much more than the novel's most explicit involvement with the cinema through James O. Incandenza's filmography. I pointed out how the novel represents an Althusserian ideological apparatus that shapes subjectivities that are profoundly structured by a cinematic visuality. In this sense, Chapter 1.4 – where I analyzed the characters of Joelle Van Dyne and Avril Incandenza as reflections of the way the novel thematizes Laura

Mulvey's concepts of the "male gaze" and "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" – has been particularly explicit in exposing how the subjectivities portrayed in the novel function in a cinematic way also outside and beyond the act of cinematic spectatorship.

From Chapter 2.2 on, the thesis ceases to analyze *Infinite Jest's* depiction of the ideological apparatus and starts to explore the way the novel conceives of the possibility of an exit from ideology. This chapter contains the center towards which the whole thesis gravitates: the idea that the novel points to the issue of anamorphosis – and, accordingly, of the Lacanian "gaze" – as a privileged model for the disruption of ideology. I showed the presence of this discourse in the novel especially by underscoring the visual effects that Hal experiences while looking on his NASA glass from a distorted perspective. This passage can be easily overlooked, but actually constitutes one of *Infinite Jest's* most explicit representations of anamorphosis. Through my analysis of the role of the deformed characters in Chapter 3.2., I have attempted to indicate other ways through which the novel addresses this central issue. As a matter of fact, in this thesis it has been my intention to characterize *Infinite Jest* as portraying a path from the ideological and deluded "eye" to the real and disruptive "gaze." We have seen that the gaze is the function that the eye constantly elides, and how it can shatter the subject's illusion of control by making him or her experience how he or she is looked back by (and inscribed in) the object. I have also tried to demonstrate that in the novel an analogous process takes place on the level of language, through a series of linguistic distortions that take part in a process of disruption of the Symbolic network and of gradual imposition of the silence of the Real. I used this concept to interpret the role of speechlessness in Hal's and Gately's specular "hitting-the-bottom" experiences at the beginning and at the end of the novel.

The dissertation's tripartition into the Lacanian orders has been appropriate also for another reason. It showed how film theory can offer a new perspective from which to re-

examine Wallace's take on realism, postmodernism and his indication of a new direction for fiction outside these two categories. In Part 1 I have attempted to demonstrate how Apparatus theory's approach toward the "impression of reality" in the cinema informs Wallace's remark that the realist form is "soothing, familiar, anesthetic" (McCaffery 34). I also tried to show how this issue is thematized in *Infinite Jest* through James's attempt to avoid the "pernicious illusion of realism" (944) in his filmography, as well as through Orin's delusive subjectivity (see Chapter 1.2). Likewise, in Part 2 the emphasis put by Apparatus theorists on self-awareness as a solution against the cinema's ideological power has provided me with a key to understand the way both the film theory and the experimental cinema of the 1970s influenced *Infinite Jest*'s presentation of a social order where postmodern detachment and self-reflexivity have been institutionalized and imbibed by ideology itself. The introduction of the Lacanian Real in Chapter 2.2 and the analysis of the way Wallace channels it into *Infinite Jest* in Part 3 have informed my analysis of the new direction for fiction proposed by Wallace. I characterized it as a form of new realism that is not informed by an effort to mimetically reproduce reality, but by an attempt to prompt the reader to experience the Lacanian Real, understood as a disruption in the Symbolic network's possibility to signify everything. In Chapter 3.1 I have shown how a fundamental model for Wallace's understanding of this direction was provided by the cinema of David Lynch. This excursus on the relationship between *Infinite Jest* and David Lynch has been also important insofar as I lacked sufficient evidence to establish for certain Wallace's direct knowledge of his coeval new Lacanian film theory. Wallace enthusiasm for Lynch has been necessary as an alternative source to demonstrate his awareness of the Lacanian Real and of the "gaze."

