

## David Lynch's Influence on David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

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### Abstract

This essay investigates the influence of the films of David Lynch on David Foster Wallace's major novel *Infinite Jest*. It is organized in two sections. Section one illustrates Wallace's views on what real art should be, as they are expressed in his two famous "manifestos," and proceeds to read the essay "David Lynch Keeps His Head" in relation to the manifestos in order to demonstrate that Lynch's influence on Wallace's thought has not yet been fully grasped. Section two delves into *Infinite Jest* to examine textual proof of the Wallace-Lynch connection, both in content and form. Content-wise, convergences are proven to permeate both authors' interest in theories of consciousness, typified in themes such as: psychoanalysis, especially the Oedipus Complex; self-deception; the Sartrean "look;" the corporeal subject and the phenomenological distinction between objective body and lived body. Form-wise, the following narrative items are mapped: Lynch's surrealism, recognizable in paradigmatic scenes from *Infinite Jest*; the character-idea, as both authors embody abstract ideas in characters; and a formal commitment to "an anti-teleological spirit." Finally, the analysis takes into consideration Lynch's films produced prior or during the writing of *Infinite Jest*, and exclusively those Wallace expressed direct admiration for, namely: *Eraserhead* (1977), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Blue Velvet* (1986), and *Lost Highway* (1997).

**Keywords:** David Foster Wallace; David Lynch; *Infinite Jest*; *Eraserhead*; *The Elephant Man*; *Blue Velvet*; *Lost Highway*; adaptation studies

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## Introduction

This essay is designed to present and investigate the influence of the films of David Lynch on David Foster Wallace's major novel: *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996 and since considered, possibly, the best novel of its generation.

While the slant of this text is literary, both methodology and goals have been set to maintain a productive balance between the fields of literary studies and film studies. Film scholars may find here a solid analysis of the foundations of Wallace's art and its critical discussion, plus a thorough examination of the Wallace-Lynch connection that may lead to multiple trajectories of further analysis. Literary scholars may find a reconsideration of Lynch's role in Wallace's non-fictional agenda and a textual mapping of Lynch's influence on *Infinite Jest*.

The first section opens by illustrating Wallace's categorical views on what *real* art is or should be, as they are expressed in two literary manifestos, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" and "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace by Larry McCaffery." It then proceeds by reading the essay "David Lynch Keeps His Head" as it relates to the two manifestos. This reading should demonstrate that Lynch's influence on the evolution and exposition of Wallace's thought has not – in spite of its being widely acknowledged – been fully grasped.

Section two delves into *Infinite Jest* to examine textual proof of the Wallace-Lynch connection, both in content (2.1) and form (2.2). Content-wise, convergences will be proven to permeate both authors' interest in theories of consciousness, typified in themes such as: psychoanalysis, especially the Oedipus Complex; self-deception; the Sartrean "look;" the corporeal subject and the phenomenological distinction between objective body and lived body.

Form-wise, the following narrative items will be mapped: Lynch's surrealism, recognizable in paradigmatic scenes from *Infinite Jest*; the character-idea, as both authors embody abstract ideas (Munning 2011: 61-76) in characters; and a formal commitment to "an anti-teleological spirit, [...] refusing or parodying the notion of resolution or goal-reaching on multiple levels" (Burn 2013: 61).

Section two will take into consideration Lynch's films produced prior or during the writing of *Infinite Jest*, and exclusively those Wallace expressed direct admiration for, namely: *Eraserhead* (1977), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Blue Velvet* (1986), and *Lost Highway* (1997).

## 1 Wallace's Manifestos

Inasmuch as Wallace criticism has always indicated the "essay-interview nexus" – where "essay" refers to "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction"<sup>1</sup> and "interview" to "An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace by Larry McCaffery"<sup>2</sup> – as the heart of Wallace's non-fictional production, it hasn't recognized that the essay "David Lynch Keeps His Head"<sup>3</sup> functions as the essay-interview nexus's corollary by ascribing to David Lynch the function of Wallace's alter ego. The manifestos, then, are three, and they function systematically.

EUP lays down the sociological analysis on which all of Wallace's discourse is founded. Loneliness is the inability to bear the psychic costs of being around other human beings. TV allows an illusory escape from loneliness by offering a one-way window into "human lives." The illusion is toxic: every viewer is, while watching, alone. We watch "over six hours a day" (Wallace 1998b: 22): we are all alone together, e unibus pluram. TV, though, simply gives us what we want: to sit passively and revere actors embodying "the promise of a vacation from human self-consciousness" (Wallace 1998b: 25). It's a fabricated, self-conscious, image-

<sup>1</sup> Hereafter EUP.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter "the interview."

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter "the Lynch essay."

promise of unself-consciousness. It's deceptive, and we know it. Nonetheless, we watch, and as we do "human worth [becomes] not just identical with but *rooted* in the phenomenon of watching" (Wallace 1998a: 26).

