FIGURANT SOCIETY: POST-POSTMODERNITY AND DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S *INFINITE JEST*

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

By

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Washington, DC
April 24, 2009
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To Anna Katerina Sagal

In appreciation of Renata Marchione, Scott Rossow, and Jordan Rubinstein

With many thanks to Ricardo Ortiz and Henry Schwarz
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A Personal Note, In The Name Of Eschewing Future Personal Notes

It was on September 10\textsuperscript{th} of 2008 that I received permission from the Georgetown University English Department Director of Graduate Studies to undertake an independent course of study examining potential connections between David Foster Wallace’s 1996 novel \textit{Infinite Jest} and the social networking sites Facebook and MySpace. An unlikely pairing at first glance, yes, but I was fascinated by the possibilities. It struck me that Wallace’s novel, in its exploration of the loneliness experienced by a number of different individuals as they each attempt to engage the entertainment devices of their culture, and their society-at-large, seemed to foreshadow some of the under examined, infrequently reported, and as of yet undocumented elements of these newly minted internet behemoths. Could the growing prevalence of entities such as Facebook, MySpace, Second Life, or Twitter ever breed the kind of solipsism and fraudulent self-sufficiency present in Wallace’s fictional world of \textit{Infinite Jest}? I was very excited by this line of thinking, and by the opportunity to work closely with such an eminent contemporary work of fiction, and so I was nothing short of ecstatic to hear of my proposal’s official approval. I was now assured of standing for my oral examinations on this very topic, and while it was certain that my \textit{exact} line of inquiry would change shape many times in the months to come, it was almost just as likely that my thesis project would be permitted to grow out of these research efforts. I went to a celebratory dinner that evening with a dear friend most content in this knowledge.
Only two days later, on September 12\textsuperscript{th}, David Foster Wallace killed himself. In an eerie and haunting coincidence, I had purchased a new copy of \textit{Infinite Jest} that Friday afternoon; my trusty longtime companion was falling apart, and regardless I did not want to mar it by marking it up unnecessarily with various scrawled and scribbled notations. Then, like seemingly most of the world, I did not hear of Wallace’s death until some twenty-four hours after the fact, on Saturday night.

Unadorned: What a loss, to his family and friends, who all lost a loved one, and to the world of literature, which lost a wonderful writer, and a relentless advocate for the power of the printed word. As you, who after all are taking the time to read this particular piece, are surely aware, the resultant outpouring of emotion was strong and swift, with appreciations and eulogies and memorials, reflections and retrospectives and tributes all flowing in from every corner of the community of arts. Many wrote knowingly of a dedicated friend and teacher, others still of the passionate voice known only via words on a page, but resoundingly resonant just the same; all seemed determined to deliver immediately the type of closed door career summation that would have just months prior seemed preposterous for an artist so committed to evolving and pushing the boundaries of his craft.

It was in these first few weeks after Wallace’s death, as I continued to sift through the assorted remembrances still intermittently filtering out to the public, knowing full well that my own pending work on his material would have to in some
way acknowledge this sad turn of events, that I became cognizant of two trends, and I in turn had two major realizations, if you will.

The first of these realizations was just how prevalent the personal was in these recollections; that is, once the initial wave of plain and obligatory obituaries passed, I slowly but surely noticed how many of these remembrances had something to say (something positive) about Wallace as a person. In death, Wallace was being made a very human figure. You were just as likely to read a former student’s account of the ways in which he was an incredibly approachable and helpful teacher, or a fan’s blog post about his graciousness at a post-reading gathering some odd years past, as you were to encounter a text exploring the intricacies of his prose. It was a curious phenomenon, and many in the media noted that such emotive showings for a literary figure were rare. The second trend I noticed involved categorizations of Wallace as an author, and of his art. Countless articles (nearly all articles that did not fall into the aforementioned Personal Zone) began with thunderous headlines such as

ACCLAIMED POSTMODERN AUTHOR DEAD AT 46, or featured broad lead-ins along the lines of “David Foster Wallace, the prominent postmodern author of such works as Infinite Jest and A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again, killed himself in his California home Friday night. Wallace, whose magnum opus Infinite Jest was a colossal 1,079 page novel in the mold of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and John Barth, was…. You get the idea. Wallace’s oeuvre was receiving its respectful due, as
his books were being placed on the shelf snugly next to the great authors of the “high” postmodern literary generation.

Why are these points the least bit noteworthy? you now have full license to ask. They are each of importance, and great import at that, because they each represent a troublesome problem for future Wallace scholarship. These are issues I want to address here.

Simply put, David Foster Wallace is not a postmodern novelist; this much has become clear to me over the course of the past year. The more I mulled the matter over and over in my head, and the more I wrestled with the direction in which to take my own thesis project, the greater the magnitude of this otherwise seemingly innocuous claim seemed to me, until here and now, where and when this question of postmodernity versus….something-other has come to take center stage in my efforts. Thus, in the pages to come I will be making a two-pronged claim. I will be arguing that:

1) We are no longer living in the postmodern cultural moment, and
2) *Infinite Jest* is the first, and as of yet best, piece of fiction to fully capture my conceptualization of an emergent post-postmodern cultural condition.

To my mind, these two statements necessarily go hand-in-hand. If I want to convince you *Infinite Jest* is not a postmodern novel, does not it only follow that I must prove to you first that we are likewise not living in a postmodern era? This is how I
will be conducting the proceedings. I have settled on this dichotomous structure for the sake of argumentative stability, not because the two parts are mutually exclusive. In fact, as one would rightfully expect, the two are inseparable; point being, please expect healthy overlap between the two phases of discussion. In some places, I hope you can forgive any sense of redundancy, while in others I ask you to tie together the connections yourself.⁵ There is a lot of ground to cover.

Now, to address my first realization: We cannot accomplish this sort of work in the field of David Foster Wallace studies if we allow ourselves to now read his work through biography-tinged glasses.⁴ It is this position, this philosophical stance, which is at the root of my great aversion to all of the recent personality-based outpourings of sentiment, not any sort of emotional deficiency; I do not think I am the possessor of a cold, callous, and compassion-less character.⁵ I could share as many warm and moving anecdotes about the impact of Mr. Wallace’s work as the next person.⁶ However, for those inclined to care, such sentiments are a very bad thing in this academic realm. Already, even in casual settings, much more is being made of the various suicides and depressions present throughout Wallace’s work than ever before. I have witnessed this firsthand, and it is not pretty; not too long ago a colleague of mine, well aware of my subject material, made to me the horrific remark, “Well now there will be more of a market for your kind of work.” If we care anything at all about the judicious consideration of contemporary literature, this will never do. Thus the call for the quarantining of Wallace’s work from the developing cult of personality, even if this
means overcompensating for the time being (as obviously nothing, no work of art, can ever be truly considered in a vacuum, free of any and all associative links to its creator).

It is pleasant to know that David Foster Wallace was by accounts a kind soul, and intriguing to know the story behind his long-term battle with illness; neither should have a bearing on the assessment of his achievement as an artist. And so I will accordingly strive to conduct this endeavor.
An Overview

It is necessary first to take a moment to expound upon the order of business set forth in the previous section. It is my intent in the pages that follow to demonstrate how our postmodern condition, in a logical and progressive development, has given way to a new and different state of existence. In order to set about this, I am devoting my first chapter to a summary of postmodernity itself, where I will be giving brief readings of two prominent pieces of postmodern theory. These passages will serve as my working definitions of the postmodern condition.

Chapter two will see me arguing for this aforementioned evolved state of existence by pushing directly up against the postmodern parameters outlined in chapter one. In keeping with the nomenclatorial tradition of recent theoretical history, and in the absence of accepted/established precedence, I will be in many places throughout this text referring to this new entity as post-postmodernism. My third and final chapter will be a reading of David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest* as an urtext of this emerging age, this post-postmodern condition.

At the heart of all this analysis I have isolated and zeroed in on the notion of the *figurant*. It is my primary assertion that we today occupy a cultural space where possibilities for the refiguring of representation, subjectivity, and general forms of social interaction are presenting themselves as never before. Those individuals who have traditionally formed the silent majority of our society—the marginalized, the
peripheral, the painfully average—have new access to self-expression, to personal
vocalization; the subject of modernity in 2009 has a very different story to tell about its
own self, and very different ways of telling it, than the subject of modernity did in 1984.
Though the playing field is of course not perfectly uniform or level just yet, the balance
of narrative power has shifted, and remains ever shifting. Such changes, I argue, have
formed the basis of an altered enough set of circumstances to warrant a theoretical
reassessment of the “cultural logic” defining our day and age.

I call this new post-postmodern culture of ours Figurant Society. The word
figurant is most recognizable as a French ballet term denoting a dancer who does not
perform solos, and it has come in more recent usage to signify, in general, an actor or
performer who has no lines or speaking parts. Historically, in the scheme of the world
at large, the vast majority of us have been figurants, going about our daily lives unseen,
unheard, and unnoticed. Now that we find ourselves in the midst of a sea change in
regards to who can be seen, who can be heard, and who can be noticed, it follows that
the figurant is at the core of this transformation.

Figurant is also a term that occurs notably in the literary text with which I have
chosen to ground all the cultural analysis of my first two chapters, *Infinite Jest*, lending
strategic symmetry to the two parts of my post-postmodern study. In this way, chapters
two and three work together to provide a coherent picture of our developing post-
postmodernity.
Lyotard, Jameson, And The Essence Of Postmodernity

In the increasingly esoteric circles where such matters remain of great gravity and are thus still discussed accordingly, there are few words as explosive as *postmodern* (or any of its variations). At our current advanced date, the mere mention of this word in an academic setting is liable to induce concern, confusion, and even controversy, a veritable scholarly clamor. *What is postmodernism? How does one define that which is postmodern? Are we, right this moment, living in the postmodern age?* These broad questions (and more) are the sort of far-reaching fare one is likely to encounter when engaged in a dialogue about what exactly entails *the postmodern*, and despite their general nature and overall air of simplicity, they are very pertinent and probing queries. Even for those so inclined to explore this nebulous topic, there are few consensus-yielding answers to be found. Despite the best efforts of many an individual, it is hard to identify just one single, authoritative definition of postmodernity, one explicative model or template that is easily conveyable to the uninitiated, and in recent years many have grown weary of so much as trying; attempting to advance postmodern theory has gone out of vogue just as acceptance of contemporary society’s postmodern condition has become quite commonplace. Scholars and writers laboring in relevant fields exhibit a working knowledge of the subject, but display little desire to grapple any longer *firsthand* with postmodernism.
It is into this climate that I submit the following endeavor, and it is for these reasons that I have been long reluctant to drop my defenses and blurt out the first of my work’s two main tenets: That we, especially those of us living in the developed, late-capitalist, post-industrial West, are no longer living in a postmodern world, as we exist in an environment developmentally and experientially beyond what has been traditionally for decades now considered postmodern.

I am hopeful this statement makes clear the nature of my topical reticence; one is naturally hesitant to make such a sweeping claim when doing so means building experimentally on a tentative theoretical foundation which is itself ever shifting, much debated, and frequently maligned. All the same, it is an argument whose time has come. Yet, how to go about this task?

