

**“SHOCKING IN THE INTENSITY OF ITS ABSORPTION:”
OPTICAL TECHNOLOGY AS A SOLIPSISTIC MANIFOLD
IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S *INFINITE JEST***

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ABSTRACT

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Title: Shocking in the Intensity of its Absorption: Optical Technology as a Solipsistic Manifold in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

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In order to better understand the individual in contemporary society, I examine David Foster Wallace's opus *Infinite Jest*. In my reading, the novel portrays the individual's search for kinship in a society engrossed by a panoply of sensory experience that confines the individual to a prison of the self. Philosophers call this imprisonment solipsism. I aim to prove that Wallace writes *Infinite Jest* to reveal the solipsistic nature of our existence. To uncover this purpose, I investigate Wallace's treatment of optical technology and its relation to solipsism. Optics is remarkable for its substratal position in a novel striated with many content-rich thematic layers. As the science behind electronic imaging, image transmission, and perception by the human eye, optics underlies each step of the imaging chain featured centrally in *Jest*. Optics is also operative for solipsism, as characters in *Jest* demote reality to a series of mere ideas or images that abstract their experiences, further isolating them from other minds. I argue that studying this relationship between optics and solipsism is necessary in contemporary society. Filling the space between a philosophical treatise and a self-help book, *Infinite Jest* is a technology designed to our challenge conceptions of the self, ultimately to make us feel less alone.

We live in a world composed largely of our fictions, ranging from our dreams to our systems of government and our cosmologies, and we create and use new fictions every day in an attempt to order our lives and make them happier and more meaningful. Nothing can be more important than understanding a power so pervasive as this, so functional in our lives, and so filled with potential for perverting or furthering life.

Alvin Kernan, *The Death of Literature*

The characteristics of our romantics are to understand everything, *to see everything and to see it often incomparably more clearly than our most realistic minds see it*; to refuse to accept anyone or anything, but at the same time not to despise anything.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

This is not science. This is story-telling.

Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*

We come from a dark abyss, we end in a dark abyss, and we call the luminous interval life.

Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises*

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IMPORTANT DEFINITIONS

optics, *n.*

1. The branch of physics that deals with the properties and phenomena of light, sometimes esp. in relation to sight.

(Oxford English Dictionary)

2. The study of the behavior and properties of light and the way in which it interacts with matter.

(The Manual of Photography)

technology, *n.*

5. A particular practical or industrial art; a branch of the mechanical arts or applied sciences; a technological discipline.

(Oxford English Dictionary)

solipsism, *n.*

1. The doctrine that there exists a first person perspective possessing privileged and irreducible characteristics, in virtue of which we stand in various kinds of isolation from any other person or external things that may exist.

(The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy)

manifold, *adj.* and *n.*¹

A. *adj.*

1.

a. Varied or diverse in appearance, form, or character; having various forms, features, component parts, relations, applications, etc.; performing several functions at once; †complex, difficult (*obs.*). Now chiefly *literary*.

...

c. *spec.* Of an apparatus, machine, or instrument: composed or consisting of many parts; multiple in its effects.

(Oxford English Dictionary)

INTRODUCTION

Suicide is such a powerful end, it reaches back and scrambles the beginning.

—David Lipsky, *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*

David Foster Wallace has rolled in and out of public consciousness over the past few years on the tidings of his untimely death and the posthumous publication of his unfinished novel, *The Pale King*. Much of this attention has been positive. McSweeney's created a page on their website called "Memories of David Foster Wallace" on which fans, friends, and strangers posted stories of their interactions with the author.¹ Articles were written by other literary figures praising Wallace's work and lamenting the loss of a great figure in contemporary literature. At the same time, however, Wallace's suicide seems to have cast a shadow onto his life and work. "Wallace's life must be seen as a cautionary tale," write Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly in their book *All Things Shining* (24). The book, on how to find meaning in a secular age, continues to describe the incapacitating aspects of "Wallace's kind of Nietzschean nihilism" (56). After reading such negative—and, I will soon argue, misguided—treatments of Wallace, the veracity of Lipsky's words on suicide, taken from his 5-day biography of Wallace, gripped me. I begin my project with Wallace's end because this project is fundamentally about Wallace's earnest desire to help other people. Although many are obsessed with his dark death and view Wallace the "feral prodigy" or his tortured genius. While this project is about solipsism and optics, which don't seem like reader-friendly or happy things, the point that I'm trying to make is that Wallace designed the book to help people. In this

¹ The page is still up (at the time of the completion of this project) and can be accessed at: <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/pages/memories-of-david-foster-wallace>

sense, the physical undertaking of writing this prodigious novel (of hugely sad material) is such a deeply humanistic (sacrificial, even) enterprise. Because the novel seems to work effectively to decrease solipsism (for me, IJ communities, scholars), we have cause for joy.

Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957) was a Greek writer and philosopher both celebrated and condemned for his spiritual writings that sought to find greater meaning in a modern age he felt was increasingly banal, absurd, and mired in the material. Examining Kazantzakis' correspondence reveals that his literature was the product of a mind dogged by existential and metaphysical uncertainty. Of the work quoted above, Kazantzakis wrote, "...yesterday I finished the *Spiritual Exercises*. Is it good? I don't know. I tried with simple words, as in confession, to trace the spiritual struggles of my life, from where I set out, how I passed over obstacles, how the struggle of God began, how I found the central meaning which regulates at last my thought, my speech and my actions" (Friar, Introduction to *The Saviors of God* 19). David Foster Wallace appears similar to Kazantzakis in many ways—though I think none would describe his literary offerings as "simple words." Like Kazantzakis, Wallace tends to polarize readers. Loved by some, loathed by others, Wallace's work is well known for its length and difficulty, but ever-present beneath his voluminous fiction and his technical essays is a humble and cogent mind that wants, above all else, to instruct. I begin my investigation of Wallace with a passage from *The Saviors* because Kazantzakis described the book as an attempt "to trace the spiritual struggles of my life." I believe Wallace's opus, *Infinite Jest*, results from the same undertaking. Tennis, entertainment, addiction, recovery, loneliness, and solipsism were all components of Wallace's life. *Infinite Jest* reads, at times, like

Wallace's cavernous brainpan. But more significant than this are the works' similar purposes. Kazantzakis labels his work as a book of "Spiritual Exercises." I believe the same can be said of *Infinite Jest*.

