

## Blog Post 2: *Infinite Jest* and Its Critics

500 words minimum

Due Tuesday, February 10<sup>th</sup> for A-L

Due Tuesday, February 17<sup>th</sup> for M-Z

Any discussion of “interactivity” or “interactive literature” must begin from acknowledging that every work of literature is part of a conversation. Whether a text engages with its forerunners, influenced (whether anxiously or not) by the tradition preceding it, or whether it is in dialogue with its own immediate cultural context, literature cannot avoid being in a heteroglossic, dialogical relationship with other things. For a writer like David Foster Wallace, seemingly obsessed, as he is, with communication, with the problems, challenges, and possibilities of truly speaking and listening to other people, one must also emphasize the dialogue between his text and how and why people have read his work. In other words, thinking about the interactivity of any text cannot stop at its immediate physical and conceptual boundaries, nor those of its predecessors and contemporaries, but also involves considering the diverse critical, scholarly, and popular ways a given work has been read.

As I have mentioned, since the publication of *Infinite Jest* (1996), and then getting really started after Wallace’s death in 2008, an entire sub-discipline has sprung up of various critics seriously reading Wallace’s work. And *Infinite Jest*, as his *magnum opus*, has received quite a lot of attention from the emerging field of Wallace studies. Various people have read the novel in a variety of interesting, profound, complex, and often eye-opening ways. Multiple readers’ guides have appeared. Scholarly journals have devoted considerable space—oftentimes whole issues—to his work. Multiple monographs and collections of essays have been published. Online communities of readers and fans have formed, expanded, and proliferated. Films have been and are being made adapting his work or reflecting on his life. In short, I do not think it a stretch to suggest that “interacting” with *Infinite Jest* means interacting with what people have said and written about the novel. And there is quite a bit to interact with.

So for your second blog post I would like you to read one text revolving in *Infinite Jest*’s orbit and to report back to us on the blog about that essay. I have provided a bibliography of texts below that you can look at. The majority of these are by critics writing about Wallace’s work, but I have also, for context, included essays Wallace himself wrote that directly bear upon aspects of *Infinite Jest*, as well as an important interview with Wallace. Each student will be responsible for choosing one of these essays to read and write about for this assignment, and each student will be working with a different essay. I will be passing around a sign-up sheet on Thursday for students to choose an essay to read and work with.<sup>1</sup> All these essays are on CourseWeb, under “Course Documents,” in the folder “Additional Documents,” and then in the folder “Essays on *Infinite Jest*.”

After you have read the essay that you have selected, I would like you to write a report *and* a response to it. First, I would like you, in two to three paragraphs, to introduce the essay, describe its argument, and locate its critical stakes. Then describe and show how the critic reads and interprets Wallace (or how Wallace treats his own critical object), and also how the critic *supports* their argument. Pick significant, specific moments of reading and interpretation to focus on. You will probably find that some of these essays are difficult and complex. Focus on those

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<sup>1</sup> Before class on Thursday please take a few minutes to scan a couple articles that you might be interested in reading and discussing so that you will have a good idea of what you want to read and why when I hand out the sign-up sheet.

moments of difficulty and complexity and try to account for them, try to see what the critic is trying to do and trying to say.

Second, in another two to three paragraphs, I would like you to *engage* with the critic, to comment on their reading, to extend their thinking. One easy way of going about this would simply be to answer the following questions: Do you agree or disagree with the critic? Why or why not? What has the critic done well? What have they overlooked? You may choose, however, to build upon the critic's work (or read them against the grain), to go *further* in your reading, to allow their insights to lead you toward interesting, novel ways of engaging with Wallace's novel. Though agreeing/disagreeing with a critical text can be an effective way of engaging with it, I often find that being *generous*, trying to read criticism critically, to see what *more* the critic might have *opened up*, can be a more productive and useful way of reading, writing, and thinking.

Your midterm essay assignment will ask you to engage with at least a couple of Wallace's critics, so this is a good way to get started on this requirement. This assignment is also intended to provide resources for other students, as we will have critical reports of over twenty essays after this assignment is complete. So be sure to pay attention to what other people are reading and writing about, as this will surely help you as you move toward the midterm.

And please feel free to ask any questions of me or get help. Lastly, note that if you want to look at something not on the list that should probably be okay, just run it by me beforehand.