Thus EUP diagnoses the culmination of the metastasis of watching: we're constantly reminded that somewhere life is fuller, other, and we become "spectatorial, self-conscious" (Wallace 1998b: 34), fundamentally detached from ourselves. Fiction, consequently, must reinstate the real world beyond the illusions of mediation and recover human essence but fails because (at least in the '80s and '90s) it tries to fight popular culture through *irony*. To Wallace, irony has become the tyrant and essence of mediation and Western-industrial life.<sup>4</sup> This is Wallace's utmost recognition and foundation: we live under the tyranny of mediation and irony, "other people become judges" (Wallace 1998b: 63), the crime naïveté, and cynicism the "attitude of stand-out transcendence" (Wallace 1998b: 64).<sup>5</sup>

Only one path<sup>6</sup> remains feasible, then, and Wallace ends EUP accordingly:

the next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels [...] who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who [...] endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. (Wallace 1998b: 81)

Irony, loneliness, the metastasis of watching, the depletion of values; inextricably related predicaments tied to our worship of pleasure, as Marathe voices in *Infinite Jest*: "this appetite to choose death by pleasure if it is available to choose - this appetite of your people unable to choose appetites, this is the death" (Wallace 1997: 319) incarnated in TV's "*reward* [of] passive spectation" (McCaffery 2012: 33),<sup>7</sup> as Wallace explains in "the interview," where we discover that EUP's "TV" and "fiction," within Wallace's discourse, equal the general notions of "popular culture" and "art," and where we start reading his non-fiction as a system in which Lynch will be crucial.

"The interview" is published in the 1993 summer issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, as is EUP, and in it TV and commercial film are immediately linked. They are industries because they reward death by pleasure:<sup>8</sup> the alarming and "distinctly Western-industrial" (McCaffery 2012: 23) need to avoid pain at all costs (McCaffery 2012: 23).<sup>9</sup> These forms of low art "help us deny that we're lonely" (McCaffery 2012: 32); as does big-R Realism in fiction: "soothing, familiar, and anesthetic; it drops us right into spectation" (McCaffery 2012: 34).

Serious art, then, should "make you uncomfortable" (McCaffery 2012: 22) and "force you to work hard" (McCaffery 2012: 22). That's real pleasure: the "by-product of hard work and discomfort" (McCaffery 2012: 22). And magical, urgent fiction should impose real confrontation with, and relief from, loneliness. Not escape.<sup>10</sup>

In these sentences we find the human emotions treated with the reverence and conviction mentioned at the end of EUP. And here, also, Wallace's treatises about TV, art, culture, other writers and Lynch, finally become about the "stuff I write" (McCaffery 2012: 33). I, Wallace, am trying to write fiction that's "supposed to be

<sup>4</sup> See EUP for a thorough analysis of the concept of irony. For Wallace, since irony can debunk but not reconstruct, its pervasiveness in the '90s coincides with the emptying of social values.

<sup>5</sup> Also, note that for Wallace, irony and the culture of watching are inextricably related. They constitute the existential outlook of his generation.

<sup>6</sup> See "New Sincerity" (or "Post-postmodernism").

<sup>7</sup> Also, note that the same is stated in EUP: "television's greatest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding. One can rest while undergoing stimulation. Receive without giving" (Wallace 1998b: 37).

<sup>8</sup> "TV and popular film and most kinds of 'low' art [...] is [sic] lucrative precisely because it recognizes that audiences prefer 100 percent pleasure to the reality that tends to be 49 percent pleasure and 51 percent pain" (McCaffery 2012: 22).

<sup>9</sup> "In most other cultures, if you hurt, [...] they view this as basically healthy and natural. [...] For these cultures, getting rid of the pain without addressing the deeper cause would be like shutting off a fire alarm while the fire's still going. But if you just look at the number of ways that we try like hell to alleviate mere symptoms in this country [...] you can see an almost compulsive tendency to regard pain itself as the problem. And so pleasure becomes a value, a teleological end in itself" (McCaffery 2012: 23).

<sup>10</sup> "The magic of fiction is that it addresses and antagonizes the loneliness that dominates people" (McCaffery 2012: 31).

uneasy" (McCaffery 2012: 33), where "the reader has to do the work" (McCaffery 2012: 33) and confront loneliness: this to "illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human"<sup>11</sup> in our world.

The essay-interview nexus, then, is a system that states, without ever explicitly stating it: "I am the next literary rebel. I'll recover essence beyond mediation, without irony, by forcing readers out of spectation, to work."

But how? Use metafiction<sup>12</sup> (and non-linearity) to prohibit spectation. Cleanse it of irony<sup>13</sup> so that the reader has a payoff. If it works, reading becomes "like a full human relationship" (McCaffery 2012: 34) (which needs two inputs that meet halfway), and you'll give the reader something, she'll walk away fuller. Love. Togetherness. Human emotion. Do it with remarkable unself-consciousness (McCaffery 2012: 30). Take something "narcotizingly banal" (McCaffery 2012: 39) and reconstruct the tensions that lie beneath it, "make the familiar strange again" (McCaffery 2012: 38) recover its essence: EUP transposed to the interview's "I":

Really good work probably comes out of a willingness to disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you look banal or melodramatic or naïve or unhip or sappy, and to ask the reader really to feel something. (McCaffery 2012: 50)

And the Lynch of "the Lynch essay" does it all – note that the essay-interview nexus was published in 1993, and "the Lynch essay" (written in 1995) in September 1996. Wallace had last published fiction in 1989. *Infinite Jest* came out in February 1996. It had taken seven years. In that span, Wallace tried to redefine his career: *Infinite Jest* was his one big (1,079 pages) shot, the non-fiction the side dish. The essay-interview nexus launched a new movement in American literature, implicitly pointing to its author as the leading rebel. "The Lynch essay" followed by extending the discourse to visual art, and still pointed to that same rebellion. It was published right after *Infinite Jest*, capitalizing on the hype's peak (to which the essay-interview nexus had contributed). The nexus, then, is essay-interview-essay.<sup>14</sup> It should be seen as a structural system to support the publication of *Infinite Jest* and the redefinition of Wallace's career.