I constructed this dissertation as a path from the Imaginary to the Real, from the eye to the gaze and from realism to the new realism that characterizes Wallace's fiction. Simultaneously, David Hering's use of Foucault's analysis of *Las Meninas* in *The Order of*

Things as a key to interpret Wallace's fiction has prompted me to conceive it also as a path from a motif of reflection to a motif of refraction and reciprocity. That is why, in drawing toward the conclusion, I will now return to my earlier reference in Chapter 1.3 to the novel's earliest written section, the two-page draft titled "Las Meniñas." In light of what I have pointed out in chapter 2.2 about the role played in the novel by the annihilation of language, it is now possible to formulate several hypotheses concerning the relationship between the section narrated in a broken childish slang by a young Clenette Henderson (37-38), the rest of the novel and Velasquez's painting. As we have seen with respect to Hal's receding mastery over language, that process coincides with the character's unprecedented awareness of several secrets surrounding his family. As I have pointed out, Hal's and Gately's moments of "hitting the bottom" simultaneously involve the annihilation of language and a contact with the Real. Similarly, Clenette Henderson's narration is characterized both by a lack of mastery over language and by an ability to address straightforwardly family secrets and taboos. The story she tells about her half-sister Wardine somewhat mirrors the Hamletian structure of Hal's family: also in this case there is an absent father (presumably both Clenette and Wardine's father, given that Clenette is Wardine's "half Sister" (38)) and a mother who has replaced the father with another family figure, in this case Wardine's abusive uncle Roy Tony. As a matter of fact, we read that "Roy Tony brother be Wardine father. He gone" (38). Besides mirroring Avril's replacement of James with her half-brother Charles Tavis, Wardine's family structure also resembles that of Gately's family, where Gately's mother substituted his absent Estonian father (446) with the abusive "former Navy M.P." (446). Therefore, the section narrated by Clenette can be seen as one of the many examples of *mise-en-abyme* that we have encountered throughout the novel.

David Hering's definition of *mise-en-abyme* as "the reflection of the text within the text" (86) is helpful to understand the model of reflection at stake in this case. The idea that

“Las Meniñas” may be understood as a mise-en-abyme of the whole novel is somewhat confirmed also by Wallace’s 1988 letter to Bonnie Nadell – which I mentioned in Chapter 1.3 – where he defined the draft as “a 2-page story that has been distilled to its fictional essence” (Bonnie Nadell’s David Foster Wallace Collection, 1.1). With this statement in mind, it is possible to hypothesize that in Wallace’s intention the draft would have contained the “fictional essence” of the whole novel. As a matter of fact, besides the analogies to Hal’s and Gately’s families, the section narrated by Clenette stages a linguistic distortion – although not a state of aphasia – which, as we have seen in Chapter 2.2, in the novel often coincides with a moment of contact with the Lacanian Real. In this case the Real also coincides with the unspeakable traumatic taboos of incest and abuse openly addressed in the section. Therefore, similarly to what Foucault underscores about *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things*, the section narrated by Clenette displays an oscillation between a monologic model of reflection – the mise-en-abyme – and a dialogic model of refraction, expressed by the polyphonic use of the very unique narratorial voice of a minor character.

Foucault’s analysis of *Las Meninas* and his stress on reciprocity can also be naturally connected with my interpretation of *Infinite Jest* in the light of the Lacanian “gaze.” As Foucault points out, in Velasquez’s painting “the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange” (Foucault, 4-5). This occurs insofar as “[n]o gaze is stable, or rather in the neutral furrow of the gaze piercing at a right angle through the canvas, subject and object, the spectator and the model, reverse their roles to infinity” (Foucault 5). While Foucault underscores through this reciprocal interchange the way the painting looks back at the viewer, he also points out an aspect that is even more in line with Lacan’s formulation: the presence of elements that are irreducible to our visual field. This invisibility characterizes both the fact that we only see the back side of the canvas and the fact that we cannot know what the painter

is looking at – which, given the direction of his eyes, is clearly not the royal couple. As Foucault explains:

The spectacle he [the painter] is observing is thus doubly invisible: first, because it is not represented within the space of the painting, and, second, because it is situated precisely in that blind point, in that essential hiding-place into which our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of our actual looking. (Foucault 3)

It is this invisibility of the blind point that makes the reciprocity possible, insofar as we can fill that void and be looked at by the painter's gaze, which "accepts as many models as there are spectators" (Foucault 3). The Lacanian "gaze" cannot help but be evoked by this interplay between invisibility and reciprocity that shows that "no gaze is stable" (5).