Technology and solipsism are oft-mentioned themes in *Infinite Jest*. Never before, however, has *Jest* been viewed as a text fundamentally concerned with these themes—until now. I view *Infinite Jest* as an exhibition of various practical arts individuals use in an attempt to escape the self. These arts, as exercises intended—most fundamentally—to give meaning to our lives, I believe comprise the novel's spiritual exercises. The necessity of these "technologies of the self"—as Katherine Hayles terms them—grows from Wallace's belief that solipsism, a skeptical philosophical worldview with a history dating back to Descartes, exists today as a pernicious perceptual problem (Hayles 692). While studying Wallace's life and fiction, by way of the David Foster Wallace Archive at the Harry Ransom Center, I discovered that attempting to overcome solipsism appears to be—in the words of Kazantzakis—the "central meaning" of Wallace's life which regulates his "thoughts," "speech," and "actions." In one sense, this exercise is spiritual because, as Rémy Marathe says, the American "temple is self and sentiment" (*Infinite Jest* 108)². We live in a society that worships individuality and selfhood, and which is increasingly regimented around this tenet. Yet, despite the fact that our age trains all sights on the individual—her needs, her wants, and her desires—Wallace viewed fin de siècle American society as a culture of concealed sadness. "There's something particularly sad about it, something that doesn't have very much to do with physical circumstances, or the economy, or any of the stuff that gets talked about in the news. It's

² All *Infinite Jest* quotations are taken from the Back Bay 10th anniversary paperback edition, November 2006. Future citations will be written: "(*IJ* pg. ###)."

more like a stomach-level sadness. I see it in myself and my friends in different ways. It manifests itself as a kind of lostness” (Miller). I believe that Wallace considered solipsism a major contributor to this sadness, and *Infinite Jest* marks his attempt to save us all from ourselves.

In another sense, *Infinite Jest* is itself a spiritual exercise because, as Wallace once said, “Fiction’s about what it is to be a fucking human being” (McCaffery 4). If society, at times, seems to be no more than an abyss of transitory pleasures, Wallace was an individual willing to take that further step, willing—and exceedingly capable—to battle to give meaning to the confused struggles of man. Herein lies another parallel to Kazantzakis’ *Saviors of God*. When grappling with issues of this magnitude, all words seem simple—including the prodigious lexicon of David Foster Wallace.

The yellow smiley face symbol on *Infinite Jest* the fatal entertainment, then, becomes an appropriate symbol for *Infinite Jest* the text because, unlike the entertainment (which, to its credit, was intended to have a positive effect), *Infinite Jest* the novel *works*. Though it’s a dark, twisted artifact that is *shocking in the intensity of its absorption*, the novel can be stamped with a smile; filling the space between a philosophical treatise and a self-help book, *Infinite Jest* is itself a technology designed to challenge our conceptions of the self, ultimately to make us feel less alone.

CHAPTER 1

DIGGING UP WALLACE'S HEAD

*Introduction—"A Mind Apart"—"Finger-steeple"—The
Technological Dystopia of Infinite Jest—Toward an Efficacious
Technology of the Self—Calculated Complexity—Statement of
Purpose*

1.1 Introduction

Though critics, readers, and journalists have recognized the themes of technology and solipsism in David Foster Wallace's fiction, few have plumbed the depths of either theme within his work, and none have sufficiently investigated—what I argue is—the robust and significant connection between the two. My primary goal in the chapter below is to demonstrate that a concern with solipsism thoroughly and prominently pervades David Foster Wallace's writing and held deep and abiding personal significance for Wallace himself. Despite solipsism's prevalence, critics give the doctrine only a passing nod during discussion of Wallace's work. Instead, they primarily work to elucidate Wallace's theories for contemporary literature in our media-saturated society, all in an attempt to position Wallace in the literary canon. Studying Wallace's fiction and his papers held at the Harry Ransom Center, I have realized that Wallace's theories for entertainment, literature, and the fiction writer are fundamentally informed by his solipsistic sensitivity—a heretofore overlooked relation. To understand solipsism in *Infinite Jest* is to understand the purpose and theoretical lattice of the novel; to understand Wallace as a solipsistically conscious author is to understand his reason for writing fiction.

My second goal is to promote a liberal understanding of technology in *Infinite Jest* to pave the way for my investigation of technology as an apparatus to overcome solipsism. I argue that the panoply of technology in Wallace's work hasn't yet garnered critical focus at the most productive mode of selection. While the majority of critical work on *Infinite Jest* correctly notes technology's centrality in the text and/or addresses this centrality during analysis, it narrowly—and implicitly—defines technology as electronic media. This definition prohibits discussion of the myriad of distinct, operatively complex, and textually robust themes that belong under the umbrella of technology when defined liberally as a practical art designed to defeat solipsism. Although *Jest* contains a plurality of technologies, I narrow my focus to optical technology in chapter two because optics shares a unique historical rapport with solipsism and, like solipsism, operates at a foundational level in the text. Thus, exploring these two core themes illuminates much of the text at higher levels of selection. Before I narrow my focus, however, I will use this chapter to provide a gloss of technology in *Jest* in order to provide a window into the world of the novel. This window also allows me to chart the critical landscape surrounding technology, solipsism, and *Infinite Jest*.

As a final point, this chapter will at times digress to perform some necessary shovel work that breaks ground on a few different plots of critical and methodological import for this investigation. Generally, these are features of the text that must be addressed early on to either avoid complications later in the project or provide a foundation for later analysis—the lengthiest of which is my explanation of *Infinite Jest* as a work of complex fiction. However, the most important goals remain: to establish the

centrality of Wallace's solipsism in his life and work and, once established, use this insight to offer a new understanding of technology for *Infinite Jest*.

1.2 A Mind Apart

A panorama of Wallace's life and work reveals that solipsism loomed large in both fields. Despite the concept's significance, its treatment is merely scribbled on the margins of critical discussion. Though solipsism has not been given the critical attention it warrants, it has been considered. James Ryerson's introduction to *Fate, Time, and Language*—Wallace's senior thesis and only formal philosophical work—contains the most thorough account of solipsism in Wallace and provides a good entry into my treatment of the subject. Aptly titled, "A Head That Throbbled Heartlike: The Philosophical Mind of David Foster Wallace," the piece highlights the important role philosophy played in Wallace's fiction. Ryerson writes, "Though Wallace abandoned it as a formal pursuit, philosophy would forever loom large in his life. In addition to having been formative for his cast of mind, philosophy would repeatedly crop up in the subject matter of his writing" (17). Ryerson proceeds to note the various philosophical topics that "crop up," including one concept that occupies the last third of his account: solipsism. It may seem strange that solipsism—itsself not a particularly common philosophical concept—would garner such focus in an introduction to Wallace's modal logic attack on Taylor's 'Fatalism'; however, Ryerson makes clear that "Solipsism, sometimes discussed as a doctrine but also evoked as a metaphor for isolation and loneliness, pervades

Wallace's writing" (27). Wallace had strong feelings about solipsism³ and its role in entertainment, art, and human relationships. Unsurprisingly, it's also central to his fiction.