After extensive deliberation, I have decided that the best fashion in which to proceed involves tethering this first part of my study directly to (though as mentioned above there are many contrasting examples of thought available to those so interested) two definitive works on postmodernism, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, and Fredric Jameson’s essay “Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” This decision is to a degree arbitrary, but only to a degree. These two works arguably represent the most important scholarly works available on postmodernism (because they are the most influential), and I am not alone in holding such a position. One could belabor the minutiae of numerous other fine studies, but doing so in this type of setting would be impractical, lacking in clarity and
concision. After all, the goal here is not to rehash the basic principles of postmodernity for its own sake—the sake of an exhaustive rendering of the historical record—but rather to provide the necessary framework for an exploration of that which is now culturally burgeoning, bristling with unexplicated energy, ready to be known. As it is my hope, when all is said and done, to convince you, the reader, that at least as it pertains to the ordering of contemporary human experience via theoretical machinations, you are indeed taking part in a new kind of experience, it would seem that the most effective way to go about this is to establish the nature of postmodernity as clearly as possible, and contrast those positions with the conditions of social and cultural life today. I will be therefore be devoting this work’s first section to a simple synopsis of postmodernity.

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For those whose native tongue is English, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* takes the form of a translation from the French, and is a very dense read. Much of what concerns Lyotard in this particular piece is of a technical, scientific bent. As a result, for a work like the one you are currently either holding in your hands or viewing on your screen, which intends to eventually ground its analysis in an artistic medium (literature), much of Lyotard’s analysis is superfluous. However, the main tenets of his piece are each of direct relevance to our business, and it is to these very specific points that I will limit my
summary; I simply want to explicate briefly a few main points and quotes from *The Postmodern Condition*.  

It is attention to the changing nature of society’s relationship to the notions of narrative and knowledge that best defines Lyotard’s postmodern. For Lyotard, the postmodern is an age of increased scientific activity and authority, so much so that the realm of structural science has ascended at the cost of historical narrative. The traditional role of the narrative—those stories we construct and tell about our culture, our society, our individual lives, both past and present—is under threat and in flux in the postmodern sphere. By way of introduction Lyotard famously writes, “[s]implifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives,”¹¹ and henceforth issues The Great Question: “Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?”¹² 

Lyotard never quite gets around to satisfactorily answering this grand question, but that is okay, as presenting a solution is never quite the point in his brief essay. In the meantime he discourses at length about the postmodern means for knowledge dissemination. On this second crucial topic of knowledge, in the section “The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Societies,” Lyotard states that the “two principal functions” of knowledge are “research and the transmission of acquired learning,” and makes much of how “the proliferation of information-processing machines” has had as much “of an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation (transportation systems) and later, in the circulation of sounds and visual
images (the media).” However, despite these technological advances, and their great impact, “[a]ccess to data is, and will continue to be, the prerogative of experts of all stripes.” It is here that Lyotard’s postmodern forms its murkiest confluence. What kind of world is a world that has lost its great, overarching thematic structures, has seen information, knowledge, and the ability to learn dispersed more diversely and extensively than ever before, yet still features limits and constrictions when it comes to the control and flow of data?

It is a world of competition and altered representations, one that is full of volatility, unpredictability, and stern contrasts. This postmodern place of jarring juxtapositions, which Lyotard believes is invested with so much potential, is much more efficiently and eloquently mapped out in Fredric Jameson’s seminal 1984 essay, “Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.”

Segueing to Jameson from Lyotard is a neat and tidy affair; Jameson wrote the Foreword to the 1984 University of Minnesota Press edition of The Postmodern Condition, and so we have direct access to his thoughts on Lyotard’s work. Those thoughts are mixed. On one hand, Jameson concurs with Lyotard. Both men see postmodernism as being paralogical—about instability at both the cultural level and the level of the individual self. Jameson writes that in Lyotard:

[T]he dissolution of the self into a host of networks and relations of contradictory codes and interfering messages is prophetically valorized. This view not surprisingly will then determine Lyotard’s ultimate vision of science and knowledge today as search, not for consensus, but very precisely for “instabilities,” as a practice of paralogism, in which the point is not to reach
agreement but to undermine from within the very framework in which the previous “normal science” has been conducted. The rhetoric in which all this is conveyed is to be sure one of struggle, conflict.\textsuperscript{15}

However, Jameson interprets Lyotard as not going far enough in his efforts to define postmodernism as its own distinct historical entity: “Lyotard is in reality quite unwilling to posit a postmodernist stage radically different from the period of high modernism and involving a fundamental historical and cultural break with the last.”\textsuperscript{16} Instead, Lyotard’s postmodernism is simply a “cyclical moment that returns before the emergence of ever new modernisms in the stricter sense.”\textsuperscript{17}

For Jameson, this is not enough. His postmodernism is not a period or phase of high modernism, but rather a new societal state rising out of the ashes of the failed modernist project. “[H]igh modernism,” Jameson intones, “can be definitively certified as dead and as a thing of the past: its Utopian ambitions were unrealizable and its formal innovations exhausted.”\textsuperscript{18}

Whereas Lyotard’s study of the postmodern focuses on the changing means for the dissemination of knowledge, and the role of the scientific in everyday life, Jameson’s postmodern is a place of culture, for in postmodern society culture itself has exploded and is now a part of everything; to that end, Jameson claims that critical distance—the idea that there is some sort of space between the cultural artifact and the subject that is viewing or experiencing it critically—no longer exists in a postmodern world.\textsuperscript{19} Such space is no longer empty or neutral, an observational vacuum, but is itself also inhabited by culture. This is a curious and intriguing point to make on a
number of levels, not the least of which is the fact that Jameson himself attempts to elucidate this claim through critical observation; Jameson illustrates this point about distance/space through several readings of various art objects, including his quite famous examination of Andy Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*. Reading this painting, Jameson further argues for the depthlessness and superficiality of the postmodern art object. “Nothing in this painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer,” he says of *Diamond Dust Shoes.* In turn, a large part of this artistic depthlessness stems from the notion that postmodern artists such as Warhol have no qualms about letting traditionally external (i.e., existing outside of the traditional purview of art) cultural commodities occupy the space of their work—“Warhol’s work in fact turns centrally around commodification.” Jameson maps this trend out as part of the larger natural progression of things, the shift from modernism to postmodernism; for instance, high modernists such as Joyce were likely to “quote” items from “schlock and kitsch,” but postmodernist artists fully incorporate such motifs and materials into their work.

Define schlock and kitsch? What is one person’s schlock and kitsch but another person’s gold? Indeed, much of Jameson’s argument is perceptual, and there are two major perception-based conceptualizations that must be mentioned in order to better encapsulate Jameson’s postmodern world. First, Jameson is much concerned with what he dubs “the waning of affect in postmodern culture.” Jameson writes:

[C]oncepts such as anxiety and alienation (and the experiences to which they correspond) are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern….This shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology can be characterized as one in which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter’s fragmentation….
expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older *anomie* of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings….are now free-floating and impersonal and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria.  

In essence, it is this general idea that ties together many of the otherwise potentially divergent strands and tangents of “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” Shooting off from this central point, Jameson’s waning of affect manifests itself three primary ways in postmodern art. First, this waning of affect results in the loss of style. What this means is that postmodern art is best described as the art of appropriation—all unique forms of individual expression having been exhausted throughout the era of high modernism, postmodern artists are now “cannibals” of the artistic past. Therefore, the rise of postmodern artistic trend number two: the growth of pastiche. Jameson’s pastiche is a bastardization of parody; pastiche is “without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists.” Thus, postmodern artists use the tools/works of others, but not as devices to aid the tools/works from their own project; rather, they utilize past pieces or existing art as their own medium. There is no winking reference, or coy nod, to a shared knowledge of the other artistic style. All is delivered deadpan.

Finally, this death of style in postmodern art has resulted in the importance of relationship through difference. Jameson is able to fit this idea neatly into aphoristic
form, stating “difference relates.”27 Citing a poem by Bob Perelman, Jameson demonstrates that postmodern art tends to take the shape of “a text, whose reading proceeds by differentiation rather than by unification.”28 This is a crucial thing to remember about Jameson’s postmodern: it is a fragmented place, defined by the act of making sense of the broken shards, as opposed to the more traditional task of achieving some semblance of understanding through the observation of a completed whole. The spatial relationship of the audience to the art object is altered and decontextualized in the postmodern.

Speaking of space, to account for his second major perceptual construct, Jameson argues that “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism.”29 The demands of this new space are the last step in the process of disorientation for the postmodern subject. Jameson focuses here on the craft of postmodern architecture, citing various examples of architects whose work has been original and powerful enough to function as “something like a mutation in space itself.”30 Jameson goes as far as to liken this mutation to an evolutionary gap, proclaiming that humans have as of yet (at the time of his writing) not developed the capacity to grasp the startlingly different use of space in prominent examples of postmodern design.
Much, much more could be written about the two works just profiled. Even so, it would be a waste of time to devote any more energy to recapitulating the efforts of Lyotard and Jameson when the real enterprise is yet at hand. Please keep their ideas in mind—maybe it is best to sort of shape them into mental bullet points—as we move forward; we will be engaging with their ideas further in the pages to come.
An acquaintance of mine, when some time ago I first spoke to him of my desire to write about an emergent post-postmodern condition, shook his head and exclaimed with feigned ruefulness, “And how I was just getting used to the postmodern!” He supported my venture, and so was being droll, but I believe that his quip speaks to a larger issue. The cliché is true: Old habits do die hard. For something that was supposed to describe and encapsulate the startling new shape of an evolving society, the concept of postmodernity has strangely enough become somewhat staid, the stuff of conventions, while said surrounding society has continued evolving. In the scholastic sphere, postmodernity is now a comfortable catchall, its initial properties compromised and sullied by abuse, overuse, and rampant mischaracterization. Most important, though, is the banal reality that times have changed, and are ever changing. The Ivory Tower is not exempt from this: Critics, scholars, and theoreticians must grow, too.

This should not come as any great surprise. In every other walk of life, when a tool or product is outdated and ill-suited to its current task, it suffers a final breakdown and is subsequently replaced; or where foresight is involved, it is replaced before this ultimate failure is allowed to occur. As cultural and literary theories are little more than tools employed in the business of better understanding the world all around us, so too is postmodernism merely that antiquated device. What worked well twenty-five years ago can hardly be expected to function in the same efficient manner today. Yet this is
exactly what we have asked of postmodern cultural and literary theory during the same time period. We have consistently expected the same old works to endure and retain relevance, to year after year teach us about contemporary existence again and anew, when in truth these theories were designed to order an experience that itself is now different in many fundamental ways. The heretofore uncharted consciousness of contemporary society beckons. Can we understand ourselves once more?

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We have become a society of second generation figurants. Where once the vast majority of citizens were silent stage actors consigned to the margins of life, playing out intricate dramas wordlessly in a small sliver of the world, today your individual has unprecedented ability to speak. For the first time ever, bit players have similar access to various means of vocalization as do life’s star attractions.33

Much of this development is attributable to grand technological advances. Just as Lyotard noted the manner in which the rise of information-processing machines altered the flow of human knowledge, so too must we note the effects of further (and drastic ones, at that) changes in capabilities for these same i-p machines. New media, in all its bluster, is something that has genuinely changed the parameters of both human experience and the symbolic capacity to render that experience legible and knowable.

Lyotard’s notion of the rise of small, local narratives is now firmly established. Therefore, the business of post-postmodernity is linking these petit recits. I am insistent that this is not the same thing as rebuilding the decayed metanarratives. It is imperative
to understand that *structuring is not ordering*. Providing an extensive framework for the conducting of these individual narratives is not inherently an attempt to explicate them, or an effort to imbue them with a hierarchy. Rather, it is merely an acknowledgement that no matter how diverse or scattered the world increasingly becomes, there are still myriad ways to draw connections between these human stories.