And in this tripartite nexus, Lynch is Wallace's alter ego. Lynch defies historical conventions to "wake the audience up" (Wallace 1998a: 169) (just as "a particular job of fiction is [...] to wake readers up" (Schechner 2013: 105). When "art film" is nonlinear and devoid of characterization and "commercial narrative film" is linear and possesses "strong individual characterization as well" (Wallace 1998a: 168); Lynch combines both into art films with round characters, i.e. actual human beings. Meaning he's Wallace in films: non-linearity in the service of human emotion, and with the same motives. Commercial narrative film, like TV and big-R Realism, dominates you (spectation).<sup>15</sup> Avant-garde film doesn't, but loses the moral, emotional, human side. Lynch's Expressionism, like Wallace's Post-postmodernism, offers the best of both worlds: emotion without domination. And this "is not only refreshing but redemptive" (Wallace 1998a: 191); it can also make us "morally uncomfortable" (Wallace 1998a: 203) (just as Wallace's fiction aspires to be "redemptive" by way of making us "uncomfortable" (McCaffery 2013: 21-22). And it does so by deconstructing our "black-and-white" (Wallace 1998a: 205) moral world. Lynch's characters are yielded to forces that co-inhabit them all the time, and this "has unsettling implications. People can be good or bad, but forces simply *are*" (Wallace 1998a: 204); judgment is confounded, evil might inhabit you, the viewer, as well – see e.g. how moral discussion erupted between critics after the release of *Blue Velvet*; including a wide range of accusations of moral deviancy (Todd 2012: 64-85).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "These are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" (McCaffery 2012: 26).

<sup>12</sup> Metafiction is that genre of fiction that reflects on itself as fiction. For Wallace, the genre's pervasive use of irony and self-consciousness has detached fiction from the world and brought a literary paralysis.

<sup>13</sup> Film scholars may be interested in Wallace's analogy between metafiction and the *Terminator* series: "I think you can see Cameron's *Terminator* movies as a metaphor for all literary art after Roland Barthes, viz., the movies' premise that the Cyberdyne NORAD computer becomes conscious of itself as *conscious*, as having interests and an agenda; the Cyberdyne becomes literally self-referential, and it's no accident that the result of this is nuclear war, Armageddon" (McCaffery 2012: 30).

<sup>14</sup> Where the added "essay" stands for "the Lynch essay."

<sup>15</sup> "Movies are an authoritarian medium. They vulnerabilize you and then dominate you. Part of the magic of going to a movie is surrendering to it, letting it dominate you" (Wallace 1998a: 169).

<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the critical discussion (Todd 2012: 64-85).

Lynch does this with “remarkable unself-consciousness” (Wallace 1998a: 198) (like the rebel of EUP). His movies are “fundamentally unironic” (Wallace 1998a: 199), they treat human emotion “in an old-fashioned, pre-postmodern way, i.e. nakedly, sincerely, without postmodernism’s abstraction or irony, [...] in this age when ironic self-consciousness is the one and only universally recognized badge of sophistication” (Wallace 1998a: 198-199).

The essay-interview-essay nexus, then, constitutes a systematic discourse – in which the subject shifts from “the next literary rebels,” to the “I,” to Lynch – that defends Wallace’s conception of art, and elevates it to the status of revolutionary. The highest summit of such art is identified in Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, in which Wallace saw the paradigmatic example of avant-garde art that manages to avoid the pitfalls of autoreferentiality and solipsism while riding “the fragile line between unremarkable and abnormal in America” (Max 2012: 214).

Finally, note that Wallace’s argument is bolstered by film criticism. “*Blue Velvet* ushered in a new era for cinema, in which the veneer of American suburban life was stripped away, revealing the dark beneath” (Hughes 2007: 80). It did so by unconventionally portraying mundane problems (Manning 2011: 68), abandoning normal structures of signification (Fuchs 1989), breaking down moral boundaries (Shattuc 1992), causing ethical uncertainties (Todd 2012: 79), and challenging its interpreters (Southworth 2011: 189) through a non-linear structure (Gifford 2007: IX-X).

For Wallace, seeing *Blue Velvet* was “a truly epiphanic experience” (*sic.*):<sup>17</sup> it forever altered Wallace’s art and strongly influenced the writing of *Infinite Jest*, both in content and form.

## 2 David Lynch and *Infinite Jest*

### 2.1 Content

#### Psychoanalysis, Family, and Oedipus

In his effort to “wake the audience up” by combining avant-garde form and profound human content, then, Wallace follows Lynch (as Wallace’s alter-ego) in leaving behind traditional Realism while still structuring *Infinite Jest* around the classic (and Realist) theme of family. This is precisely what Lynch has done with his own masterpiece *Blue Velvet*. In *Blue Velvet*, Jeffrey – the protagonist – finds his perverse surrogate parents in Frank and Dorothy, the gangster and the nightclub singer (Ballard 1996). The film, then, revisits the Oedipus theme (Hughes 2007: 81):<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey has sex with his “mother” (Dorothy) and kills his “father” (Frank). Also, when raping Dorothy, Frank takes the role of “Daddy” and “Baby (wants to fuck)” while forcing her to be “Mommy;” and Dorothy, when involved with Jeffrey, calls him “Don,” which indicates he’s either her surrogate husband (Donald) or son (Donny).

These are the foundations of the manifestos in practice: Lynch’s films may be surrealist, but they “are predominantly character-driven” (Biderman and Devlin 2011: 1), centered on “the human psyche,” (Biderman and Devlin 2011: 2), identity and psychology.