A productive assessment of solipsism's relation to technology in Wallace's work cannot begin until the term solipsism is defined. Since Wallace, as both a philosopher's son and philosophy adept, was well versed in the discipline, I turn to *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* to define solipsism at this stage of the project⁴. The first, and most basic, entry reads:

solipsism, the doctrine that there exists a first person perspective possessing privileged and irreducible characteristics, in virtue of which we stand in various kinds of isolation from any other person or external things that may exist (861).

An explicit definition of solipsism is absent from Ryerson's account of philosophy in Wallace, perhaps because he refers to multiple types of solipsism during his discussion—most notably, the semantic form developed by Wittgenstein.⁵ Wallace engaged extensively with Wittgenstein's treatment of solipsism in his first novel *The Broom of the System*, a detail that Ryerson, Boswell, and others have examined.⁶ Ryerson reports that as a young man Wallace found Wittgenstein's semantic struggle against solipsism

³ One may wonder why I'm choosing to call the sentiment solipsism instead of, as Ryerson notes, isolation or loneliness. I adopt solipsism because Wallace specifically uses the word in this general, metaphorical way to describe his own life and fiction, and because the doctrine, like optics, deals in terms of perception. These points will be made in detail over the course of my investigation

⁴ This definition also appears on one of the title pages of this project. In subsequent chapters, a new definition better suited for optics will be identified and adopted.

⁵ It should be noted that Wittgenstein and other philosophers who discuss solipsism do not explicitly define the term either. Often, they reach solipsistic conclusions during a line of analysis and then attempt to defeat the doctrine. When this occurs, it is assumed they are speaking of the general form as it appears above; however, the nature of their arguments against solipsism modifies the term in subtle though important ways. Wittgenstein, for instance, attacks the solipsistic idea that we each possess a private language unique to our understanding of the world. He uses principles of language to disprove this, thus his argument is said to be against "semantic solipsism." In the same way, we get empathic solipsism, ontological solipsism, methodological solipsism, and others. Because the meaning of each form is slightly different, the general definition—which, to put it simply, "gets the idea across" best—remains most useful at this stage of the project.

⁶ Cf. "A Head That Throbbled Heartlike: The Philosophical Mind of David Foster Wallace" and *Understanding David Foster Wallace*.

particularly persuasive, perhaps due to the fledgling author's own love for language. During a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace called Wittgenstein's *Investigations* "the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made" (13). Though Wittgenstein was a large influence on Wallace, his semantic solipsism fails to encapsulate the various forms of solipsism that appear across Wallace's work. Therefore, the Wittgensteinian definition of solipsism alone is not useful to identify solipsism beyond *Broom*. Furthermore, critics who identify solipsism in Wallace's work refer to the general definition rather than that which emerges from Wittgenstein. As such, while charting the critical landscape below, the word "solipsism" will denote the general form reproduced above.

Looking into Wallace's work, we find that Ryerson's claim that "solipsism... pervades Wallace's writing" is easily corroborated. Running the numbers, the word "solipsism" appears in nine of Wallace's published works, four nonfictional, five fictional—to put that into perspective, the common philosophical term "metaphysics" appears in only eleven.⁷ Besides featuring the word with some frequency, Wallace's work, as his college roommate and close friend Mark Costello described, "is full of sealed-off people." Ryerson reports that Costello told him, "Plainly, Dave, as a guy and a writer, had a lifelong horror/fascination with the idea of a mind sealed off" (27-28). In addition to the litany of characters that exhibit solipsistic behavior, solipsistic symbols fill Wallace's fiction—especially *Infinite Jest*. For instance, acting both behaviorally and symbolically solipsistic, *Infinite Jest*'s Nell Gunther "amuses herself" by rotating her glass eye "so the pupil and iris face in and the dead white and tiny manufacturer's

⁷ These numbers include the words' appearances in footnotes.

specifications on the back of the eye face out” (362-63). For Gunther, all perception focuses inward; the exterior world is obstructed by selfhood.

Wallace himself confirmed his preoccupation with solipsism in his nonfiction piece “Authority and American Usage.” In the essay, Wallace admits he “has at various times been afflicted” with “solipsistic conceits” (Lobster 87). Wallace uses the term again in a postcard to Don DeLillo, writing “that’s part of the horror, realizing how much I’m ruled by solipsism and ego” (101.10 *Wallace Archive, HRC*). Not only was Wallace’s work filled with sealed-off people, he—by self-admission—was sealed-off himself.

Perhaps it was this aspect of his character that drove him to write, for Wallace describes fiction writing as an exercise that can—and should—defeat solipsism. According to Wallace, “serious fiction’s purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves” (*McCaffery* 1). Accomplishing this purpose necessarily entails the defeat of solipsism, for to gain access to another mind is to realize that you are not alone. Wallace corroborates this notion by saying that good fiction allows us to “become less alone inside” (*McCaffery* 1). As such, it’s clear that Wallace wrote fiction to defeat solipsism. This telos is of utmost interpretive importance for any account of Wallace’s fiction.

1.3 “Finger-steeple”

Despite solipsism’s prevalence in Wallace’s life and fiction, an investigation that primarily seeks to understand Wallace’s treatment of the doctrine, and assess its potential value, has not been undertaken—until now. Thus far, critical discourse has only

appropriated the term as a synonym for loneliness and isolation⁸, usually during a discussion of Wallace as a theorist, and/or as a stepping-stone towards an analysis of his prescriptions for literature in our media-saturated age. Critics frequently reference Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram" to make the point that "Americans' isolation and loneliness" (McLaughlin) are increasing as a result of television and contemporary fiction, which has "slipped into a state of ruleless solipsism" (Jacobs 217). This work, however, is not exegetic or illuminating, it merely surveys what Wallace explicitly wrote in "Unibus." It's apparent from his nonfiction, private correspondence, and interviews that Wallace felt solipsism was an increasing problem in society and that his fiction was designed to overcome it. The questions that remain, and which critical discourse has not yet broached, are: *how* does Wallace's fiction overcome solipsism for the reader and *does it succeed* in this effort? My project sets out to elucidate the first question and, at its conclusion, uses the findings of my investigation to offer one possible answer to the second.