One of the ironies of postmodern theory is that despite its emphasis on the elemental fragmentation of the world it surveys, it does not fully or effectively account for the authentic and complex multiplicity of that same world. Lyotard writes of “The Nature of the Social Bond” that there are “two basic representational models for society: either society forms a functional whole, or it is divided in two.” Indeed, even at the sheer representational or theoretical level, one can no longer afford to be this reductive in approaching this issue, as it is no longer a dichotomous, black-and-white, A vs. B affair. This simple model, that of performativity juxtaposed with entropy, which was so enticing for postmodernists of all stripes, is no longer of the utmost applicability. Post-postmodernity calls for greater conceptual and logical flexibility.

Likewise, this plagued Lyotardian love for the dichotomous rears its head again when we consider the contemporary relationship between traditional human storytelling, or narrative, and the scientific sphere. In today’s world, it is no longer necessary to make a choice between the two, as it is no longer necessary (some would say no longer even worthwhile) to chart the two separately.
Witness how Jameson has written of the postmodern that “one of the features that characterizes more “scientific” periods of history, and most notably capitalism itself, is the relative retreat of the claims of narrative or storytelling knowledge in the face of those of the abstract, denotative, or logical and cognitive procedures generally associated with science.” In today’s environment, the humanistic element is back with a bang; as if mutating to survive in an evolutionary manner, these two artificial constructs, narrative and science, have fused.

I give you the social networking sites Facebook and MySpace. Each of these sites presents a way for the narrative and the scientific to co-exist as never before. All individuals who sign up for Facebook or MySpace start an account: They complete a profile, or webpage. By doing so they are plugging into a leveling, formalizing structure, one that is scientific/logical in two primary ways. First, and most obvious, Facebook and MySpace users are joining a website, a digital organization; they are obviously putting their profile into a technological device that literally would not exist were it not for the efforts of science. Second, and more interesting, every individual who establishes an account with Facebook or MySpace is agreeing to become a part of, and make subsequent use of, an existing, pre-established template. This structure is straightforward and streamlined, and reads like a computer survey. Though it varies slightly between the two sites, in order to set up and maintain a functioning profile, all users must in essence analytically detail themselves. They must respond to prompts about their anatomy, their career/schooling, their hobbies, their interests, their tastes in
films, literature, and music (users may put as little information as they want, but they still must respond to each data field); they must even comment upon the nature of their friendships (i.e., in the case of MySpace, users can input a “top” group of friends). All these categories are at the discretion of the program; it is as if the users are coldly filling out a survey.

Despite all this, Facebook and MySpace are also human enterprises. The scientific structure that is offered up by these websites is ultimately a resource at the disposal of each individual subject. It is little more than that; it is worthless without the human-capacity-for-storytelling component. Thus, Facebook and MySpace are structures onto which each subject is able to graft their personal story. These stories may of course be as unique or divergent as the people telling them. Though we may be living in a rather scientific age, in this space science has no supremacy over traditional narrative.

These sites, Facebook and MySpace, are then enablers of the modern embodiment of Lyotard’s small and localized narratives. Each page is a story unto itself, shorn of the necessity of an overarching, totalizing myth; each page possesses meaning and is interpretable in its own singular right. However, if in each of these cases (Fb/MyS) one were to consider only the individual page, one would be missing a great deal. These pages, these individual accounts, particularized though they may be in the broader scheme of things, are not wholly independent. Each of these pages is part of a huge, widespread network; and you, the visitor to one of these pages, are
bombarded with reminders that said page you are on at the time is not existing fully of its own accord, but is actually part of a larger grid.\textsuperscript{36} Such reminders are inescapable. This is because, procedurally speaking, this is really the point of arranging such accounts: to form connections with other pages; for each page to forge a link in the chain of storytelling. Every individual can form “friendships” with other individuals, and these friendships form the basis of the network that actually supports the entire operational concept of the two organizations. After these connections are forged, one’s page then prominently displays these friends; on Facebook, links to these friends form a panel alongside your own individual page, with other opportunities to link away from one’s own page presenting themselves in many other various locations on the page, while for MySpace, there is a highly centralized panel for the displaying of friends, with other scattered access options similarly aligned as Facebook.

As a result, these initial small and localized narratives operate not so much as products of fragmentation or deterioration, or as the remnants of a disintegrated master narrative, but instead they serve the exact purpose of building up new structures. They are today the tools of networking.\textsuperscript{37} Crucially, these connecting structures are not overarching or all-encompassing things; they do not order, nor do they attempt to explicate. They provide structure. The \textit{point} is to see how many groups you can join, how many friends you can have (this is not meant to be interpreted in a strictly competitive fashion); the experience is about seeing in how many different stories you can share. Yet this mindset is apart from a postmodern conceptualization of
multiplicity. For one, all these disparate viewpoints and varied takes on the world are not viewed suspiciously, or dangerously, or as threats to any established order of things. Likewise, it still matters to belong; this is not fragmentation for fragmentation’s sake (think difference relates). People/stories now have this structural template in place to guarantee at least the slightest of contextual continuity. Plus, a minimum level of human cooperation is required for successful interaction. People who set up a Facebook or MySpace account and leave their pages blank or scarcely illustrated, who fail to adequately tell their stories or who do not join any groups or establish any connections with other narratives, these people’s pages (and thus their stories) are left behind, ignored, not read.

The individuals who set up these Facebook/MySpace pages, they are our figurants evolved. The teenager longing for expression, the homemaker yearning for an outlet, the artist starving for a medium, and all other non-clichéd figures near and far between, all these characters previously kept silent by the circumstances of life now have the means to express themselves to the audience at large. How to decipher and make sense of the cacophony of voices resulting from this development is another issue entirely.

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The threat of data overload is far from a new situation. It could be said to be one of the great trends of the postmodern era. “[T]he breakthrough in our own period to microstorage, computerized data, and data banks of hitherto unimaginable proportions,
whose control or even ownership is….one of the crucial political issues of our own time,” wrote Jameson perceptively in 1984.\(^{38} \) In accordance with these types of concerns, many postmodern artists even made exploring such quandaries—debates over data control and informational flow—the focus of their works and projects (this is an idea we will address more in the next chapter).

Time has seen this change, slowly but surely. Today the internet is entrenched as an indispensable part of our collective existence; yet, like all things, the internet has gone through many phases of development. Initially the internet was an avenue for the democratization of this data overload. It changed the rules of the game. The advent of the internet brought access to all sorts of traditionally elusive and specialized information (along with obviously millions of pieces of fairly basic and universal triviality) right to the unprivileged individual. Suddenly this previously unprivileged individual possessed undreamed of encyclopedic data powers, something the human mind was unaccustomed to experiencing; just witness the aforementioned postmodernist quivering at the mere prospect of such a scenario. As such thinkers and artists foresaw, this could produce any number of alienating emotions—existential angst, disorientation, confusion, the sense of being a solitary individual lost and adrift in the face of sensory overload.

But again, evolution was at hand. Eventually, (as in earlier this decade) the power and reach of the internet would attain a key level of refinement, this time in the conceptualization and implementation of social networking.
Thanks to Facebook and MySpace, there is now a way to ground that untethered individual in cyberspace, and to by extension mute the great postmodern fears of dystopia and entropy.\textsuperscript{39} Facebook and MySpace’s service in this regard is providing a structure for one’s contact with this deluge of information; they function as a brace for human interaction with a plethora of \textit{stuff}. Via the structures of Facebook and MySpace, which offer up a constructed human experience, one may now deal with data overload in a controlled and specific way, without too fully internalizing the whole interaction (which has traditionally been a dehumanizing result feared by all those who have pondered the topic). We have reached a point in the history of technology where the great question in regards to data is no longer about the means of dissemination, but instead is one about the manner of processing that disseminated information.

Data, information, is therefore at the disposal of the individual like never before. This control over knowledge also means that the human individual controls their immediate representational self as never before. There is a rather casual throwaway line in \textit{The Postmodern Condition}, a knowing and winking aside to the reader, if you will, that reads “each of us knows that our self does not amount to much.”\textsuperscript{40} Now this same quote is also endnoted with a most revealing additional comment. Lyotard notes that Bouveresse has written extensively on the idea of “‘the dereliction’ of the self with the “crisis” of science,” quoting Bouveresse as saying “[g]iven the state of science in particular, a man is made only of what people say he is.”\textsuperscript{41}
This simple description of humankind’s ontological status is no longer apt. In a society of figurants, the role of the individual is magnified like never before; with the scientific and technological advances seen in social networking sites, this paradigm for interpersonal definition has shifted. Now, within this medium, people can only make of a man what a man says he is. This is because Facebook and MySpace provide each individual with greater control over the part he/she plays in any given social interaction. Via the structure of their individual page, the figurant is able to disclose or withhold any information and data about themselves that they so choose; they can even select what other persons or groups see or do not see their virtual self. In this regard, science today has created a situation, a digital field, where one individual can come into social contact with another, witness a relatively complete summary/profile (complete here meaning a full portrait of those traits/characteristics that are most easily quantifiable and directly expressible) of that person, and in doing so gather a great deal of information about said person, yet find their ability or power to characterize or define that person leveled off like nothing prior. The observer’s societal authority is newly limited. The individual whose self is being observed thus has new access to a different kind of audience, for in the scenario detailed above the profile reader is indeed just that, an audience member, a privileged observer able to hear the figurant’s dialogue for the first time, yet unable to interrupt or partake in the intimate exchange as traditional social interactions allow for, until the roles are reversed, the speaking figurant ceding the stage to examine the examiner’s own profile. The means for judging the other have changed.
If, as Jameson would have it, modernists *quote* schlock and kitsch, and postmodernists *incorporate* schlock and kitsch directly into their work, then post-postmodernists ask *and why care about what is schlock and kitsch?* In post-postmodernity, these materials are inextricable from the stuff of everyday life; on a day-to-day basis, one is not concerned about distinguishing such substances from “art” at all. They are merely mimetic devices, the tools of realism. Yes, one may still pass qualitative judgment on what used to be deemed schlock and kitsch, but this is only done today on the basis of merit alone. No longer is sheer curiosity a component of this type of cultural analysis.

Naturally, this is a very abstract point to make; it is almost entirely an argument of perception(s). Still we cannot act as if this is not enough on which to proceed. After all, the two most important elements (postmodern spatial relations and waning of affect) of the preeminent postmodern theory (Jameson’s) are perceptual claims. What, then, happens when predominant perceptions change?

Our sensibilities have caught up with any purported postmodern mutations in spatial objects. Looking at a building like Jameson’s landmark example of John Portman’s Westin Bonaventure Hotel (found in Los Angeles, California) in 2009, what does one see but a nice hotel? Little more. Frankly, we are just plain used to such structures by now; if you are fortunate enough to frequent, or just visit on occasion, any of the major metropolitan areas of the U.S., you have likely either stayed in, or at least
seen up close and personal, such an edifice.\textsuperscript{42} Entering buildings on their sixth floor, encountering spaces with a multiplicity of purposes, to these things we are now accustomed. If you were to play the role of the intrepid street reporter at one of these places and accost a patron at random in order to ask them a few questions about the postmodern spatial curiosities of which they were taking part, to inquire as to their feelings about their “physical trajectories through such buildings (being) virtual narratives or stories,”\textsuperscript{43} you would likely be met with any number of bewildered and puzzled looks.\textsuperscript{44} Allowing twenty-five years for adjustment will tend to do that. We have recalibrated ourselves. We, as members of a figurant society, have taken our virtual narratives elsewhere, to a place where such narratives are no longer muted by the stature of surroundings, but instead are given free reign to be heard by whosoever may have the opportunity and the desire.