## Bibliography of Criticism on *Infinite Jest*<sup>2</sup>

- Boswell, Marshall. "Infinite Jest: Too Much Fun for Anyone Mortal to Hope to Endure." In *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 116-79. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003.
- Frank Louis Cioffi. "'An Anguish Become Thing': Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Narrative* 8, no. 2 (May 2000): 161-81.
- Cohen, Samuel. "To Wish to Try to Sing to the Next Generation: *Infinite Jest*'s History." In *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, 59-79. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012.
- Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. "Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network." In *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, 182-207. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012.
- Freduenthal, Elizabeth. "Anti-Interiority: Compulsiveness, Objectification, and Identity in *Infinite Jest*." *New Literary History* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 192-211.
- Giles, Paul. "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace." *Twentieth Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 327-44.
- . "All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature." In *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, 3-24. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012.
- Goerlandt, Iannis. "'Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away': Irony and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 309-28.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*." In "Ecocriticism," special issue, *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1999), 675-97.
- Hering, David. "*Infinite Jest*: Triangles, Cycles, Choices and Chases." In *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Edited by David Hering, 89-100. Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2010.
- Hoberek, Andrew. "The Novel after David Foster Wallace." In *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*. Edited by Stephen J. Burn and Marshall Boswell, 211-28. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Holland, Mary K. "'The Art's Heart's Purpose': Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 47, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 218-42.
- Houser, Heather. "*Infinite Jest*'s Environmental Case for Disgust." In *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, 118-42. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012.
- Jacobs, Timothy. "American Touchstone: The Idea of Order in Gerard Manley Hopkins and David Foster Wallace." *Comparative Literature Studies* 38, no. 3 (2001): 215-31.

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<sup>2</sup> I have made available the following articles on CourseWeb under "Essays on *Infinite Jest*," which is under "Additional Documents." Note that some of these articles are not in fact on *Infinite Jest*, or are interviews with Wallace, or things Wallace wrote, etc. Also note that this bibliography is by no means exhaustive, and there are many more things one could find. I feel, however, that these articles, essays, and interviews are a good place to start and are some of the more interesting/valuable things on Wallace and *Infinite Jest*. Lastly, note that this bibliography is formatted in Chicago style and would necessarily need to be converted to MLA.

- . “The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Languages* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 265-92.
- Kelly, Adam. “David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline.” *Irish Journal of American Studies Online*, no. 2 (Summer 2010). <http://www.ijasonline.com/Adam-Kelly.html>.
- . “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction.” In *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Edited by David Hering, 131-46. Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2010.
- . “Development Through Dialogue: David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas.” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 267-83.
- Konstantinou, Lee. “No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief.” In *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, 83-112. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012.
- . “The World of David Foster Wallace.” *boundary 2* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 59-86.
- LeClair, Tom. “The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 38, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 12-37.
- Letzler, David. “Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: *Infinite Jest*’s Endnotes.” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 303-24.
- McCaffery, Larry. “An Extended Interview with David Foster Wallace.” In *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. Edited by Stephen J. Burn, 21-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012. First published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 127-50.
- McGurl, Mark. “The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program.” *boundary 2* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 27-54.
- Nichols, Catherine. “Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 43, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 3-16.
- Sayers, Philip. “Representing the Entertainment(s) in *Infinite Jest*.” *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 346-63.
- Scott, A. O. “The Panic of Influence.” *New York Review of Books* 47, no. 2 (February 10, 2000). <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/feb/10/the-panic-of-influence/>.
- Thomas, Eric A. “‘Psychotic Depression’ and Suicide in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 276-91.
- Wallace, David Foster. “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young.” In *Both Flesh and Not: Essays*, 37-68. New York: Little, Brown, 2012. First published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 8, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 127-50.
- . “The Empty Plenum: David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*.” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 217-39.
- . “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” In *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 21-82. New York: Little, Brown, 1997. First published in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 151-94.
- . “Keynote Commencement Address.” Kenyon College, Gambier, OH. May 21, 2005. [http://web.archive.org/web/20080213082423/http://www.marginalia.org/dfw\\_kenyon\\_commencement.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20080213082423/http://www.marginalia.org/dfw_kenyon_commencement.html).