My investigation also approaches this material from the perspective that fiction can reveal certain truths more effectively than analytic reasoning, disquisition, or oration—a position I appropriate from Wallace. Thus, one has no better tool to understand Wallace's concerns than his fiction. While critics note Wallace's belief that "the novel...should be a 'deep, significant conversation with another consciousness' in which a 'relationship' is forged that enables the reader to feel 'unalone—intellectually, emotionally, [and] spiritually' (*Miller* 5)," they tend to lean on Wallace's nonfiction during their analysis of his fiction (*Jacobs* 218). Critical discourse heavily references

⁸ Except for Ryerson's introduction to *Fate, Time, and Language*, which I considered in detail above. There, solipsism is considered as a philosophical doctrine; however, as I previously mentioned, Ryerson limits the utility of his account by focusing on Wittgenstein's linguistic solipsism.

Wallace's nonfiction and interviews, where, it is assumed, Wallace lays bare his fictional intentions, and then culls his voluminous fiction for blurbs of television-sound-bite infinitesimals. Perhaps it's true that Wallace's nonfiction offers a more distilled, on-point Wallace—Wallace the thinker rather than Wallace the author. However, if meaningful communication is as difficult to achieve as solipsism suggests, and if—as Wallace claims—fiction is best suited to breach the barriers that solipsism erects between us, and if we believe Wallace's profession that "It's always tempting to sit back and make finger-steeple and invent impressive sounding theoretical justifications for what one does, but in my case most of it'd be horseshit" (*McCaffery* 7), then Wallace's fiction, rather than his nonfiction, is the best tool to uncover and understand his theoretical, sociological, and existential convictions. As such, this investigation will construct arguments based on Wallace's fiction and only delve into his nonfiction to offer additional justification for those arguments.

Wallace's concern with solipsism—specifically, with conquering it for his readership (and perhaps, then, within himself)—is overt in his nonfiction, his personal life, and his fiction. What has not been undertaken is an investigation to uncover how his fiction enables this conquest and whether or not it succeeds in this purpose; in short, does *Infinite Jest* provide a method to escape the self? Answering that question is the goal of this project. Moving toward that goal, the remainder of this chapter will map technology in *Infinite Jest*, reveal its close ties to solipsism, and explain why I adopt it as a heuristic to understand solipsism.

1.4 The Technological Dystopia of *Infinite Jest*

Technology is a prevalent theme in *Infinite Jest* that frequently merits critical attention. However, because critics don't approach the subject with Wallace's telos for fiction in mind (i.e., overcoming solipsism for the reader), they fail to realize technology's complex relationship with solipsism. Sketching the technologically dystopian world of *Jest* provides an entry point into this relationship while providing a crash-course introduction to the novel's complex narrative. It also serves a secondary purpose as context for my later analysis on optics. Furthermore, at the very end of this project, this picture of *Jest*'s society will provide a reference point to understand solipsism and technology in our own age.

In his 1994 book *Cyberia: Life in the Trenches of Cyberspace*, media theorist Douglas Rushkoff writes: "The mission of the cyberian counter culture of the 1990s, armed with new technologies, familiar with cyberspace and daring enough to explore unmapped realms of consciousness, is to rechoose reality consciously and purposefully." (6). For the cyberians, technology affords a new freedom: the freedom to actively choose the reality one inhabits. David Foster Wallace embarks on a similar mission in the early 90s while writing *Jest*; however, while the novel presents a future informed by technological advances, these technologies circumscribe a single, strict reality of confinement rather than a plurality of realities accessible through freedom of choice. Conscious of technology's growing role in society—through media, entertainment, and communication—Wallace imagines a future in *Jest* where technology further girds culture, where a "fiber-optic-InterGrid" of "Teleputers" receives "InterLace Disseminations" of movies, television, "weather, art, health," "financial-analysis," "videophony," "killer apps;" all constituents of a new millennium "electronic *couture*"

(IJ 60, 416-417). *Jest*'s reality appears antithetic to the spirit of the cyberians—though Wallace would suggest it is the natural outcome of their mentality. The cyberian mission to “rechoose reality” suggests that these young and capable dreamers will, with the aid of technology, reform the world to their liking—and they will do so together as a culture. We will choose the world we want to live in, they predict; then, we will create it. Like so much else, *Infinite Jest* brings this proposition full circle and, in doing so, reveals the illusory nature of the cyberian dream. In *Jest*, instead of actualized free exploration or choice of reality, the notion of choice is co-opted as a marketing tool by corporations and government who, as the newspaper headlines record, fall “IN LINE FOR ‘PIECE OF THE ACTION’ ON VIDEO, CARTIRIDGE, DISK RENTALS” (IJ 392). “What if,” *Jest*'s Interlace TelEntertainment asks in an ad campaign, “what if a viewer could more or less 100% choose what's on at any given time?” (IJ 416). The mores of choice espoused by the cyberian culture erode in *Jest*, revealing a consumer culture marketed toward individual viewers. Though ostensibly given the freedom of choice, these viewers are confined within a rigid system that allows choice only within a corporate-delineated media space.

Scott Bukatman makes this point in his excellent book on identity in the digital age, *Terminal Identity*. He explains how technological proliferation creates a false sense of freedom through the microcosm of television:

The plurality of channel selections serves as a kind of guarantee of the freedom of the subject to choose, to position *oneself* within the culture... Yet, as so many have argued, the range of choice is illusory. The viewer is always passive before the spectacle; the act of viewing amounts to an act of surrender (38-39).

In the same way, technology furnishes the cyberian culture with the ability to reach new planes of reality—such as cyberspace—and thus, they believe, the freedom to choose

between realities, yet Wallace exhibits that this dynamic actualizes as a form of self-surrender. The new realities technology enables are not created by an individual or a community but by a corporation interested only in the bottom line. Any exploration of these spaces is a submission to their boundaries. Thus, the cyberian culture's dream of absolute freedom becomes an individual mantra imbued by corporate media.

Additionally, *Jest* illustrates that explorative daring—a virtue of the cyberian culture—betrays the individual confined within this system by enhancing her isolation. An overabundance of pathways in the media space coupled with the seductive allure of free choice ensures that each individual follows a unique path that inevitably ends in isolation. In essence, the landscape entraps the individual and prevents him or her from returning to community. While the cyberians attempt to “explore unmapped realms of consciousness,” *Jest* exhibits that this exploration of consciousness is no more than an adaptive landscape responding to the individual's desire. As such, one never truly escapes the self. According to Wallace, this is society's inheritance from the cyberian program of choice: the individual locked in a prison of the self. Wallace epitomizes this progression through the book's impetus and lethal entertainment, “Infinite Jest.” Those who dare to view the cartridge are irrevocably trapped, watching the film on “a recursive loop” until they are left with “No desire or even basic survival-type will for anything other than more viewing” (*IJ* 54, 507). This cartridge becomes the paradigm for much of technology in *Infinite Jest*: it turns people inwards, robs them of community, and mires them in solipsism—a state that Wallace believes erodes all meaningful qualities of humanness.