What is most interesting today about Jameson’s extensive analysis of space is what he does \emph{not} say. In what is too perfect a contrast for today’s experience, the only analysis Jameson gives to the feature of the Bonaventure that most directly and importantly colors the exchange between space and individual, the single room, is a dismissive parenthetical: “with the passing observation that the hotel rooms are visibly marginalized: the corridors in the residential sections are low-ceilinged and dark, most depressingly functional, while one understands that the rooms are in the worst of taste.”\textsuperscript{45} This is not a particular flaw of Jameson’s work; rather, it is just that this postmodern marginalization of the individual has run its course. In attempting to
understand the drastic cultural changes of the second half of the 20th century, it made perfect sense for theorists to focus on the macro-level (hence, the “logic” of all of “late capitalism”) while neglecting the experience of the individual; most even thought that was an inherent part of the postmodern condition. However, with the normalization of many of the originally outstanding features of postmodernity accomplished, and the rest now either fundamentally altered or no longer applicable, the individual is again a figure of great importance in its own right, as opposed to a mere construct from which to view the world. Jameson’s human unit lived out a disjointed existence in a fractured setting it did not understand; the citizen of today is over the initial shock of this societal state, and with new tools at the ready is going about the business of making a new kind of life.

Perhaps this is why today the notion of a culture-wide waning of affect is particularly troublesome, difficult to accept or even comprehend. People still feel alienation, anxiety, myriad types of pain and suffering; this is a fact of life no matter the epoch, and it ought to be acknowledged. For too long, postmodern theory, in its many attempts to explain the surrounding world by privileging science over the individual, has ignored this unalterable fact. A post-postmodern school of thought would commit no such oversight.

As is so often the case in these matters, the one field that quietly has been at the forefront of this cultural correction is literature, especially literary fiction.
If the section you are just concluding intended to start a conversation with the classic tenets of postmodernity, demonstrating the ever growing gaps between the prevailing dominant cultural theory and the culture such theory supposes to explain, and strove to make the case that enough evidence exists to start the process of cobbling together a theory of the post-postmodern condition (figurant society), then the section to come strives to ground this brand of abstract thought in a more tangible way, through an examination of one of the most important novels of recent times, and the first book that can and should be called, for a long list of reasons, a post-postmodern novel, a true product of the figurant society, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. 
The Figurant In *Infinite Jest*: A Post-Postmodern Theme And Structure

Fragmented and splintered. Full of unexpected juxtapositions. Lacking any sense of distinction between traditional value sets of High and Low. Cold and inhuman. Fascinated by science. Conscious of literary and cultural theory.

All this and more has been said about the literature of the postmodern age, and it is into discussion with this tradition that David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* enters. From a very early point in his career, this engagement with the past has been explicitly present in Wallace’s work. In “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” the concluding novella to his second book, the 1989 collection of stories *Girl With Curious Hair*, Wallace overtly crafted what was nothing short of a manifesto for the future direction of American literary fiction. Wallace wrote right on the copyright page that “[p]arts of “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way” are written in the margins of John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse,” and such is exactly what Wallace did in said story: He offered readers a retelling of Barth’s seminal 1968 short story (from the collection of the same name). Believing that authors such as Barth had led literature astray by focusing on self-reflexivity for self-reflexivity’s own sake, and by forsaking human characters, issues, and concerns in the name of hermetic artistic experiments, Wallace desired to reinvigorate fiction by reinserting the humane, and the passionate, back into literature, all while directly engaging the reader. I will not get bogged down in summarizing “Westward” any further here (the story is 140 pages long), but it was
necessary to at least mention the novella in this space on account of its historical importance. It is a weird, ungainly contraption, a piece of second generation meta-fiction designed to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of these aforementioned postmodern meta-fictional literary practices while at the same time demonstrating utter mastery of its protocols. When encountering it, one can almost see the wheels of Wallace’s mind turning—it reads more like a literary to-do list than prose per se—and it is the best place in his early fiction that Wallace makes clear his intentions of engaging the literature of postmodernity while capturing the sense of a new era, a new state of mind.

Wallace further acknowledged this extra-postmodern project in a 1993 interview with the critic and scholar Larry McCaffery: “If I have a real enemy, a patriarch for my patricide, it’s probably Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon. Because, even though their self-consciousness and irony and anarchism served valuable purposes for their times, their aesthetics absorption by U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else.” The timing of this interview is revealing. Indeed, at the time Wallace was in the process of working on his third book, a longer work which was excerpted (and eventually seven other places prior to its 2/96 publication) right alongside the transcript of the just quoted McCaffery interview. The ideas that Wallace addressed at such great length in his conversation with McCaffery were not mere talking points. They were the beliefs and convictions of a tremendously focused intellectual whose chosen vocation was that of literature. As a result, for
Wallace the artist it was not enough to just discourse on his opinion of contemporary culture, or explain his take on postmodern society and its accompanying art. It was necessary to issue forth his own response to postmodern precedent, to make real his vision for a new era of American art (a vision he had only been able to hint at in previous works).

_Infinite Jest_ was that response. Upon release it was an immediate success, both commercially viable and critically acclaimed, but in the scholarly realm it for the most part has subsequently met with a decidedly different fate; admired and respected, well explored, to be sure (for a work only thirteen years old), but largely misunderstood. Despite the obvious clues and signs pointing towards a much different (and correct) conclusion, rarely has _Infinite Jest_ been viewed, critically speaking, as anything but an addition to the work of literature’s postmodern canon. This misperception dates all the way back to the fall of 1996, with the publication of the first scholarly piece on _Infinite Jest_, written by Tom LeClair. In his essay LeClair makes the most admirable argument, that a new generation of writers (here, namely Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and Wallace) deserving their own body of scholarship has arisen. Yet LeClair essentially focuses on the same tired postmodern themes of information control and data overload as they can be evidenced in the work of another, younger generation—“these new fiction-writing prodigies both find and create a world of information that is prodigious….like Pynchon and the other systems novelists of the 1970s and 1980s who were influenced by cybernetics”\textsuperscript{51}—and displays a disappointing lack of attention to
detail in reading *Infinite Jest*; for instance LeClair has the events of the novel taking place in “about 2015.” LeClair also established a precedent of focusing too closely on the similarities between postmodern and post-postmodern novels, at the cost of exploring their divergences; in the years between 1996 and today, he would be far from the only scholar to make such a mistake.

All the same, LeClair’s piece got the proverbial ball rolling on *Infinite Jest* studies, so his work would be commendable for that alone, if such were the case. Most importantly, though, LeClair should be likewise lauded for his work’s simple yet sage acknowledgement that the imagined setting of “Wallace’s post-millennial future” was a “gigantic, post-postmodern world.” It is vital to note this: The world of *Infinite Jest* is not a postmodern place. It is distinctly evolved from that “waning” cultural moment whence it came.

Fortunately, other works have managed to observe both the post-postmodern positioning of the novel’s authorship and the post-postmodern setting of the novel itself. Stephen Burn’s slim survey *David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest* does a good job of illustrating the way in which Wallace engages with postmodernism from the outside. In one instance of this he writes that Wallace “critiques this obsession [of postmodernist authors] with encyclopedic knowledge [and] dramatizes the limitations of this attempt.” Burn illuminates this point by demonstrating the way in which two characters (it should not be seen as a coincidence that these two characters are both parental figures, of the older, previous generation), Don Gately’s stepfather and Hugh
Steeply’s father, find their lives ruined by their symbolic-of-postmodernism fixations:

“Encyclopedic data storage is, for Wallace, another potentially dangerous addiction, and their [Gately’s stepfather, Steeply’s father] attempt to control data leads to larger slippages in their lives.”

The as of yet only book length critical study on either Wallace or *Infinite Jest* is even more explicit in its addressing of the postmodern versus post-postmodern issue. Marshall Boswell begins his 2003 *Understanding David Foster Wallace* with the following passage:

Although Wallace is often labeled a “postmodern” writer, in fact he might (sic) best regarded as a nervous member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of modernism. He confidently situates himself as the direct heir to a tradition of aesthetic development that began with the modernist overturning of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism and continued with the postwar critique of modernist aesthetics. Yet Wallace proceeds from the assumption that *both* modernism and postmodernism are essentially “done.” Rather, his work moves resolutely forward while hoisting the baggage of modernism and postmodernism heavily, but respectfully, on its back.

This is a tremendous and insightful statement from Boswell; he is dead on the mark in his analysis. Like Burns, Boswell proceeds to present a number of illustrative examples of this, but ultimately such is not the full focus of Boswell’s account of *Infinite Jest*.

It is mine. Boswell’s opening salvo serves as a superb jumping off point for our purposes here. Just how has Wallace managed to capture this artistic post-postmodern progression? To presage this cultural shift? He pulled off each of these accomplishments via his striking use of figurants. In *Infinite Jest* Wallace reconfigures the traditional artistic representation of the figurant.
While it is a somewhat dangerous game to play, not to mention rather old fashioned, particularly in light of the theme here, the closest Wallace comes to speaking in the novel is through the wraith of James Incandenza. In the scene in question, a gravely injured Don Gately lies semi-conscious in a hospital room at St. Elizabeth’s. Gately, the recovering addict, has gamely refused any and all analgesics above the non-narcotic level of Toradol; clearly, in the wake of his surgery this painkilling pittance is far from making the grade, and Gately is thus in ferocious pain. Recumbent, immobile, and mute, unable to discern the passing of day or night, Gately is subjected to a revolving door lineup of characters coming in and out of his room to visit him. Most of these individuals are persons Gately is familiar with from his time of sobriety: both charges and fellow coordinators from Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House, or sponsors (the Crocodiles is the nickname for the particular group of grizzled, old AA veterans that have taken young Don Gately under their wing) from Boston-area Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. It is clear from the text that Gately is not clear as to the true nature of the visits he is receiving; he is uncertain whether some of the interfaces are hallucinated while others are real, or if all are imagined, or if all are real. In his delirious state he lacks discernment.

Amongst this hazy parade of encounters one stands out above the rest. After falling asleep during a (seemingly real) visit from Ennet House’s Geoffrey Day, Gately (seemingly) dreams an exchange with “the figure of a very tall sunken-chested man in
black-frame glasses and a sweatshirt with old stained chinos.” Gately and “the wraith”—as the figure is referred to all throughout the recounting of the exchange, though the reader knows from both the description of the wraith’s physical characteristics and the content of the wraith’s dialogue that the supposed specter is James Incandenza, legendary optics man, tennis academy founder, and avant-garde filmmaker, father of three, deceased some five years and counting at the time—get to “interacting,” and after a bit the wraith proceeds to tell Gately about the nature of his artistic career and its various endeavors. The wraith asks Gately if he recalls:

[T]he myriad thespian extras on for example his beloved ‘Cheers!,’ not the center-stage Sam and Carla and Nom [sic], but the nameless patrons always at tables, filling out the bar’s crowd, concessions to realism, always relegated to back- and foreground; and always having utterly silent conversations: their faces would animate and mouths move realistically, but without sound; only the name-stars at the bar itself could audibilize."

Figurants. Gately remembers the show and such soundless peripheral characters; *Cheers!* was one of his favorite programs as a youth. The wraith then shares with Gately that “in the entertainments the wraith himself made, he says he Goddamn bloody well made sure that either the whole entertainment was silent or else if it wasn’t silent that you could bloody well hear every single performer’s voice, no matter how far out on the cinematographic or narrative periphery they were.”

It is indiscernible just why Don Gately, in a sort of fever dream, is visited by the ghost of James Incandenza intent on expositing his artistic vision—“real life’s real egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world’s real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist
of his own entertainment”—this is one of the book’s many shrouded connections, mysterious occurrences. What is certain, though, is that Incandenza’s description of his own filmic philosophy can well be used as an apt characterization of both Wallace’s structural and stylistic techniques in *Infinite Jest*; in addition, it distills in no uncertain terms an important theme of the novel’s plot (and of course is a prominent way Wallace prefigures our current figurant society/post-postmodern condition).