*Infinite Jest* follows the same aesthetic tenets. Set in a fictional future in which the O.N.A.N. (the fictional Organization of North American Nations) is threatened by the dissemination of a film that literally kills its viewers through ecstatic pleasure, ghosts interact with the living, and people carry their heart in bags; *Infinite Jest* is at heart an exploration of “the different ways ‘fathers impact sons’” (Burn 2003: 42)<sup>19</sup> and of family relationships in general. Reference to psychoanalysis is immediate: at page 27 of 1079, James Orin Incandenza, Hal (the protagonist’s) father, disguises as a “professional conversationalist” to trick Hal into a session. JOI

<sup>17</sup> Interviewed on *Charlie Rose* (1997).

<sup>18</sup> For evidence of the central role of the Oedipus theme in Lynch’s *whole filmography* (Hughes : 81).

<sup>19</sup> The “central theme [is] the fatal link between fathers and sons” (Dowling and Bell 2006: 125).

thinks Hal never speaks; Hal thinks JOI has hallucinations and nicknames him "Himself" (to indicate self-enclosure); both think the other is unable to communicate, and both are right (Wallace 1997: 838).<sup>20</sup>

Disorientation regarding the Self runs through all Incandenzas and is tied to addictions. The latter include sex, which leads to a revisit of the Oedipus complex. Orin, Hal's oldest brother, has a "repressed sexual attraction to his mother" (Dowling and Bell 2006: 38) (mirroring *Blue Velvet*'s Jeffrey's to Dorothy) that makes him "attracted only to young mothers of small children" (Wallace 1997: 899) and leads him to develop an addictive relation to sexual intercourse: his "gratification comes not from the sexual act itself but from his sense of having conquered the resistance of another person" (Bell and Dowling 2006: 68). Orin, in fact, refers to his sexual preys as "Subjects," by which he in fact means "the exact obverse".<sup>21</sup> He fully resembles *Blue Velvet*'s Frank, whose attraction to sex is, again, attraction to power, rage, and violence. Orin's sexual use of Subjects, finally, is a mix of the Oedipus complex, a pathological exercise of power, and an unconscious will to see other families hurt.

Avril, the mother, is a "malevolent influence on her sons" (Bell and Dowling 2006: 112). She's a 56-year-old nymphomaniac who's entertained sexual relationships with her half-brother and multiple colleagues and students both at E.T.A. (Enfield Tennis Academy, in which Hal lives, studies, and trains) and elsewhere. In Hal's words:

these encounters were imaginable but somehow generic, mostly a matter of athleticism and flexibility [...] I tended to imagine the Moms staring expressionlessly at ceilings throughout. The complicit passion would have come after, probably, with her need to be sure the encounter was hidden. (Wallace 1997: 957)

For Avril, as for Orin, then, sex is a pathological addiction that hides unconscious needs. And again, going back to *Blue Velvet*, a glaring parallel is noticeable: Avril's unconscious needs match Jeffrey's – just like Orin's matched both Jeffrey's (attraction to "mother") and Frank's (pathological power dynamics). As for Avril, Jeffrey's sexual attraction to Dorothy is attraction to hiddenness. This is testified by his café-conversation with Sandy: "I'm seeing something that was always hidden. I'm involved in a mystery. I'm in the middle of a mystery." "You love mysteries that much?" Sandy asks. "Yeah!"

And parallels run through the film too. Jeffrey's mystery involves taking part in Dorothy's sadomasochistic adultery. In this sense, his behavior equals Frank's: "Dorothy is obviously in a psychological state of extreme vulnerability. In the guise of helping her, Jeffrey is actually exploiting her [...] Dorothy later accuses Jeffrey of this when she repeatedly tells Sandy, 'he puts his disease in me'" (Sander 2011: 54).

This is how *Blue Velvet* becomes the story of Jeffrey's (an average college student) discovery of his own darkness, exemplified by likenesses between him and Frank (a murderer and rapist) that nullify the good/bad light/darkness dichotomies in a narrative by which "Lynch emphasizes that the brutal aspects of the human spirit are in all of us" (Sander 2011: 54).

And *Infinite Jest* follows in creating internal psychoanalytical patterns as well. As we've seen, sexual deviances link Avril and Orin. The parallel is confirmed by a scene – in which Avril wears a cheerleader's outfit while "blowing on the whistle" (Wallace 1997: 552) in front of John Wayne (E.T.A. student and sexual *liaison*), who's wearing "a football helmet and light shoulderpads and a bare Russell athletic supporter and socks and shoes and nothing else" (Wallace 1997: 552) and "produc[ing] the classic low-register growling sounds of U.S. Football" (Wallace 1997: 552-553) – that is as surreal as *Blue Velvet*'s Frank's encounter with Dorothy in which he kneels apart from her, grunts, inhales from his gas mask, moans, and breaks down while she spreads her legs in front of him whispering "Mommy loves you".

The Avril-Wayne encounter "stag[es] the original meeting between Orin and Joelle" (Bell and Dowling 2006: 112) (the only girl Orin ever loved). They've met in a football field. Orin was a football player and she was a cheerleader. The Oedipal theme is recalled as Joelle has much in common with Avril: "both are beautiful and

<sup>20</sup> See JOI reappearing as a wraith: "only to find, near the end, that your very own child had himself become blank, inbent, silent, frightening, mute" (Wallace 1997: 838).