Wallace's commentary also extends beyond the cyberian camp to critique America's pleasure-seeking social mores. In *Jest*, Rémy Marathe, a separatist from the

Canadian terrorist cell Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents⁹, explains how the American “temple is self and sentiment. Then in such an instance you are a fanatic of desire, a slave to your individual subjective narrow self’s sentiments; a citizen of nothing. You become a citizen of nothing. You are by yourself and alone, kneeling to yourself” (*IJ* 108).

Marathe’s words illustrate America’s social receptivity—susceptibility, even—to the cyberian freedom-of-choice doctrine and its perverse functioning in the media space of American capitalism that terminates in isolation and imprisonment of the self. We are powerless to resist technology’s seductive allure.¹⁰ Despite these censures of American society, I would argue that rather than calling for cultural reform, *Infinite Jest* is Wallace’s attempt to find meaning within culture. It does not attempt to change the world; it only attempts to change how we see it. In his essay “Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace,” Giles supports this interpretation:

Wallace is not a proselytizing or didactic writer, but his texts reflect a condition of confusion where the human sensibility is left uncertain about its epistemological status in an environment where cyborgs and machines are becoming ever more powerful, and conversely, where the categorical distinction between human and nonhuman is becoming ever less self-evident.

I argue that in the world of *Jest* the individual’s epistemological status is solipsism.

Rather than a making a call for reform, *Infinite Jest* reflects the individual’s struggle to

⁹ Referred to by the acronym “A.F.R.” from here forward.

¹⁰ Although this account makes *Jest* appear Ludditic, Wallace’s criticism of technology is not that strong. Wallace seeks to advocate change only insofar as his fiction engenders awareness. Though Wallace largely portrays technology in a negative light, his fiction is not Ludditism so much as it is an attempt to give us a perspective—in this case on the solipsism enwrapping us all. In his book *The Rise of the Computer State*, David Burnham writes, “The charge of Ludditism is particularly irritating because many of those making it pride themselves on their analytic abilities while seeming to be unable to distinguish between an angry mob of violent weavers and those who ask whether the computer may not be used for malevolent purposes” (17). I argue that charging Wallace with Ludditism is irritating in the same way. Wallace apparently agreed, for not only did he own Burnham’s book, he underlined the above passage. Wallace seems to vocalize these thoughts in *Jest* through Hal, who says, “Saying this is bad is like saying traffic is bad...nobody but Ludditic granola-crunching freaks would call bad what no one can imagine being without” (*IJ* 620). Rather than condemn the system, Wallace strives to find its redemptive qualities—and by doing so, encourages us to ask if any such qualities exist.

know him/herself and others in a world increasingly mediated and fragmented by technology.

1.5 Toward an Efficacious Technology of the Self

My analysis thus far has provided merely one facet of *Infinite Jest*'s commentary on the recursive loop of technology and solipsism (that existing between *Jest*'s media conglomerate Interlace Telentertainment and the individual viewer). Reducing the entirety of the novel's discourse on the solipsism/technology dynamic to a few paragraphs, however, is impossible; in two words, the book is *massive* and *complex*, so much so that one must almost produce an account of Wallacean proportions to provide an adequate assessment of any one discourse, subtext, or theme in the text. I begin by addressing Telentertainment specifically, though, to sketch the society and media space Wallace creates in *Jest* so that they may provide a platform for my analysis of optics and solipsism in the following chapters. Before I narrow my focus, however, I'd like to consider technology's status in the text more broadly, along with solipsism, to reveal the theme's overarching aspects. Understanding these aspects allows a fuller appreciation of optics' particular importance as a technology for *Jest* and primes my reading of the novel as a conglomeration of technologies commonly used in an attempt to defeat solipsism.

Solipsism provides a launch pad to understand technology—and much else—in *Infinite Jest*. The concept is patently present in the text, though under many different names, and it seems to underlie much of the novel's narrative action. The book's many characters are all (almost without exception) swimming against a whirlpool of solipsism,

alienation, and anhedonia¹¹, or as Hal Incandenza puts it: “in a nutshell, what we’re talking about here is loneliness” (*IJ* 113). With its nested levels of circularity, the book itself can be viewed as a whirlpool of their struggle; a compilation of insular characters similar only in their attempts to escape this vortex of self-absorption—indeed, this is perhaps the only cord binding the fragmented text together.¹² On this beachhead, I base my reading of *Infinite Jest* as an exhibition of various technologies individuals in modern society use—some more often than others—in an attempt to escape the self (i.e. to overcome solipsism). Discussion of technology has thus far been limited to electronic media, yet the novel encourages a much broader definition. One can define “technology” for *Infinite Jest* as any discipline used by the individual as a practical art to defeat solipsism.¹³ In her essay “The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity,” Katherine Hayles explains methods characters use in *Jest* to overcome selfhood as “technologies of the self” (692). The topics for which *Infinite Jest* is best known belong

¹¹ I will discuss Anhedonia in more detail in section 2.8 below. For now, know that Wallace defines this term variably throughout *Infinite Jest*. He explains in an endnote that the term was created to signify a psychological suppression of pain (*IJ* 1053). Kate Gompert better defines it for *Jest*, however, by describing it as “a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content” (*IJ* 693).

¹² In his book *Machine-Age Comedy*, Michael North lights upon this point. Expounding on *Jest*’s complicated attitude towards solipsism, North writes, “Wallace explores all possible meanings of the term *self-surrender* [in *Jest*], which signifies not only surrender of the self but also surrender to the self, and he fills the novel with situations in which these are interchangeable” (170).

¹³ With the exception of Hayles, critical discourse has not considered technology in *Jest* beyond electronic media, much less suggest a new definition tailored for the novel. Critics rely exclusively on Unibus, considering it Wallace’s manifesto on technology, and use it as a lens through which to view his fiction, despite the fact that Wallace’s treatment of technology in *Infinite Jest* is far more elaborate. North agrees:

The essay [E Unibus Pluram] actually is not a very good guide to *Infinite Jest*, no matter how much the central situation of the fatally addictive film may seem to come from the same set of assumptions, because the novel spends so much of its massive length on other addictions, other processes of self-subjection, that depend on causes much more subtle and complex than the machinations of the TV networks” (168).