Wallace explores figurants (and the idea of the figurant) in numerous ways throughout *Infinite Jest*. For starters, even the Sams and Carlas of *Infinite Jest*, the characters who would normally be considered “the main characters” in a more traditional narrative, are heavily invested in this issue—and so the Incandenzas, first family of *Infinite Jest*, are.

Indeed, James Incandenza struggles as he does to make “Infinite Jest” the film (he went through a purported five different versions prior to his death during post-production) because of the acute significance of its purpose to its creator; Dr. Incandenza “had seen his own personal youngest offspring, a son, the one most like him, the one most marvelous and frightening to him, becoming a figurant, toward the end [of his life]” and consequently vowed “to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*….something the boy would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come *out*.”

40
This figurant child is of course Hal Incandenza, otherwise considerable as one of the novel’s two absolute primary protagonists (Gately being the other). Immense role in the immense novel or not, in a decidedly non-linear fashion Hal’s father’s perception proves largely accurate. In the novel’s opening scene, its last event chronologically speaking, Hal’s college admissions interview with three University of Arizona deans goes disastrously awry when, in an attempt at explaining inconsistencies in his application, his efforts at communicating with the administrators somehow come across as incoherent and unintelligible; “we witnessed something only marginally mammalian in there,” observes one dean. A terrible scene ensues, and Hal is rushed away to a local hospital bound and restrained. All through this brouhaha, as those around him bustle back-and-forth arguing chaotically about Hal’s health, Hal himself is able to, in lucid and vivid detail, take in the scene around him; he just has no voice (except through the narrator’s address to the reader).

This end for Hal is the culmination of his father’s diagnosis; J. Incandenza himself had shared in a very similar exchange with Hal in one of the novel’s earliest (chronological) episodes. In a do-you-laugh-or-do-you-cry scene, Hal is sent by his father to a “professional conversationalist,” a gentleman who turns out to be little more than James Incandenza in disguise, his face made-up with a fake mustache and nose (he doesn’t even bother to wear different clothes—Hal recognizes with ease his father’s trademark argyle sweater-vest). This summit ends much like the meeting at the University of Arizona; Hal, with increasing fervency, struggles to demonstrate that he
really does have a voice, that he really can speak, while the onlooker, this time his father, watches with growing horror the “mute” young man. At this, Hal, whose impassioned speech is unable to connect with an audience, is left literally speechless, and the passage ends.

*Infinite Jest’s* narrative accounting is extensive enough that the reader is shown the likely historical root of all such Incandenzan figurant-based troubles. In the absolute oldest scene recounted in the novel, the reader sees James Incandenza, in 1960, also at the tender age of ten, interacting with his father. The episode is entirely univocal; over the course of twelve-and-a-half pages, with a mere five paragraph breaks, young Jim’s voice (Dr. James is known as Jim here) is eliminated, fully extinguished by his father’s dominating presence. The reader knows Jim is there—his father is continually addressing him, as the two are preparing to play tennis, Jim for the first time ever—yet the narrative marginalizes him to the scene’s sheer brink. Furthermore, the primary topic of his father’s lengthy monologue serves itself to instill the qualities of the traditional figurant in Jim; Jim Sr. goes to great pains to painfully instruct Jim that he is nothing more than a body: “Son, you’re a body, son. That quick little scientific-prodigy’s mind she’s so proud of and won’t quit twittering about: son, it’s just neural spasms, those thoughts in your mind are just the sound of your head revving, and head is still just body, Jim….you’re a machine a body an object, Jim.”

This is enriched and enlivened all the more when one considers how Jim’s father’s point of view, the “wisdom” he is imparting to his son, is a product of his own
experience. His entire life up until this winter’s day in Tucson, Arizona, has been an exercise in being a figurant. Jim’s father’s father is a distant figure; he never once comes to watch his son play tennis, until one random day when his son is playing the son of a client. Then, even during the match, a match where Jim’s father is wiping the court with his opponent, Jim’s father overhears his own father say “He’ll never be great.”

Moments after this brutally dismissive remark, Jim’s father suffers a gruesome on-court injury, and is never the same player.

Likewise, as an adult Jim’s father is even more immediately a classic figurant. An actor, one obsessed with the career and image of Marlon Brando and dreaming of such personal success (leading-role stardom) for himself, Jim’s father instead ends up aimlessly shuffling around Southern California and Arizona in search of bit parts, his most notable being a gig as The Man From Glad, a classic example of human-made-empty-image-and-symbol.

These male Incandenzas epitomize the figurant paradigm; they seem to live and breathe, to function and speak like normal, yet their interactions are muted and unfeatured. Their silence is that of marginalization, of unrealized humanity, and it is that fate that James Incandenza hopes to avoid for Hal. A real life spent as a figurant is a harrowing proposition; is it any coincidence that Gately, in a Freudian slip committed while prone in his hospital bed, confuses the words wraith and figurant?68
One of the more salient things about *Infinite Jest* is the number of characters that actually inhabit its pages. Depending on your criteria for defining an actual “character”—meaning whether you count a figure who does not appear directly, but is referenced in the text, or not, etc.—there are between roughly 300 and 350 characters in *Infinite Jest*. What is really remarkable then about this volume of characters is the way in which Wallace actually gives voice to so many of them. Moreover, the degree to which Wallace sets about this task is something distinctly symptomatic of our current moment. The figurants of *Infinite Jest* are the figurants of post-postmodernism; evolved, they are allowed the time and space to speak, and we, their audience, must take heed.

There are literally hundreds of examples of this in the novel, occurring in different increments of focus and intensity. Beginning on the smallest scale, there is Millicent Kent. M.K. is the best female singles player in the 16s at Enfield Tennis Academy. Over the course of the book, she is a classic figurant: seen dining at a cafeteria table opposite the scene’s real action, mentioned during a rundown of the past weekend’s match results, so on and so forth. Characterized as “two hundred kilos if she was a kilo,” and nicknamed the *U.S.S. Millicent Kent*, M.K. in other narratives might be resigned to the role of a two-dimensional caricature. In *Infinite Jest*, though, she receives her own space to share her story. Cornering Mario Incandenza one autumnal evening after dinner in an attempt to steal a kiss or two, she relates the tale of growing
up desiring to be a dancer, and of coming home one day at eight from tennis practice to find her large father pirouetting in front of a mirror in the family’s dining room wearing (or attempting to as best he could, given the difference in size) her leotard. It is a startling (and potentially creeps-inducing) anecdote; given the added layer of the intimate setting in which it is told, just Mario and Millicent face-to-face (well, with Mario’s severe height disadvantage to pretty much everyone, and M.K.’s healthy stature, more like face-to-ribcage) in the trees at the fringe of E.T.A.’s hilltop campus, it is a confessional moment and serves to humanize Millicent Kent, an otherwise minor gag character.  

Millicent Kent’s release from the chains of figurant status comes in just one isolated place in the novel. There are many other such freed figurants in other places, heard just a fleeting time or two, but they are the lowest common denominator in this demographic. Take now LaMont Chu. LaMont Chu is not a name that jumps out at a reader of *Infinite Jest*; ask a friend for a brief summary of the novel and he will likely not receive mention. Yet Chu is unlike traditional narrative bit players. When we first see LaMont Chu, in a brief two-page scene, he is sitting in a mandatory meeting listening attentively to a short address from his assigned “Big Buddy,” the stoic Canadian emigrant John Wayne. Now John Wayne is the single best tennis player at E.T.A., in fact one of the continent’s best, and he is accordingly an important character in the book. In addition to his athletic exploits, personal details will emerge about Wayne (many centered on the nature of his citizenship situation/national allegiance)
that make him an unintentionally attention-grabbing figure. As a result, it may seem as if this scene serves merely to introduce John Wayne to the reader, and to share insight into his personality and mannerisms, etc., while setting the stage for the stage; that is, it serves to characterize the working atmosphere at an elite youth tennis academy, which will be the milieu for much of the book’s action. And, really, this is what it does in this place in the text.

But Lamont Chu is not sentenced to this role and this role alone in the narrative. He appears again, here and there, in several other small parts of the book, yes, but in parts that are memorably his and only his. In these passages we see the picture of a boy at a boarding school far from home, engaged in a highly competitive pursuit, struggling to remain even keeled. LaMont “confesses to an increasingly crippling obsession with tennis fame. He wants to get to the Show so bad it feels like it’s eating him alive….He finds he can’t eat or sleep or sometimes even pee, so horribly does he envy the adults in the Show….He feels himself in a dark world, inside, ashamed, lost, locked in.” Lamont’s expression of his growing competitive addiction, which leaves him both terror-stricken and increasingly paralyzed by indecision, is as sad as it is shocking: He is only eleven years old!

Enfield is a demanding place for those so young and fragile, one that frequently leaves its attendees burnt out shells. It is through this would-be figurant eleven-year old that Wallace chooses to convey the deadening sense of E.T.A.’s surroundings to the average pupil. Granted, Hal experiences a similar existential angst at the academy, one
that is the subject of significant narrative space (a growing alienation from his self), but the reader views Hal’s condition largely at seventeen—he is a year from graduation for most of the novel, already well shaped by his E.T.A. years, so we see the results of E.T.A.’s influences on him, not the actual formative process—plus Hal’s story is mitigated by the fact that in the school pecking order he is an established leading man, far from a figurant in the eyes of his peers (though, obviously the irony is that personally he is in danger of becoming one, but only those closest to him seem aware of this). Thus, a prospective figurant\textsuperscript{72} like LaMont Chu possesses not only the power to speak as an individual, but also performs the act of broaching and conveying serious thematic matters to the reader.

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The animation of one figurant leads to another figurant, and more often than not links by the text’s end\textsuperscript{73} to the book’s most visible characters. Such is the defining structural component of this very complex novel.

Look at the character of Tony Krause. Referred to most often throughout the text as some variation of the sobriquet “Poor Tony Krause,” Tony Krause is a homeless, transvestite, drug addicted, pickpocket; by the traditional standards of normative American culture, it does not get much more marginalized or voiceless than that. Tony’s tale does not exert much in the way of societal clout; it is not the kind one has access to on many occasions.\textsuperscript{74} Despite this, within the world of \textit{Infinite Jest}, the narrative of Tony Krause is on equal footing with any other present, and his story winds
through the entire book in valuable ways. He is first introduced relatively early on in
the text, on page 128, during a scene told through first person narration, the viewpoint
of fellow drug addict and petty thief, “yrstruly.” In this scene, desperate for money with
which to score skeet, Tony, with the aid of two accomplices, the aforementioned
yrstruly and “C,” ends up robbing an inebriated man leaving a bar in Harvard Square.
The trio jump the man, beat him to the point of unconsciousness, and leave him in a
snow bank under a garbage dumpster in an alley. This victim happens to have four
hundred dollars in cash on his person, and the three assailants separate him from his
money. However, despite Tony’s subtle protestations (subtle because while he
expresses displeasure at the idea, he fatefully does not make clear the full and true
nature of his reluctance), yrstruly and C decide to head to Boston’s Chinatown to
engage a dealer with whom (unbeknownst to them) Tony has a simmering feud. The
dealer, a “Dr. Wo,” knowing that Tony is part of their crew, sells them the desired
skeet. Back at their night headquarters near the BPL building in Copley Square, Tony
lets C cook up first, and as it turns out the skeet is laced with Drano; yrstruly and Tony
watch C die a painful, grotesque death. All of this takes place on Christmas Eve.