<sup>21</sup> In Hal's words: "It's poignant somehow that you always use the word Subject when you mean the exact obverse" (Wallace 1997: 1008).

smart, obsessive-compulsive house-cleaners, intimately involved with the same men" (Bell and Dowling 2006: 113). It is then expanded as Joelle is both Orin's girlfriend and JOI's actress. She's the leading figure of the deadly entertainment and deeply involved with JOI. Orin is sure that the involvement is purely platonic. Avril is not. And the family's psychological dysfunctions merge – with JOI, Orin, Avril, and Joelle – in a square of dubious sexual and emotional involvement, including struggles of power, jealousy, love and hatred that mirrors *Blue Velvet*'s square involving Frank, Jeffrey, Dorothy, and Sandy.

Psychoanalysis and the Oedipal theme are at the center of the deadly entertainment as well. The deadly scene features Joelle "as some kind of instantiation of the archetypal figure Death [...] explaining in very simply childlike language [...] that Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal" (Wallace 1997: 788) (the pattern reproduces the Baby-Mommy dynamics of *Blue Velvet*). The P.O.V. is from a baby carriage, shot through a special lens that reproduces neonatal nystagmus, showing Joelle in close-up repeating "I'm so sorry. I'm so terribly sorry. I am so, so sorry. Please know how very, very, very sorry I am" (Wallace 1997: 939). The apology hints to the trauma and violence inherent in birth and family relationships, and is connected to the novel's main plot-device: JOI's deadly entertainment was his last desperate attempt to communicate with Hal by producing "something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life [and] to say I AM SO VERY, VERY SORRY and have it heard" (Wallace 1997: 839).

*Infinite Jest*, then, is very much a novel about self-displacement and its family origins, explored through the framework of psychoanalysis.

### Incarnations of Evil

That psychopathologies are a central theme in *Infinite Jest* is also shown by the presence of myriad minor characters who suffer from various mental disorders and addictions. Perhaps the greatest example is Randy Lenz, who's name refers to Georg Büchner's *Lenz* (1836), where the main character's "already unhinged mind [...] descends into madness" (Burn 2013: 71) *Infinite Jest*'s Lenz is responsible for "the plot's crucial escalation" (Burn 2013: 71), which makes the novel "strategically arranged to stem from a character whose name is synonymous with mental illness" (Burn 2013: 71). Lenz is also yet another incarnation of *Blue Velvet*'s Frank. He has "Rage and Powerlessness" (Wallace 1997: 538) issues he resolves by wandering through dark alleys after NA meetings to excruciatingly kill animals and discover that "what he liked to say at the moment of issue-resolution was: 'There'" (Wallace 1997: 541). This process of issue-resolution demands ever "more adrenal excitation and thus more sense of what Bill James one time called a *Catharsis* of resolving" (Wallace 1997: 544). So from rats he passes on to cats, and then to stray dogs, and then to pet dogs "directly inside the yards and porches of the people that owned them" (Wallace 1997: 544), and from just hitting them, to setting fire to them, and to cutting their throats.

Lenz, like Frank, is the "portrait of a gratuitously cruel, barely human being" (Bell and Dowling 2006: 146) and, like Frank's, his identity is the result of suffering. They both function as incarnations of evil, incapable of overcoming their inner brutal forces. And yet both are human. As Lenz alternates between his motiveless killings and the reading of William James (tied to conscientious thinking), Frank alternates between gratuitous violence and vulnerable breakdowns where he cries and refers to himself as "Baby" – e.g. he replies to Dorothy's "Hi, Baby" with "It's Daddy, you shithead! Where's my bourbon? Can't you fucking remember anything? Now it's dark. Spread your legs! Wider! Show it to me! Don't you fucking look at me!" Then hits her. Then suddenly has a moment of extreme vulnerability and needs to suck on his inhaler as his inner fragility requires help for oxygen, the very essence of life. Then he explodes again: "Mommy, baby wants to fuck! You fucker! Don't you fucking look at me!" Hits her, and finally rapes her.

This perpetual transition between evil and vulnerability is at the heart of both Frank's and Lenz's characters. *Blue Velvet* and *Infinite Jest*, then, also share modes of representation regarding evil, highlighting the artistic moral *telos* Wallace attributed to Lynch's films – namely the deconstruction of our "black-and-white" moral world we referred to in section one – and showing how he applied the same structure to *Infinite Jest*.

### Self-Deception and “the Look”

“In a Lynchian moral scheme it doesn’t make much sense to talk about either Darkness or about Light in isolation from its opposite [...] You could call this idea of evil Gnostic, or Taoist, or neo-Hegelian, but it’s also Lynchian” (Wallace 1998a: 205). As shown, *it is also Wallacian*, and closely recalls Schopenhauer’s philosophy, one that critics have already shown to relate to both *Infinite Jest* and *Blue Velvet*.<sup>22</sup> Schopenhauer thought an irrational “Will” pervades all reality and places “impulses [that] are evil and overpowering” (Lee 2011: 46) within all of us. In response, he theorized, the basic human condition becomes self-deception: we try to deny the “Will” within ourselves. In *Blue Velvet*, self-deception is incarnated, for example, in Sandy, who wants to stay with Jeffrey *as long as she doesn’t see things she can’t bear to see* (Lee 2011: 57). In *Infinite Jest*, it is yet another main theme. The novel contains two worlds. One is the world of the Incandenzas, which we’ve seen. The other is the world of addicts, of AA and NA. The two worlds become one in *addiction*, as all Incandenzas are addicted either to alcohol, marijuana, sex, or a combination of these. And addiction becomes both cause and consequence of self-deception. It starts off as the “desire to flee from the tension of existence” (den Dulk 2015: 52-53) – i.e. as *consequence* of self-deception –, to then become *cause* of it, as addicts want to “deny that they are addicts” (den Dulk 2015: 53). At this latter stage, addicts declare themselves *free* from addiction. Michael Pemulis, for example, “claims that ‘addict’ is just a ‘word’” (den Dulk 2015: 53), and Tiny Ewell “insists on hearing the exact definition of the word ‘alcoholic.’” Finally, “when the addiction has become an undeniable reality for the addict,” self-deception provides the opposite deceit, and the addict declares himself a prisoner, an Addict by nature, under Determinism’s law.