North got it: there are deeper forces at work in the novel of which Telentertainment is only a by-product. Wallace confirms this in an interview: “It’s short sighted to blame TV. It’s just another symptom” (*McCaffery* 2). This investigation argues that solipsism is the underlying ailment for which technologies of the self offer a cure.

in this category—tennis, Alcoholics Anonymous, entertainment—along with many others that garner less attention—filmmaking, sex, drugs, love. Determining whether or not a technology is successful, however, proves a more difficult question than it may initially seem—and this, I believe, is one of Wallace’s implicit teachings. The remainder of this project is aimed toward finding an efficacious technology of the self.

Wallace indicates that many technologies used to escape the self actually further entrap the self, beginning a recursive loop that leaves the individual in a solipsistic state (my deconstruction of the cyberian program exhibits this pattern). Yet this is not the rule. Some technologies in *Jest* are exalted for their therapeutic properties—specifically their ability to rescue the individual from solipsism—such as Alcoholics Anonymous and tennis, but even the worth of these themes is uncertain. When viewed as a technology of the self, tennis exhibits the text’s non-commitment on this issue. Schtitt, the head coach of E.T.A., believes tennis to be such a technology. He holds that athletics is “about learning to sacrifice the hot narrow imperatives of the self—the needs, the desires, the fears, the multiform cravings of the individual appetitive will—to the larger imperatives of a team (OK, the state) and a set of delimiting rules (OK, the Law)” (*IJ* 82-83). But Wallace subtly indicates here and elsewhere that it’s not as simple as choosing the right hobby (tennis vs. entertainment vs. drug abuse)—for as we’ve seen, “the state” and “the law” in *Infinite Jest* are jockeying for a piece of the solipsism-inducing action, and Hal claims he’s been taught by Schtitt to “See yourself in your opponents. They will bring you to understand the Game. To accept the fact that the Game is about managed fear. That its object is to send from yourself what you hope will not return” (*IJ* 176). Though Hal refers to “sending” a tennis ball, his words subtly indicate a deeper form of

expulsion. In a sense, tennis is the confrontation of the reality that one is alone, and its object, like all of *Jest*'s technologies', is to banish one's fear of isolation—to erase the fear of solipsism. But then Hal speaks of tennis as a lonely exercise “bounded by the talent and imagination of self and opponent, bent in on itself by the containing boundaries of skill and imagination.... that made it, finally, a game, these boundaries of the self” (*IJ* 82). So is tennis, as a technology of the self, a remedy or part of the problem? Hal and Schtitt's contradictory accounts of the game illustrate a debate that extends through the novel. Schtitt alleges that the sport is a sacrifice of the self for something external, a team or a higher law, while for Hal the game is a solipsistic exercise where the player confronts the self in an attempt to expel his fear of loneliness. So which is it?

1.6 Calculated Complexity

This example exhibits *Jest*'s level of complexity, a quality that forestalls attempts to assess a given theme in the novel. Explaining the nature of this complexity provides a backdrop for understanding the contradictory points my analysis entertains and, more generally, introduces *Jest*'s narrative form. In addition to the problem of uncertainty regarding character motivations and plot events due to the contradictory accounts of various unreliable narrators, “Such a multivalent, circular novel presents special problems for the critic, who must decide where to start unpacking the plot, particularly since that plot achieves meaning through layering rather than through traditional cause and effect” (Boswell 121). Irene Triendl argues in her book *Philosophy and Performance in David Foster Wallace's “Infinite Jest”* that critics don't deal effectively with these aspects of the text: “On the whole...critics tend to emphasize content over form...they judge *IJ*'s ‘difficulties’ to be mere complications which obscure its content” (Triendl). Critics tend

to either ignore *Jest*'s difficulties or adopt a definitive interpretation of the plot despite the fact that, patently, one cannot be reached. To avoid thinking, as Wallace once said he mistakenly did, in "distinct problems and univocal solutions," I view the novel as complex by design (McCaffery 8).

The word "complications" implies that *Infinite Jest* is a comprehensible, though intricate, system; that it is solvable. In his book *Complexity and Postmodernism*, Paul Cilliers describes how "Some systems have a very large number of components and perform sophisticated tasks, but in a way that can be analyzed (in the full sense of the word) accurately. Such a system is complicated" (3). I argue that *Infinite Jest* does not meet this benchmark and is a complex work of fiction. The numerous contradictions in *Jest*—pertaining to both the unimportant details (such as the actual calendar year of the Y.D.A.U.) and important details (like why observers believe the seemingly lucid Hal is having an epileptic fit anytime he attempts to speak during the first section of the novel)—suggest the book is actually incomprehensible by design. Thus, the system at work in the novel is best described as complex, meaning that it is "constituted by such intricate sets of non-linear relationships and feedback loops that only certain aspects of them can be analyzed at a time. Moreover, these analyses would always cause distortion" (Cilliers 3). Hayles understands this aspect of *Jest*: "Imagine a huge novel that has been run through the recursive feedback loops of an intelligent agent program and then strung out along the page. Although the words follow in linear sequence, the recursive enfolding would dramatically affect the novel's structure sequence, and meaning" (Hayles 684). I agree with Hayles and argue that the novel should be viewed as complex. Moreover, the intentionality of *Jest*'s "mere complications" is revealed by Wallace's changing of Hal's

age from 13 to 11 in the “professional conversationalist” interview between the first and second editions of the text (Moore). Because this change further muddles attempts to determine the calendar years of Subsidized Time, it appears Wallace made this change precisely to obfuscate the calendar date of Y.D.A.U. If we believe Wallace was in command of his text, then the change from a date that conforms to the system and increases complicatedness to a date that contradicts the system and increases complexity should indicate that *Jest*’s complexity is an intentional piece of textual content. Thus, I will view all textual inconsistencies and discrepancies in *Jest* as meaningful technique rather than mere oversight.