The "gaze" can be also connected to David Hering's emphasis on the presence in Wallace's fiction of a "motif of *refraction*" that "attempts to refractively pass through the 'reflective' surface and dialogically communicate with whoever is through or outside the surface" (Hering 87). This occurs not only because of the reciprocity between subject and object, but insofar as the refracted object prompts the subject to experience the way desire refracts his or her own vision.

In conclusion, the refracted anamorphic object, by indicating the site of the "gaze" and the limits of our mastery over what we see, clearly solves a dialogic function and represents one of David Foster Wallace's most effective means to build in his novels a dialogic and communicative ethics of vision.

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Estratto per riassunto della tesi di dottorato

L'estratto (max. 1000 battute) deve essere redatto sia in lingua italiana che in lingua inglese e nella lingua straniera eventualmente indicata dal Collegio dei docenti.

L'estratto va firmato e rilegato come ultimo foglio della tesi.

Studente: Angelo Maria Grossi matricola: 817311

Dottorato: Lingue, culture e società e scienze del linguaggio

Ciclo: XXX

Titolo della tesi¹ : The Gaze Regained: Elements of Lacanian Film Theory in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

Abstract:

La mia tesi analizza a fondo la presenza, all'interno del romanzo enciclopedico *Infinite Jest* di David Foster Wallace, di elementi di teoria del cinema di matrice lacaniana. In essa dimostro, sulla base della mia ricerca d'archivio, la presenza di un incanalamento consapevole da parte di Wallace nel suo romanzo di teorie del cinema attenenti alla corrente psicanalitica degli anni '70 (Laura Mulvey, Metz, Baudry, etc.), la quale corrente, fondendo Lacan e Althusser, portava avanti una visione pessimistica del cinema come apparato ideologico generatore di soggettivazione. Inoltre analizzo il romanzo utilizzando strumenti affini alla nuova corrente di teorici lacaniani degli anni '90 (Copjec, Žižek, McGowan), ai quali la sensibilità di Wallace è più vicina, giacché, diversamente dai primi, essi rileggono l'approccio psicanalitico alla teoria del cinema alla luce del 'reale'. Il fulcro della mia tesi, che è tripartita secondo la triade lacaniana (immaginario-simbolico-reale), è una lettura secondo cui *Infinite Jest* ritrae un apparato ideologico di potere che ingloba al suo interno armi che appartengono sia all'immaginario (attraverso la pervasività della cultura dello spettacolo) che al simbolico (attraverso l'alienazione nell'autocoscienza), e al contempo tende a una via d'uscita dall'ideologia attraverso una tematizzazione (e un impiego letterario) dello "sguardo" inteso in senso lacaniano, ovvero come la dimostrazione dell'esistenza di un limite alle possibilità dell'ideologia di rappresentare e significare tutto.

My dissertation explores the presence of elements of film theory of Lacanian orientation inside David Foster Wallace's encyclopedic novel *Infinite Jest*. Based on an archival research, the dissertation demonstrates how Wallace intentionally channeled into his magnum opus elements of film theory pertaining to the psychoanalytic current of the 1970s (Laura Mulvey, Metz, Baudry, etc.). This current, which mixed Lacan and Althusser, was informed by a pessimistic view on the cinema, understood as an ideological apparatus that produces subjectivation. I also analyze the novel by using interpretative tools analogous to the new current of the Lacanian film theorists of the 1990s (Copjec, Žižek, McGowan), whose sensibility is closer to Wallace's. Unlike the earlier current, the new current conceives of the psychoanalytic approach to film theory in the light of the 'real'. The center of my dissertation, whose tripartition follows the Lacanian triad (imaginary-symbolic-real), is a reading of *Infinite Jest* whereby the novel portrays an ideological apparatus of power that deploys tools pertaining to both the Imaginary order (through the pervasiveness of the cinema and media Entertainment) and the Symbolic (through the alienation into increased self-consciousness and critical distance). Simultaneously, the novel seeks for an exit from ideology through the thematization (and literary deployment) of the "gaze", understood in the Lacanian

¹ Il titolo deve essere quello definitivo, uguale a quello che risulta stampato sulla copertina dell'elaborato consegnato.

sense, namely that which demonstrates the limits of ideology's possibility to represent and signify everything.

DocuSigned by:
Firma dello studente
Angelo Maria Grossi
B9DB2D3FB3BD4D2...