The recognized (den Dulk 2015) centrality of Sartre’s thought in Lynch’s and Wallace’s works (defined as *Existential*) revolves around these concepts. Self-deception is paramount in Sartre, and defined as “bad faith:” the process by which an alcoholic claims “to be an alcoholic ‘like a tree is a tree’” (den Dulk 2015: 53). A move performed in *Infinite Jest*, for example, by Kate Gompert and Joelle Van Dyne (den Dulk 2015: 52-53). And “bad faith,” in Sartre, is irredeemably related to “the look.” As it is, I argue, in *Blue Velvet* and *Infinite Jest*. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes “the look” by way of an example: a jealous man peeps through a keyhole. In the moment he’s pure *subjectivity*, *free*. Once somebody behind him *sees* him, he becomes the spying jealous man, i.e. he becomes *object* of “the look”: he now knows *shame*. In *Blue Velvet*, virtually the same scene is represented. Jeffrey hides in Dorothy’s closet and is in full control, fully *subject* and *Other* to the evil he witnesses. Once he is discovered he becomes participant. He *pretends* to be a voyeur, but we understand “that this is not entirely a pretense” (Lee 2011: 50). He’s subjected to sexual violence by Dorothy and thus initiated to the world of violence. In other words, once he becomes object of “the look,” his inner evil drives are unearthed. Furthermore, as Frank knocks on the door, Dorothy hides Jeffrey back into the closet, and we witness another (stronger) actualization of “the look” as Frank’s anger explodes every time he’s looked at. He screams “Don’t you fucking look at me!” countless times both during the scene and through the whole film. With this narrative device, Lynch ties Frank’s violence to his terror of “the look:” when Frank becomes *object* of the Other’s eyes, he *must* see the *objective* truth of his existence, i.e. his extreme *weakness* and viciousness. “The look,” then, makes Frank *object*, highly self-conscious, and thus paralyzes him, and Frank’s inhumanity becomes the fallout of such dread.

In *Infinite Jest* – to give just one example – this process is reproduced in the very first section, which narrates the very last chronological episode of the novel, portraying the outcome of Hal’s story, i.e. *the novel’s climax*. The scene is an absurdist literal representation of the Sartrean “look” and the resulting subject-object split. Hal is at a University Admission Interview and “can only utter unintelligible, terrifying sounds whenever he tries to speak” (den Dulk 2015: 43-44). He’s been instructed to let his headmaster and coach do the talking for him. Panic arises as he recognizes the split between his jailed subjectivity (what he can’t say) and the objectification of the Other’s “look” (what the adults in the room say about him). Being misperceived and objectified leads him to speak. A downfall ensues and Hal suffers from an epileptic crisis. This is the last sight we have of him: restrained on a bathroom floor as he’s trying to say “‘I am not what you *see*’” (Wallace 1997: 13).

Both *Blue Velvet*’s and *Infinite Jest*’s representations of intersubjectivity, then, reflect Sartre’s proverbial “hell

<sup>22</sup> As attested in, 1) regarding *Blue Velvet* (Lee 2011), and 2) regarding Wallace (Vermeule 2014).



is other people"<sup>23</sup> and Schopenhauer's notion that "almost all of our sorrows spring out of our relations with other people" (Vermeule 2014: 106).

### Phenomenology and the Corporeal Subject

Lynch's *Elephant Man*<sup>24</sup> (1980) can be seen as a version of Hal's story, chronologically reversed. It combines its focus on the Sartrean "look" with an exhaustive treatment of the *corporeal subject*, a topic thoroughly represented in *Infinite Jest* in the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed (U.H.I.D.). *Elephant Man*'s theme is unmistakably reprised in *Infinite Jest*, which constitutes further proof of Lynch's enormous influence on the novel. John Merrick (*Elephant Man*'s protagonist) is hideously deformed, nicknamed "elephant man," and exploited as freak-show attraction by his cruel manager. His initial situation is equivalent – on a subject-object split level – to Hal's final one. Like Hal, Merrick can't speak, and his identity becomes *object* of various Others' – freak-show audience, doctors, London high society – "looks." And like Hal, Merrick knows himself as a human being, but Others (with their "look") misperceive him as hideous, animal, object. Eventually, one doctor Treves becomes Merrick's friend. Merrick, then, relieved, *speaks*, and shows himself as an intelligent, cultivated, delicate, and religious man. The pattern – compared to Hal's – seems to be inverted: Hal becomes object while Merrick seems to become subject. But, finally, tensions arise between his apparent integration in society (as free subjectivity) and obvious (violent) displays in which "Merrick remains an object of voyeurism and exploitation" (Correm 2011: 128) (as object of "the look"). A contrast the film never resolves.