1.7 Statement of Purpose

Philosophers for centuries have reluctantly concluded that many attempts to defeat solipsism fail, and those that claim to succeed tend to do so in ways that leave us unsatisfied. As Wallace puts it, we can defeat solipsism but never “the horror.” I want to prove that Wallace writes *Infinite Jest* in part to prove this point—indeed, this may be the fundamental purpose of the novel. At the very least, Wallace’s text indicates that we are in a prison of the self, and he seems to suggest that we must adopt some practical art—i.e., a technology of the self—if we are ever to break out. Yet each of the text’s many technologies operates in multiple ways, sometimes concurrently. Though advocated by certain individuals as an effective tool—the best tool, and the only tool—to escape solipsism, technology often functions recursively. The individual pushes against the horizon of the self but succumbs to the intensity of his/her own absorption—or worse, what appears to be a door is only the entrance to another cage. During this project, I will explore technology’s double edge as a solipsistic intensifier and a solipsistic temper to

determine its ultimate status in the work. I explained my reading of the text as a collection of technologies used to overcome solipsism. While I could make this point through a survey that touches the relevant parts of a host of different technologies, this analysis seeks to properly address one technology: optics. The reasons for my selection will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. By the end of my investigation, I will have thoroughly considered optics and its ability to defeat or increase solipsism for the individual. This single line of analysis, however, leaves the valid question: should we assume tennis or drug use operates the same way? Perhaps the length of this investigation is proof that each technology is singularly complex enough to warrant separate analysis. Be that as it may, in order to adequately treat one technology, this project must limit its scope to optics. By scrutinizing a foundational theme in the text, however, my analysis is able to consider a number of other technologies of the self—as will be shown in the next two chapters. Now that the theoretical groundwork has been laid, my investigation moves toward uncovering an efficacious technology of the self; a practical art capable of effecting “reverse thrust on a [society’s] fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life” (*IJ* 839).

CHAPTER 2

THE STARS TO STEER BY: THE ORIGINS OF OPTICS IN *INFINITE JEST*

Introduction—Optics: A Unique Universal—The Cartesian Connection—Advancing Masked—(re)Defining Solipsism for Optics in Infinite Jest—Reducing Reality—The Dangers of Abstraction

2.1 Introduction

Taking Wallace's advice and turning to his fiction to understand his position on solipsism, we are confronted with a plethora of solipsistic imagery and systems within the broad scope of technology. Optics is one of the most significant. The Oxford English Dictionary defines optics as "the branch of physics that deals with the properties and phenomena of light, sometimes esp. in relation to sight," while the *Manual of Photography* gives a more technical definition: "the study of the behavior and properties of light and the way in which it interacts with matter" (21 *Allen et al.*). The study of optics is one of *Infinite Jest*'s many focal points and one major vehicle through which Wallace delivers solipsistic symbols. The novel is filled with optical references. In the opening chapter, we learn Hal has written a college entrance essay on "'The Implications of Post-Fourier Transformations for a Holographically Mimetic Cinema'," a reference to the Fourier theory of image formation. Pages later, Hal describes how "The Brewster's-Angle light of the tabletop appears as a rose flush behind my closed lids." Brewster's angle is the angle of incidence that produces polarized light. Following these allusions, Hal opines, "I believe Dennis Gabor may very well have been the Antichrist," in a reference to the recipient of the 1971 Nobel Prize in Physics for his invention of

holography (*IJ* 7, 10, 12). These references occur in the first 15 pages of the 1,079-page *Infinite Jest*, and optical language continues to appear throughout the text—“refraction,” “raster,” “diffraction,” to name a few (*IJ* 289, 989, 1027).

In the chapter below, the technical and historical aspects of optics and light theory will be explained alongside passages from *Infinite Jest* to give relief to a small part of the text’s intricate solipsistic symbolism. My investigation will explain that because optics is the science governing perception—and the doctrine of solipsism entails a skeptical doubt of perception—optics is a fitting technology through which to explicate solipsism. This will be made especially clear by uncovering Descartes’ manifold influence, as the progenitor of solipsism and optics for modernity, on *Jest*. In addition, I will reveal how optics is at the core of many of the novel’s other themes; thereby, optics allows me to consider a number of other technologies of the self. At some moments, this analysis will step away from technology and the “Hardcore-math-based-optical science” that will become, in chapter three, the focus of my investigation (*IJ* 81). However, this chapter provides the necessary foundation—in both *Jest*’s extensive universe and optical theory—from which my more technical analysis will rise. Casting off the mantle of technology en masse, I will adopt optics as a guiding light to navigate the plexus of solipsism in *Infinite Jest*.

2.2 Optics: A Unique Universal

Optics is remarkable for its substratal position in a novel striated with many content-rich thematic layers. At first glance, *Jest*’s optical jargon and references to esoteric cinematographic techniques may frustrate attempts to unpack and understand the theme’s role in the novel. It may, like so many other “CNS-rendingly” recondite subjects

percolating through the text, appear overly complicated and unnecessary for a core understanding of the book. However, optics plays a seminal role in the novel and works as a theoretical vehicle for solipsism. Furthermore, as will be discussed in detail below, optics operates at a core level of the *Jest* universe. For instance, without optics, none of the entertainment (which many critics view as the novel's predominant theme) could be filmed, displayed on the "Teleputer" screen, or even discerned by the mind—for the human eye operates on the same optical principles that cameras replicate. This, however, is only one application; optics underlies many of the text's other salient themes.

Optics' fundamental importance for many characters and themes, in tandem with *Jest*'s internal parallelism and circularity, make it difficult to justify an entry point of analysis. Hayles also remarks on this difficulty: "For such a novel any starting point would be to some extent arbitrary, for no matter where one starts, everything eventually cycles together with everything else" (684). These challenges aside, a logical first step to understand the substratal role optics plays in *Infinite Jest* is to review James O.

Incandenza's history in optics; for all optics included in *Jest*—the optics classes at E.T.A., the theoretical discussions between students, and Incandenza's filmography which includes the sought after "Infinite Jest" cartridge—stems from his "childhood dream" (*IJ* 63). Wallace provides Incandenza's optical back-story early in the text. A condensed version appears below:

The United States government's prestigious O.N.R. [Office of Naval Research] financed [Incandenza's] doctorate in optical physics, fulfilling something of a childhood dream...[He then became] the top applied-geometrical-optics man in the O.N.R. and S.A.C., designing neutron-scattering reflectors for thermo-strategic weapons systems, then in the Atomic Energy Commission —where his development of gamma-refractive indices for lithium-anodized lenses and panels is commonly regarded as one of the big half-dozen discoveries that made possible cold annular fusion and approximate energy-independence for the U.S. ... His

optical acumen translated, after an early retirement from the public sector, into a patented fortune in rearview mirrors, light-sensitive eyewear, holographic birthday and Xmas greeting cartridges, videophonic Tableaux, homolosine-cartography software, nonfluorescent public-lighting systems and film-equipment; then... into ‘après-garde’ experimental- and conceptual-film work... involving the chiaroscuro lamping and custom-lens effects for which Incandenza’s distinctive deep focus was known. (63-65)

The importance of optics—and Incandenza’s contributions to it—for the world of *Infinite Jest* should be clear. The quote communicates the breadth of Incandenza’s work in optics, spanning both the public and private sectors before he launched a film career, but also reveals optics’ fundamental importance for many of *Jest*’s events. Incandenza designed optics for government “thermo-strategic weapons systems” that sound strikingly similar to the “EndStat stats-cruncher software” that appropriates “thermonuclear warheads” to Eschaton players—which software is also run on Incandenza’s “idle drop-clothed D.E.C. 2100” server (323). Incandenza also made an optical discovery that allowed for cold annular fusion, which in turn made possible the O.N.A.N. reconfiguration. This reconfiguration is the impetus behind the novel’s (if any moral qualifiers can even be applied) villains, the A.F.R., who instigate a multinational hunt for the entertainment that includes spy games, kidnappings, and torture, all of which finally coalesce—we are led to believe—to interconnect *Infinite Jest*’s three-pronged story line¹⁴.