There are many off-shooting points from this short, single scene that are very
important to illuminate. First, there is the basic developing story arc of Poor Tony
Krause. If his exposure to the reader had been limited to this one place in the text, his
story still would have been a memorable one—the image of T.K. suffocating a dying C
with his feather boa in order to prevent C from screaming and shrieking, actions that
would have called their activities and activities’ location to the attention of patrolling police officers, is indelible—a more human glimpse at a societal afterthought than is frequently found in the arts. However, it is not; like LaMont Chu (only magnified in intensity and depth of exploration) we are privy to the actions, thoughts, and feelings of Tony Krause in a number of other scenes. We see Tony in agony, alone, withdrawing in the men’s bathroom of a Watertown library, and we witness him suffering a seizure on a MBTA Gray Line train. In life, Tony remains a figurant (it is only to the reader, of course, that he is an evolved figurant). Other patrons, coming-and-going, ignore the perpetually closed, reeking bathroom stall; fellow riders desperately avert their eyes from the sick and incontinent form slouched on a subway seat, avoiding him like the plague until he actually passes out in the middle of the T car, gagging on his swallowed tongue. We observe Tony experiencing these agonies, and we see the staggering patterns his thoughts take; often, his mind alights on his late father. Echoing the intergenerational chasm present so many places throughout the book, Tony’s own father figuratively commits the ultimate act of silencing his son: Tony’s thoughts infer that his father, an obstetrician, “had rended his own clothing in symbolic shiva”\(^{75}\) when he was told of his son’s sexual proclivity. Even at the horrible hour of his seizure, with the last shreds of his consciousness slipping away, he thinks of his father, and his father’s treatment of him.

Doubling back now to Tony Krause’s initial scene: This figurant-focused passage contains a number of allusions, and sets off a chain reaction of events, that the
reader will eventually understand are a way of tying together the book’s multitude of plot strands.\textsuperscript{76}

In the wake of C’s death, yrstruly and Tony split; yrstruly realizes that Tony was the cause of Dr. Wo’s malice and wants no part of such a drug community albatross. He leaves Tony to fend for himself, which as discussed above he struggles to do. After surviving his seizure, P.T.K. reemerges unable to find anyone willing to help him, including his old crewmates or drug associates, and so despite his severely failing health he must attempt to make ends meet entirely on his own, albeit of course with zero resources. This leads him to late one November afternoon (11/14) mug two girls walking along Prospect Street near Inman Square; he snags the purse from one of them with ease, while the other girl’s strap doesn’t break. As Tony attempts to tear this stubborn purse away from the second girl while also attempting to run away, the second girl’s resultant momentum takes her headfirst into a lightpost. Tony breaks away with the first girl in hot pursuit as the second girl remains behind, in pain, dazed by her collision with the pole.

These girls are not just any random victims on the street, though; they are Ruth van Cleve and Kate Gompert, both of Ennet House. They are two of the novel’s other figurants.

Gompert in particular is familiar to the reader, having been the subject of multiple prior scenes where she was the main focus (as a fellow liberated figurant, her
story follows a similar trajectory to that of Poor Tony Krause). Gompert’s aching head leads her to find the closest possible place to rest and take shelter, which happens to be nearby Ryle’s Tavern, and there she ends up sharing a series of drinks and commiserating with….Remy Marathe. Meanwhile, Tony Krause and Ruth van Cleve race through the back and side streets of Cambridge. It occurs to Tony that his best bet to shed his persistent pursuer is to take shelter in Antitoi Entertainment, a local shop which “was just over two long north-south blocks distant,” and with whose owners, the Antitoi Brothers, Tony is long friendly. It is Tony’s hope that he can shake Ruth by the time he gets to the Antitoi shop alleyway, and thus slip into the store’s back entrance. Little does Poor Tony Krause know (as the reader by now long knows) but the welcoming refuge of the shop to which he is headed, with RvC in tow, is now under the control of Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents, who have killed the Brothers Antitoi and seized/established the former store as the Boston headquarters of their terrorist cell; it is their local base of operations as they conduct a series of human subject tests attempting to determine the potency and addictiveness of “Infinite Jest” (via screenings of their read-only copy) while continuing to carry out their master-cartridge-of-“Infinite Jest” procurement plans. Unwittingly, both Poor Tony Krause, the addict who never received help, and Ruth van Cleve, the Ennet House resident currently receiving treatment, whose small lives only minutes earlier crossed paths for the first time, are about to rush into this terrorist stronghold, where they will undoubtedly be held captive
and used as guinea pigs in the A.F.R.’s ongoing “Infinite Jest” tests, thereby meeting their sad ends.  

So the point is that it is this pair of unexpected interactions, Kate Gompert with Remy Marathe, Tony Krause with Ruth van Cleve, that makes explicit a connection between plot strands—the Ennet House scene, the A.F.R. machinations—which had previously been distinct, running parallel to one another. Traditional figurants are the links that make clear the parameters of the relationship between these narrative tracks.

Likewise, later we are able to piece together that the first person narrator “yrstruly” is none other than another Ennet House resident, Emil Minty. Once this piece of the puzzle is in place, it is then possible to go back (“go back” here meaning recall an occurrence from an earlier page/passage) to an aside made by Don Gately while he was on duty as a counselor at E.H. and make another powerful connection. Gately shares the plight of another Ennet House resident, Burt F. Smith, recalling how “Burt F.S. got mugged and beaten half to death in Cambridge on Xmas Eve of last year, and left there to like freeze there, in an alley, in a storm, and ended up losing his hands and feet.” Voila!

With this information secured, there then remains only one more piece of the initial Christmas Eve scene unaccounted for: the story of the doomed “C.” C seems very much the figurant character, a nameless hood killed off early in the work; however, just as his accomplices (and their victim) end up with vital roles in the narrative, so too
is C’s voice realized, even if it comes very late in the novel. C, dying early in the blowergate scene, is given new life in the narrative when his personality and career are succinctly defined by, of all people, Don Gately. A still hospitalized Gately’s unconscious dream-thoughts meander backwards over the course of his life, and by the time such thoughts reach his days of working with Trent Kite and Gene Fackelmann for “Whitey Sorkin’s bookmaking operations” it turns out that Gately not only knew C but worked alongside him for a time. Gately recalls “a fuchsia-haired Harvard Square punk-type kid….an old-fashioned street-junk needle-jockey that went by the moniker Bobby C or just ‘C,’ and liked to hurt people, the only I.V.-heroin addict Gately’d come across that actually preferred violence” who “Sorkin had lately befriended and put to work.”

If this alone were Bobby C’s moment, it would serve the structural-integrity-via-the-figurant purpose we have been exploring of late, but hardly qualify as a full-fledged voicing. However, Bobby C appears again, in the novel’s final scene. This closing passage finds Gately remembering the demise of Gene Fackelmann. Briefly, Fackelmann scams Sorkin out of a huge sum of money, but not deftly; his is a manner that is bound to be discovered in time. When Sorkin does eventually find out about Fackelmann’s treachery he dispatches Bobby C to handle the situation. Thus the last scene of Infinite Jest sees Bobby C arriving at an apartment where Fackelmann and Gately have been indulging in a Dilaudid binge for the ages, Dilaudid purchased by Fackelmann with the money stolen from Sorkin (Gately was not involved in any fashion
with the scam, he is merely reaping the rewards). Bobby C brings a crew of eleven people to the apartment, including a pharmacist’s assistant, a seamstress, and “three big unfamiliar girls….in red leather coats and badly laddered hose.” One of these three red clad figures is surely Tony Krause; earlier in the book he (and those in his immediate circle, too) is described as owning and regularly wearing a red leather coat. So T.K., a mere figurant in this space in the text, his story having been filled out elsewhere in the text, linked previously to two other major plot threads, is unexpectedly connected to yet another element of the story.

It is to be a sick, sick party. The majority of the entourage sets about ingesting some sort of substance to get themselves off, while the pharmacist’s assistant applies Narcan to Fackelmann; this is so that the seamstress may sew Fackelmann’s eyes open, and he will feel it. Gately is injected with Talwin-PX, an incredibly potent substance, in order to take him under, and to keep him from rushing to Fackelmann’s aid.

It is from a Gately-centric viewpoint that we process this concluding information, and are able to receive a nuanced view of Bobby C, the young Harvard Square street punk. His is a divided person. On one side, his is a character so twisted and cruel so as to, when instructed to handle a messy situation such as the Fackelmann affair, think the best plan of action for the handling of Fackelmann’s insubordination is to not only kill him, but to sew his sober eyes open and proceed to torture him before killing him. On the other side, though, Bobby C speaks very softly and gently with Gately throughout this scene, assuring him that he is not in danger, and that if he just
stays out of the Fackelmann proceedings he will be totally fine. As Gately falls off into unconsciousness, he and Bobby C are characterized, in a tenderly rendered description, as practically dancing:

He could feel C’s arm around him taking more and more of his weight. C’s arms’ muscles rising and hardening: he could feel this….C was starting to let him down easy….C: there was a gentleness about C, for a kid with the eyes of a lizard. He was letting him down real easy….The supported swoon spun Gately around, C moving around him like a dancer to slow the fall.85

And so C sends Gately comfortably off into oblivion. Gately will awaken in the book’s last lines, on a sandy shore in the rain, an ending into another beginning, the annularity of the novel highlighted one last time.

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Just like that another set of stories thought to be scattered fragments, or at best, running on parallel narrative tracks, are connected in very real terms. Readers who have found Infinite Jest to be “messy,”86 or have used the word “fragmented” in conjunction with the novel to denote their feelings of confusion or disorientation, and all those who have reacted strongly to the novel in a negative way when it comes to the matter of the novel’s structure, have traditionally done so because they have misread what it is that holds the novel’s center together. This misinterpretation has taken many forms over the years; a good, simple, singular example of this is to be found in an old review of Infinite Jest where one critic wrote that “what is actually meant to unify the book (or, as I suggested earlier, not unify it) is an experimental film called Infinite Jest.”87 This statement reads harmlessly enough—the film “Infinite Jest” obviously factors prominently in the novel, and looms large in the plot—but it is emblematic of a
frequent critical oversight about *Infinite Jest*. What is actually meant to unify the book is not an element of one plot strand, for the scope and sweep of the work is too immense for such a construct to work effectively. Rather, again, the work is tied together through the interaction (direct and otherwise) of the novel’s wide range of voices; character(s). Wallace’s novel holds together, indeed, is recognizable to us as a novel, on account of its thematic fixation on shared human experience. Many of the characters of *Infinite Jest* feel as if their own personal experience is unique (and are in pain/suffering because of this supposed existential isolation) because they have not had previous access to the similar stories of others; likewise, many readers feel as if these figurant passages are random and fragmented because they have not previously encountered a work in which such characters are given access to narrative means not as props or stage scenery, but as genuine voices.

Just as understanding the role of the figurant in *Infinite Jest* is essential to understanding the structure of the book, so it is essential for further understanding the post-postmodern innovation of the novel. Whereas prominent postmodern works of literature such as Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse” were works of ontological skepticism, *Infinite Jest* reasserts the humane. *Infinite Jest* is literature for a culture turning away from a waning of affect. Not only do figurants speak in *Infinite Jest*, but the stories they tell (and embody) are quite moving. Far from experiencing nothing but *euphoria*, these are people who have felt too much, have hurt too much. Most importantly, they are first characters—before anything else, they are
fully fleshed out artistic depictions of human beings, with accordant attributes and qualities. As simple a point as this is, this is a hallmark of today’s emerging post-postmodern literature; within the modernist historical arc, this third phase of development in literary fiction is marked by this reassertion of the human figure in direct response to the perceived abdication of such literary explorations by the postmodernists. Two standout examples that come to mind in this vein are Zadie Smith’s 2000 novel *White Teeth*, and Jonathan Franzen’s 2001 work *The Corrections*. Both of these books owe much to *Infinite Jest*, and both authors join Wallace in critiquing quite directly postmodernism; *The Corrections* has even been called “a correction of DeLillo in favor of the human.”91 I mention these novels here because the critic James Wood has written negatively of them and their ilk, arguing that “[t]here is an obsession in these novels with connecting characters with each other, as information is connected in the World Wide Web.”92

Here Wood is both right and wrong. He is wrong in the sense that he makes clear this novelistic approach is a bad thing, writing “real humans disaggregate more often than congregate.”93 However, Wood, in all his admirable attention to the literary workings of our time, displays a lack of understanding of our time itself. Connections, links, associations, particularly those in the nature of the *World Wide Web*, these are not the same things as congregation; context is not inherently the same thing as contact. If there is an obsession with connection present in this brand of contemporary literature, it is present because such a focus is necessary to render a broad vision of our post-
postmodern world realistically. Such interconnectivity is one of the dominant ideas of this age; writing fiction depicting this age thus requires attention to the merging of human ideas with technological capacities in ways never before necessary, let alone possible or thinkable. In his relevant criticism, Wood fails to understand this experiential shift.