As Correm argues, *EM* plays on the phenomenological distinction between *objective body* and *lived body*, between "seeing and being seen, perceiving and being perceived, touching and being touched" (Correm 2011: 131). The distinction "reveals the cruelty, abuse, and exploitation to which a perception of one's body as objective body can lead" (Correm 2011: 134). Merrick's body is the object of study, curiosity, desire, oppression, and torture. Never of feeling or empathy. Consequently, his perception of himself as objective body (i.e. the internalization of the Sartrean "look") becomes the source of self-consciousness, despair, and alienation. As Edith Stein's phenomenology explains,<sup>25</sup> subjectivity *requires* one's perception of one's own lived body, which in turn requires "*intersubjectivity*" (Correm 2011: 136) i.e. that Others see you as subject by means of *empathy*. In other words: a Self is born only through the Other's empathy. *EM* represents the shifting struggles between the lived body and objective body perceptions, and "shows that the possibility of ethical relations arises with the understanding of the centrality of our body in our experience" (Correm 2011: 140).

And "a preoccupation with 'living in your body'" (Burn 2013: 65) acquires a central role in *Infinite Jest*, too. The best example is the U.H.I.D., where *deformed* members "don the veil [...] declar[ing] openly that they wish to hide from all sight" (Wallace 1997: 534). These members seek a response to the phenomenological experience of self-perception as objective body: "being hideously or improbably deformed [...] you're the *object* of stares that [...] people try to conceal" (Wallace 1997: 534). The objectification of "the look" makes U.H.I.D. members alienated from their own subjectivity (and body): "you want nothing more than to hide from the covert stares, to [...] be reduced to nothing but a voice among other voices, [...] equal, no different" (Wallace 1997: 534). Just like Merrick, who too dons a veil and wishes he "could sleep like normal people."

*Elephant Man* and *Infinite Jest*, then, both represent the objectification of "the look" as the perceptive split between objective body and lived body, and they do so in a similar fashion. *Infinite Jest*, though, shows a further level of misplaced subjectivity: U.H.I.D. members feel not merely ashamed of their deformity; they feel *shame for being ashamed* of their deformity:

You know that you can't help how you look but that you are supposed to be able to help how much you *care* about how you look [...] You feign acceptance of your deformity. You take your desire to hide and conceal it under a mask of acceptance. (Wallace 1997: 534-535)

<sup>23</sup> In the play *No Exit* (1944).

<sup>24</sup> Hereafter *EM*.

<sup>25</sup> See Correm's reference to Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy* (Correm 2011: 137).

The U.H.I.D., then, represents the worst possible consequence generating from perceptive distortions regarding the lived body and objective body: not only the disruption of relationships among people, but the inner, total misplacement of the Self.

## 2.2 Form

### The Character-Idea

Parallels in content turn into parallels in form, structure and characterization. We'll start with the latter. Lynch and Wallace develop a peculiar type of character: *their characters embody abstract ideas* (Manning 2011, Kelly 2014). In *Eraserhead* (1977), Henry, in the dinner scene, cuts a disgusting manmade-chicken that still moves and loses "putrescent fluid [...] from the cavity" (Manning 2011: 67). The chicken is a surrealist device that embodies the displacement of Henry's unconscious. The unconscious is neither discussed nor hinted at, it is *directly embodied* in the chicken, the object of both ours and Henry's attention. It is the most distressing scene of the film. In *Blue Velvet*, ideas "are diametrically cast against" (Todd 2012: 68) one another. On the one hand, Jeffrey embodies the adolescent hero and Sandy "his virginal sweetheart" (Todd 2012: 68). On the other, Frank embodies Darkness and Dorothy is the victim-accomplice where Light and Darkness clash. As Wallace suggests in "the Lynch essay," the embodiment of abstract (universal) ideas, in his movies, coexists with Lynch's devoting "quite a lot of energy to character" (Wallace 1998a: 168) and his representing *particular* psychologies, i.e. actual human beings. In Lynch's films, in other words, the particular and the universal are fully represented simultaneously. A project that Wallace, a *novelist of ideas* (Kelly 2013), took upon himself. His fictional worlds are "constructed through [his] close engagement with abstract ideas – logical, political, historical" (Kelly 2013: 3).

In *The Broom of the System* (1987), Lenore fears that she is no more than a linguistic construct. In *Infinite Jest*, Don Gately commits to a Higher Power he doesn't believe in. In *The Pale King* (2011), Chris Fogle's life is turned around by insights into the nature of freedom. Wallace "insist[s] on the centrality of ideas [and] abstract structures that transcend the individual's psychology" (Kelly 2013: 3-4), and does so by posing "heavy reliance on scenes of dialogue" (Kelly 2013: 5). We'll look at one paradigmatic example: the recurring dialogue in *Infinite Jest* between Steeply and Marathe. Their voices directly rehash Isaiah Berlin's 1958 lecture "Two Concepts of Liberty." As the conversation is split throughout the novel, it encompasses all the strands of the plot. Steeply embodies the American liberal idea of freedom, i.e. Berlin's "negative liberty:" "the absence of external constraints on the individual agent" (Kelly 2013: 11). Marathe embodies Berlin's "positive liberty," where the agent possesses internal control and self-mastery in pursuit of his/her goals, [which] are assumed to require support from [...] larger communal goals" (Kelly 2013: 11). In *Infinite Jest*, the terms are transposed from "negative liberty" and "positive liberty" to "freedom from" and "freedom to," but the content remains exactly the same. The point, Marathe thinks, is that America has lost its sense of community, and therefore no individual possesses "positive liberty." While the discussion is abstract in nature, its direct empirical consequences are rendered obvious in the plot and in character psychology. These notions of freedom animate the war between Quebec and O.N.A.N. "Freedom from" constitutes the ideological basis of America's dystopian world of "death by pleasure." "Freedom to" leads Marathe to sacrifice for his country and its ideals by joining a terrorist group. The contrast between these two modes of freedom, then, precipitates the deadly Entertainment emergency. In Marathe's estimation, the cartridge is a mass murder weapon only because Americans are free from constraint *but have no self-mastery, and therefore are unable to choose anything but immediate pleasure*, i.e. only because "someone or some people among your own history sometime killed your U.S.A. nation already" (Wallace 1997: 319). Abstract ideas, therefore, constitute the driving force of *Infinite Jest*, and they do so from wide structural and ideological levels to particular instantiations, both in plot lines and individual characterizations.