Wood is, though, in another way, unwittingly insightful about this new genre of literature. While connecting various characters with one another as via the internet is itself not a bad thing for fiction today, novels such as *White Teeth* and *The Corrections* actually fail to adequately do that very thing which Wood accuses them of doing. Both of these works *over* explicate the nature of their interpersonal and cross-societal connections; each of these complex, wide-ranging novels suffers from a neat and tidy ending that unfortunately undermines the rest of the work. These failures, in turn, serve to confirm the greater achievement of *Infinite Jest*.

In this, my last point about the figurant-based structure of *Infinite Jest*, I walk a fine line. While I am aware that I am to a degree comparing apples to oranges, and such is always tricky, I still believe it meaningful to point out the way that the structure of *Infinite Jest* is similar to the structure of an internet entity such as Facebook or MySpace. In Wallace’s novel, these inter-character connections are not always *fully* discernible. Even where context is provided, it is not *all* provided; there are great gaps in the narrative. If we allow ourselves another moment of abstraction, we can see parallels between this storytelling strategy and the *storyconstructing* forms modern day
social networking sites are currently taking. With the new forms of subjectivity offered by Fb/MyS, any number of human stories, faces, and evolved figurants are only a touch of the keyboard away. Within this circuitry all participants may potentially be accessed; however, not all these access points are overtly explicated—the nature of this accessibility is not clear at all times to the program user, even as it is under the user’s control. So too is the reading experience of *Infinite Jest*. All within its text appears interconnected, yet not all such links are explained. Ultimately, the text is an open system, requiring the input of the reader to make sense of all the data, human and otherwise, present with the novel.  

Thus, the final figurant in this equation is liberated. The reader, oft resigned to the role of passive recipient in the reading process (the majority of the “work” having already been conducted by the author), is forced, on account of this open-endedness, to take an active role in parsing out what exactly has transpired in *Infinite Jest* in ways not usually required of a reader by a novel. I submit one last time that these unusual ways may be best summarized as reflective of the rise of a post-postmodern sensibility.
Some Final Thoughts

I hope that by now I have accomplished what I set out to do in this essay, which was of course to make the case for the emergence in Wallace’s novel of a mode of representing what I call the post-postmodern condition, an altered state of cultural being largely ascendant via the newly acquired voices of societal figurants. And so I wish to conclude my work not with a retrospective, but rather, in the time-honored tradition of Michael Pemulis, with one last look at the current environment all around us.

The temporality of this project sets it apart from your average critical study or theoretical investigation. This can be a blessing and a curse. Everything detailed here in the name of the post-postmodern is a piece of our ongoing everyday existence, while the body of critical and scholarly literature on *Infinite Jest* remains in its infancy, and is limited as such. We are not looking back historically at post-postmodernity, summarizing it from the comfortable safety of a historiographical discourse. No, we are living and breathing it now, realizing it in the acts and gestures of daily life.

Attempting to capture the sensibilities of our time, to define our age while it is still unfolding, is a daunting assignment. What holds true today may have shifted by tomorrow; what will seem certain tomorrow may well be gone by next week. Such is life; banal as they are, maxims that speak to the transience of time are reinforced again and again for a reason.
Still, this relentlessness of time provides us with opportunities anew to understand the world around us. Applying our energies to this task—the business of explicating our ever changing surroundings as best we can with what we have and what we know—is as good a use of our intellectual efforts as there is in existence. To shy away from this simply on account of the potential difficulty is to forfeit so much. In this field there may not be as much solid ground on which to operate as scholars are used to, but this fact alone should not be a deterrent; rather, it should spur forth renewed commitment to experimental and exploratory work.

The gist of what I am getting at, then, is that, if sentenced to be taken in alone, a work like this one here will ultimately fail. One singular examination of the contemporary is not enough; it is too big a subject to be encapsulated in one space. But we may each do our part. Together, we may strive to accomplish this theoretical encapsulation, and it is towards this goal, this achievement, that I set forth my project. I have tried to sketch, as accurately as possible, a structure of the world as it exists today, knowing full well the reality of this same world’s ever fluctuating state, and knowing full well that, as they are new ideas and concepts, any of the ideas and concepts I have broached could well be explored at great length in each one’s own individual right, and each one could have a very different look to it the day after tomorrow. Therefore it is my great hope, if nothing else, to start a productive and provocative conversation about the epoch we inhabit now. Please join me in actively considering these matters, and in continuing to utilize literature as a means by which to better elucidate such
affairs. Though under siege from the innumerable sensory demands on our time today, fiction remains one of the best instruments we possess for substantive cultural study. Through ongoing analyses of contemporary works like *Infinite Jest*, we can learn ever so much.

I mentioned a moment ago the relentless march of time; for obvious reasons, the one constant through all recorded time has been humankind. And so it is no surprise that at this late date in human history, the very idea of *the human* has come around to prominence once again. Our lives are as wide-ranging and diverse as ever, yet where postmodern theory and postmodern theorists saw this growing diversity as societal fracturing, as a great jumbled mess, today, as we turn the page to a post-postmodern era, let us understand that this diversity can still sometimes be linked, and in fascinating ways at that.

Humanity will, with any luck, never cease moving forward. Right now, it is the former figurants’ moment. What this means, and where society goes from here, remains to be seen.
Notes

1 Something positive, that is, unless you are John Ziegler, one part still irked about your portrayal in “Host,” one part just a despicable person, and Michiko Kakutani., with your personal sense of decorum instructing you that an obituary is the appropriate time to conduct a critical study by paraphrasing your own past book reviews.

2 Of course this is also a problem for any author of distinction who dies under these circumstances. That is why any lessons learned from the case of David Foster Wallace may be extrapolated to other similar situations.

3 No real worries here; such relationships should be self-apparent, and besides I fully trust you. If you are still hesitant about this, I assure you I tried a draft where I spelled out every single connection every single time, and I scrapped it, for it felt as if I were slapping You The Reader in the face repeatedly, or making you sit and listen to a sixty-three minute long pop song with the exact same chorus.

4 Future studies and examinations of Wallace’s last work, the incomplete-at-the-time-of-his-passing novel entitled The Pale King, which is tentatively scheduled, at the time of this work, for a spring 2010 publication, will be a whole different story, necessarily exempt from this edict for fairly obvious and self-explanatory reasons.

5 At least I sure as hell hope not.

6 Such is why I chose to begin my piece from a rather intimate and anecdotal viewpoint—to show my own personal side of the story, and then to make a point by banishing it from the following engagements. This was supposed to be accomplished in an adroit and efficient manner; in case the subtlety did not work….well, here is the endnote making all clear.

7 Roger Clemens was probably not the nicest or best person during his day, but you would still want him starting Game Seven, right? If you are smart you would.

8 Thus, throughout the remainder of the text you may view the two terms as interchangeable, and make of them what you will.

9 I am well aware that one tends to tread a tight rope when employing critically a term or concept found directly in the work one is examining. However, such an employment is well justified in this situation. I am in no way parroting a philosophy present in Infinite Jest; rather, I am attempting to tease out the ways in which the concept of the figurant functions thematically and structurally in Wallace’s novel, and striving to use such fictional lessons as instructive or illuminating examples of our very real state. The ability to both accurately and effectively use this term—figurant—in my own commentary, and to locate it specifically in Infinite Jest, is to be embraced, not avoided. Besides, supernumerary just does not have the same ring.

10 So scientific and so technical, in fact, that one of the more humorous postmodern-themed anecdotes involves the legend that later in his career Lyotard admitted to never having read many of the works he referenced in The Postmodern Condition (and he references a lot of works), and to not understanding much of his subject material himself; as a result he would rank it as his least favorite of all his work. Couple this information with the fact Lyotard certainly commits interpretive errors such as largely
misreading Wittgenstein, etc., and you can make a strong case indeed for ignoring significant portions of
the latter part of *TPC*.


12 Ibid., xxiv-xxv.

13 (All four quotes from the preceding sentence are) Ibid., 4.

14 Ibid., 14.


16 Ibid., xvi.

17 Ibid., xvi.

18 Ibid., xvii.

19 Jameson, Fredric. “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of

20 Ibid., 8.

21 Ibid., 9.

22 Ibid., 3.

23 Ibid., 10.

24 Ibid., 14,15,16.

25 Ibid., 18.

26 Ibid., 17.

27 Ibid., 31.

28 Ibid., 31.

29 Ibid., 16.

30 Ibid., 38.

31 Neither of the texts discussed here is all that long, and so not to be uncharitable but if you want more
on either subject I suggest you simply read each text in its entirety on your own time. In my direct
coverage of the pair, I am stopping where I am stopping because I feel all the most relevant points for

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purposes here have been covered, and because I dread that if I go on any longer this book report-like tone will ruin us both (By the way, I apologize for said tone, but I believe it was necessary.)

32 In today’s atmosphere, the very idea of postmodernism finds itself the scapegoat for a great many academic “problems”—see scholarly articles like Nancy J. Peterson’s “History, Postmodernism, and Louise Erdrich’s Tracks,” an essay written about the Silko-Erdrich to-be-postmodernist-or-not-to-be-postmodernist literary feud—and the scuttlebutt of an awful lot of jokes (most bad)—poor taste or not, you can literally purchase online today shirts that feature the picture of a urinal with the caption below it reading “NO POMO.” The point being, again, that, even obsolescence aside, the effectiveness of postmodern thought is nowadays greatly hindered by its treatment as a stale trope or, worse, silly punch line.

33 At this point, before I take another step, a disclaimer: I do not want my following claims to come off as too grand, or too broad. I am well aware that the technology-based cultural symptoms I am diagnosing in the pages to come are not totalizing forces in a literal sense. Basic internet remains a tool unavailable to much of the globe, let alone programs of further specialization such as those as I am about to enumerate, which reach even fewer people. Thus, despite the sometimes sweeping language of my piece, my argument is not intended to be one for/of universality. However, as for that which can be engaged culturally as part of a relevant and identifiable theoretical tradition, I believe the factors of post-postmodernity I outline here are more than sufficiently prevalent in today’s society as to warrant the treatment they receive here. For example, when push comes to shove, I guarantee more people use the internet, or find their lives drastically changed as a result of the contemporary conditions I am about to detail, than ever even heard of Andy Warhol, or Diamond Dust Shoes.


36 In fact, in the case of MySpace, just about the very first thing you will see at the top of every individual MySpace page is a graphics box containing the words (BLANK) IS IN YOUR EXTENDED NETWORK. You will see this on practically every MySpace page you visit, because in some remote way or another, pretty much every singular MySpace page is connected to every other singular MySpace page.

37 Ponder for a moment the many appearances and usages of this word in today’s culture, both as a conceptualizing noun, and as an increasingly pervasive verb.

38 Jameson, Fredric. Foreword. The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. By Jean-Francois Lyotard. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, xii-xiii. And remember, as already directly quoted, Lyotard very much believed that such accessibility and control of data would continue to be restricted to the privileged, and the privileged few at that.

39 Keep in mind that the existence of a way to accomplish this task obviously does not guarantee the successful accomplishment of said task.

41 (Both quotes in this sentence are) Ibid., 90 (Footnote 54).

42 Or really not even that much personal engagement is necessary: Over the past thirty-three years the Westin Bonaventure has been featured in a slew of movies and television shows, the odd music video or two, and of course the occasional video game.


44 And no, not just on account of the possibly stilted or obscure nature of your polite but still interrupting-an-afternoon-of-disposable-income-shopping-or-vacationing-with-the-kids inquiry, for all you smart alecks out there.


46 This is obviously a place where my personal background and bias clearly shows. Nonetheless, I feel as though holding such an opinion is totally justifiable in this regard.


48 He does not accomplish this in “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way.” While this message is conveyed somewhat clumsily throughout “Westward,” Wallace does end the piece superbly, hitting these artistic marks dead on with his succinct closing lines (inverting and subverting Barth) of “Hear it? It’s a love song. For whom? You are loved.” Unlike the work of Barth, Wallace’s work (he hopes someday) will be compassionate towards the reader, and compassionate in its rendering of human subjectivity.


49 Beta-fiction, perhaps?


52 Ibid., 31.

53 (Both quotes in this sentence are) Ibid., 31.


55 Ibid., 21.

On Page 32 of his article, LeClair first puts forth some semblance of this idea, writing that “Wallace enters his narrative” as Dr. James O. Incandenza. I do not want to go that far, but LeClair was still certainly onto something in his brief analysis of this scene, and I would like to examine the matter further in the pages to come.


Ibid., 834.

Ibid., 835.

Ibid., 835-836. Endnote 342 is a brief one; found on page 1076 it reads “Or possibly *Babel*.”

Ibid., 837.

 Ibid., 838, 839.

 Ibid., 15. A most appropriate adverb is used here by the academic.

This scene is one of the great examples of the generational tug-and-pull at work in the novel (a give-and-take that mirrors the theme of PM vs. PPM). Despite having his son’s best interests at heart, Dr. Incandenza is clearly a distant and not particularly good father—in this passage, not only does he not know his son’s birthday, but he is off by four years!


Ibid., 166.

Ibid., 837.

Ibid., 121.

This Millicent-Mario exchange takes place from page 121 to page 126.


When I say something like “prospective figurant,” what I mean is that LaMont Chu is not the sort of character one would expect to play that much of a part in the grand scheme of things, and he does not necessarily. However, when one finishes the book and considers it as a whole, Chu has conveyed in quite graspable terms something that is essential to take away from the novel.

Important to remember here that this is more than just the chosen turn of phrase, given *Infinite Jest*’s non-linear, temporally defiant structure.

Wallace does a good job of explicitly highlighting this very fact another place in the novel, via his telling of Barry Loach’s saga. As a bet with his committed-to-the-priesthood brother, who is debating leaving the Jesuits as a result of his contraction of “a kind of degenerative Lou Gehrig’s Disease of the spirit,” eventual Enfield Tennis Academy Head Trainer Barry Loach agrees to “make himself look homeless and disreputable and louse-ridden and clearly in need of basic human charity, and to stand out in front of the Park Street T-station.” Instead of asking for change, though, Barry is to “simply ask
passerby to touch him. Just to touch him. Viz. extend some basic human warmth and contact.” Of course, no one does for months, until fortunately for B.L. teenaged Mario Incandenza comes along and shakes his hand, and Barry can leave his Boston Commons post and attempt to rebuild his own faith in the human race. This scene presents both the story of yet another figurant and details the set of circumstances facing a peripheral Tony Krause.

a Page 968  
b Page 969  
c Ibid.


76 I do not mean to say here that this particular scene ties together all the book’s plot strands; rather, I mean that taken by itself, in a literal sense, this scene does link a number of previously believed-to-be-disparate characters together, etc. (This is exactly the matter I am going to delve into in the analysis to come), and that taken in the grand scheme of the novel, in a figurative sense, this particular scene is one perfect example of the tactic that is used many places in the book to conduct the business of narrative exposition.


78 This fate is confirmed for Poor Tony Krause on page 845: “the second of the newly acquired test-subjects—this was a mis-dressed and severely weakened or addicted man dressed in the clothing of a gauche woman, carrying multiple purses of suspicious nature.” It appears that P.T.K. may have after all succeeded in ditching Ruth, to Ruth’s own immense good fortune.

79 This inattention (or flat out failure to note) to the structural role played by figurants in *Infinite Jest* has resulted in numerous misreadings of the novel’s plot in many otherwise interesting scholarly articles and critical pieces. Take, for instance, Frank Louis Cioffi’s “‘An Anguish Become Thing’: Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*.” Cioffi writes by way of plot summary that “*Infinite Jest* is really three intertwined novels in one.”a I will not quote it at length here, but Cioffi next proceeds to list numerically and detail the content of each of these “novels.” The first novel is the story of Hal Incandenza, the second novel tells the tale of Don Gately, and the third novel follows Remy Marathe. Quite simply, this is not accurate. *Infinite Jest* is most decidedly not three novels-in-one. Elevating Hal, Gately, and Marathe to traditional *central* character roles overlooks much, namely, of course, the figurant primacy I am advocating.


80 On Page 275 Gately appraises seemingly random (at this point in the text) House resident Emil Minty: “Emil Minty, a hard-core smack-addict punk here for reasons nobody can quite yet pin down, is in an old mustard-colored easy chair with his combat boots up on one of the standing ashtrays, which is tilting not quite enough for Gately to tell him to watch out, please. Minty’s orange Mohawk and the shaved skull around it are starting to grow out brown, which is just not a pleasant sight in the morning at all.” Then, on page 300: “Emil still had him [Tony] marked for de-mapping as a consequence of that horrid thing with Wo and Bobby C last winter,” but “Emil simply dematerialized from the street-scene.” Furthermore, on page 303, in the midst of a hallucinatory episode brought on by his withdrawal, Tony Krause recalls “the falcon-black of the library night” and “an orange Mohawk.” Emil Minty is his
crewing partner; with C dead, the orange mohawked figure is Emil Minty, who, of course, has disappeared so suddenly and completely from his former scene because he is at Ennet House.


83 (Both quotes in this sentence are) *Ibid.*, 917.


86 There is an excellent example of this type of lazy, misinformed, and postmodern-centric reading from just the past few weeks. Last month, online magazine *Slate,* in their monthly Audio Book Club, profiled *Infinite Jest.* The *Slate* A.B.C. roundtable on *Infinite Jest* consisted of three individuals discussing the novel for an hour, and their session is a textbook case of what I am referring to here. All three, supposed nuanced readers, critics in their various artistic fields (two writers and a television critic), display a dearth of post-postmodern sensibility. They each approach their readings of the novel largely from a staid, out-of-touch, postmodern viewpoint. For instance, one of these individuals, the author and critic Katie Roiphe, says at one point that *Infinite Jest* is full of “postmodern tricks,” and that “the central fact [of] this book is [that it] is kind of a mess….it’s pretty uncontroversially a huge mess.” Readers of this piece here will know by now that *IJ* is indeed not a mess, or a fragmented postmodern jumble, but rather that the central fact of the work features the figurant, both thematically and structurally; and so I wish Ms. Roiphe could be presented with the reading opportunity you now are experiencing. Another member of the panel, James Surowiecki, a staff writer for *The New Yorker,* says at one point, irrelevant of *Infinite Jest,* “I’ve read most of the big postmodern novels, but it’s just not, it’s not kind of, it’s not kind of my thing.” As if more proof of the we-need-a-cultural-scapegoat, lump-it-all-together-under-the-banner-of-postmodernism attitude was needed….here is one more example. It is going to take great discipline in the days ahead to redefine our culture, to be willing to put in the effort required to better understand our age. Otherwise we will find ourselves like Mr. Surowiecki, conducting only the most cursory of investigations, utilizing the same old tried-and-true categories and definitions regardless of the circumstances at hand.

87 Peck, Dale. “To P. or Not to P.: *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace.” *Hatchet Jobs.* New York: The New Press, 2004, 47. Peck’s review of *Infinite Jest,* in addition to being a classic example of Peck’s now infamous incendiary style, and just plain ridiculous, is another specimen of sloppy criticism that facilely lumps *IJ* in with postmodern fare (in this case primarily Pynchon) and then moves quickly along.

88 Because let us not forget, for all the rhetoric of the new/evolutionary being bandied about here, *Infinite Jest* is still a novel; we must remember this. However, that fact is always pushing up against the knowledge that *Infinite Jest* is all the same truly doing something different, and pushing the boundaries of the novel experience. It is important to try and balance the two realities.

89 Marshall Boswell, in his study of Wallace, writes superbly at length about this postmodern relationship to questions of ontology.

90 If you are looking for one immediate snapshot of this, you cannot do much better than the scene where the aforementioned Kate Gompert is introduced to the reader, on pages 68-78. What Kate, depressed and
drug addicted, really desires is actually a *waning of affect*, ironically enough. This point only serves to underscore the power of her expressed emotions in this scene.


94 I would hope at this point in time I do not need to belabor this point, as this much should be quite clear by now.

95 The conclusion of *The Corrections* is the best and most succinct example of this flaw. After meticulously and painstakingly profiling the Lambert family, in all their dysfunctional glory, and profiling their individual places in the larger context of contemporary America, Franzen then chooses to end the work with an epilogue-like chapter that covers two years in six pages, tying together all loose ends for the reader.

96 Again, Marshall Boswell does great justice to the Wittgensteinian idea of closed-open systems as it appears in Wallace’s fiction, although he discusses such a notion primarily in the context of Wallace’s first novel, *The Broom of the System* (a natural choice given the quite overt engagement of Wallace with Wittgenstein in that book). He does briefly address the idea in regards to *Infinite Jest*, writing that as the reader puts in this non-traditional amount of effort, “Wallace and his reader become a community where meaning is made, in Wittgenstein’s sense.”

97 All of which was obviously intentional on Wallace’s part; if you are interested in further reading, the idea of literary fiction (in an age when television and its viewer passivity has become the dominant mode of entertainment and artistic expression) requiring *more* of the reader is one that runs neatly through of Wallace’s relevant non-fiction pieces, and pops up in interview after interview. Keep in mind also that this attribute of *Infinite Jest*—requiring an active reader—is not wholly unique to *Infinite Jest*.

98 For the uninitiated, I refer here to a tic of *Infinite Jest*’s Michael Pemulis, who “has this habit of looking first to one side and then over to the other before he says anything. It’s impossible to tell whether this is unaffected or whether Pemulis is emulating some film-noir-type character.” Mine is unaffected; I genuinely believe it is right to close now with a look 180 degrees around us.

99 Likewise, there are myriad other markers of post-postmodernity (other enablers of the figurant) to which I was unable to devote any time or space that could be taken up at length to great result. The recent phenomenon of Twitter—which represents *already* an evolutionary step of Facebook and its aims (and has in turn brought about subsequent reactionary changes from the designers of Facebook)—comes to mind. There are truly so many others.

100 This is not a flippant remark, and this is not something that should be taken lightly, or for granted—keeping in mind here any number of potential looming existential crises, issues that threaten continued
human existence….environmental concerns, nuclear proliferation, continuing genocides, etc., *ad infinitum.*
Bibliography


---“An Interview with David Foster Wallace.” Interview By Larry McCaffery. *Review*
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