### Lynch's Surrealism

*Blue Velvet* [...] was my first hint that [...] whatever the project of surrealism is works way better if 99.9 percent of it is absolutely real [...] Most of the word surrealism is realism, you know? It's

extra-realism, it's something on top of realism. It's that one thing in a Lynch frame that's off. That if everything else weren't picture-perfect and totally structured, wouldn't hit. (Lipsky 2010: 175)

Wallace's definition of Lynch's surrealism is the standard in film criticism. Our interest is to look at one of myriad examples from *Infinite Jest* in which Wallace incorporates Lynch's surrealism into his writing. We're naming this section "the stolen heart scene," which Dowling defines as "one of the more surrealistic moments in *Infinite Jest*" (Bell and Dowling 2006: 150). Poor Tony (Wallace 1997: 142-144) is a junky, criminal, homosexual transvestite. When passing through "fashionable Harvard Square," he snatches "a stylish Etienne Aigner purse" from a Boston accountant. The purse contains nothing of value, except a "Jarvik IX Exterior Artificial Heart." Here Lynch's surrealism comes in. The sick woman is the second American ever to receive a Jarvik IX, a carry-in-purse artificial heart. She chases Poor Tony screaming "Stop her! She stole my heart!" while bystanders shake their heads and "smil[e] knowingly at what they ignorantly presumed to be yet another alternative lifestyle's relationship gone sour." The misunderstanding includes two policemen who "passively quip, 'Happens all the time,' as the victimized woman staggered frantically past in the wake of the fleet transvestite, shouting for help for her stolen heart." The woman gives chase for four blocks, collapses, and dies on the sidewalk, amid the amusement of upscale Cambridge, in a scene that replays Wallace's own definition of Lynchian in every aspect, as proven by yet another extensive quote where Lynchian means:

a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine [...] Some guy killing his wife [...] doesn't have much of a Lynchian tang to it, though if [the guy] begins defending his actions by giving an involved analysis of the comparative merits of Jif and Skippy, and if the beat cops [...] have to admit that the guy's got a point [...] the homicide could be described as having Lynchian elements. (Wallace 1998a: 161-162)

### Antiteleological Spirit

For Wallace, "both film and novel can [...] fulfill similar goals" (Sayers 2014: 107). He writes, following Barthes (Barthes 1986), of commercial cinema as "conducive of sleep" (Sayers 2014: 108). In *Infinite Jest*, the first victim of the deadly Entertainment – a medical attaché – has a relationship to entertainment comparable to an addict's relationship to drugs or alcohol: entertainment, for him, means "spectation into a fully relaxed night's sleep" (Wallace 1997: 34). This constitutes a fictional reiteration of the manifestos, as "entertainment, for Wallace, lies on one side of a 'continuum,' at the other side of which is art" (Sayers 2014: 108).

Following the manifestos, "*Infinite Jest*'s resistance to ordinary textual cohesion [becomes] not a simple matter of plot" (Burn 2013: 61). Instead, its "layered aesthetic, designed to constantly generate multiple meanings" (Burn 2013: 65) embodies the novel's "antiteleological spirit" (Burn 2013: 61). In this spirit, *Infinite Jest* strives for "the quality of *bothness* that Wallace locates in David Lynch's cinematic vision" (Burn 2013: 72), and its prose, which "seems to be double-voiced" (Burn 2013: 72), follows. The reader, then, must sort through a complex web of digressive information and impose some kind of order on the seemingly infinite divided consciousnesses (also a Lynchian recurrence) he comes to face while experiencing the work of art. The novel deliberately rejects any *denouement* so that author and reader can become partners in the quest for meaning. It has a circular structure, begins where it ends, and ends where it begins. In between, everything is left "tangled, densely unresolved," as "there is a significant gap, a void, into which all the novel's *unanswered questions fall endlessly*" (Boswell 2003: 174).

This is characteristic of Lynch's art as well. *Eraserhead* is a quintessential example. As demonstrated by Southworth, like most Lynchian films, *Eraserhead* challenges its interpreters with "several narrative sequences that interweave and interrupt each other" (Southworth 2011: 189). This makes interpretation and definition agonizingly confusing, which is the desired effect, as "Lynch makes an intentional effort to baffle and confuse the audience" (Southworth 2011: 189). Both Wallace's writing and Lynch's cinema, then, are "digressive, rather than linear" (Hering 2015: 136). Their narratives are "characterized by dissociation and disorientation and frustrate [audience] expectations about narrative cause and effect" (Hering 2015: 129). Only a re-reading or re-watching will reveal the full scope of their contents. That is, only through the audience's *work* will their narratives acquire their meaning. In Wallace and Lynch, then, the audience "is placed within a complex relational web of informational and formal possibilities" (Hering 2015: 140) and is called to systematize, assign

meaning to discrete pieces, and finally recreate a whole. There is no art, for Wallace and Lynch, without an active audience.

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