Although the three main story lines don’t meet during the text, characters are featured across multiple plots, yet they remain unaware of this. Hal visits Ennet House and doesn’t realize his brother’s ex-girlfriend and star of his late father’s films—including “Infinite Jest”—Joelle van Dyne, is a resident there (786); Don Gately doesn’t

¹⁴ Though the three plots (surrounding E.T.A., A.F.R., and Ennet House, respectively) do not entirely merge during the novel, Hal’s memory in the first chapter of John N. R. Wayne, an alleged Québécois separatist loyalist and possibly their spy within E.T.A., “standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father’s head” suggests that the plots do eventually merge when, assumedly, the A.F.R. kidnaps the two main characters from the other plotlines, Hal and Gately (*IJ* 17).

realize the man he inadvertently killed during a burglary, M. DuPlessis, was the former assistant coordinator of the pan-Canadian Resistance or that he stole a copy of the Entertainment from his entertainment cabinet (58-59); the Antittoi brothers don't realize they sell DMZ to Hal's friend Pemulis and (somehow) receive a copy of the Entertainment,¹⁵ which sits undiscovered on their store shelf (215, 483). Triendl identifies the distinct nature of these plot lines and ties them to solipsism in her book *Philosophy and Performance in David Foster Wallace's "Infinite Jest."* She writes:

There exist [within *Infinite Jest*] isolated parallel worlds inhabited by people so self-centered that—although they basically share the same issues and live right next to each other—they are hardly aware of each others' existence and do not allow for any permeability into life situations that differ from their own. (25)

The novel's interwoven plots, like the characters they chronicle, transpire in solipsistic isolation from one another. However, the novel also possesses ubiquitous themes such as addiction, entertainment, and the A.F.R.'s search for the master copy of "Infinite Jest" that pass through the novel's many solipsistic boundaries, which boundaries both confine the—ostensibly dissimilar—characters and separate the communities in which they revolve. Nevertheless, all of these themes, as Incandenza's optical history revealed, are determined or influenced by optics. Thus, optics joins a small number of motifs in *Infinite Jest* that explain the novel's many themes, which in turn motivate much of the novel's plot and character development. Optics joins a select set of theories—including solipsism—that can be viewed as playing a quantum role in the text. By this I mean that

¹⁵ How they end up with the "Infinite Jest" cartridge is difficult to determine. They probably either received it in a trade with the DMZ from—the Nehru-jacket-wearing man that seems to be—Dr. Robert ('Sixties Bob') Monroe, or it was one of a number of cartridges Bertraund "claimed he had picked up literally on the street downtown" from a commercial display (*IJ* 481-483). While I can offer no explanation for the cartridge's appearance in the public display, Sixties Bob likely got it from Whitey Sorkin, whose goons could have stolen it from Gately and Fackelmann's apartment during the aftermath of the Yale/Brown basketball game debacle—but here we leave textual evidence for conjecture.

if you reduced any scene or page of *Infinite Jest* to its thematic constituents, and then continued to reduce those constituents until you could no longer sensibly perform the reduction, you would finally arrive at optical physics or solipsism-like epistemic quandaries.

Optics plays a quantum role in *Infinite Jest*'s most extensive, and critically recognized, theme: entertainment. This follows from the fact that optics is the science underlying cinematography, or the technique of motion-picture photography. Without optics, the "InterLace Telentertainment" corporation could not exist. The corporation could not film entertainments, nor transmit them via "fiber-optic transmission-grid," nor display them on "High-Def-screen PCs with mimetic-resolution," (*IJ* 60, 417). All of these components of entertainment rely on optical technology.¹⁶ Furthermore, entertainment is no more than a macrocosm of what *The Manual of Photography* calls the imaging chain. This chain is a series of optical stages that follow light's "emission from a light source, reflection and absorption by surfaces within a scene, detection and transformation by an image sensor (which may be the human eye) and finally its interpretation" (19 *Allen et al.*). This link to human perception and interpretation—which involves consciousness and the mind—begins to reveal optics' importance for solipsism. Though distinct, the two continually intertwine in the text. During the remainder of this investigation, the covalent relationship between the theory of optics and the concept of solipsism will be developed across a range of subjects in *Jest*. First, however, it's

¹⁶ For a very in-depth look at optics' importance for fiber-optic grids, see: Agrawal, Govind. *Applications of Nonlinear Fiber Optics*. Burlington: Academic Press, 2008. Ebook Library. Web.

And optics' importance for displays can be found at:

Wu, Shin-Tson; Yang, Deng-Ke. *Fundamentals of Liquid Crystal Devices*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2006. Ebook Library. Web.

necessary to uncover the theoretical roots of both optics and solipsism in order to develop the best possible picture of the themes as they appear in *Infinite Jest*.

2.3 The Cartesian Connection

Solipsism was defined in section 1.1 above as “The doctrine that there exists a first person perspective possessing privileged and irreducible characteristics, in virtue of which we stand in various kinds of isolation from any other person or external things that may exist” (Cambridge 861). While this definition has been useful thus far, it’s not optimum for an analysis of solipsism in relation to optics. To uncover a new definition of solipsism for optics, I turn back toward the origins of the doctrine: Descartes’ *Meditations*. Descartes is a choice figure for *Jest* because, as both a modern originator of solipsism and an early optical theorist, within the broad field of his work “The development of a semantics of seeing, discerning, focusing, and similar expressions finds figurative equivalents in philosophical, moral, and political discourses,” and, what’s more, his *Meditations* prove that “the visual paradigm has since its beginning been countered by strong epistemological skepticism,” that being, solipsism (Berkemeier 100). Descartes’ philosophy of mind and work in optics have both had pervasive—and, according to some, pernicious—influence within their field. Tracing the origins of optics and solipsism back to Descartes is necessary to understand how his influence extended beyond the theoretical and into the nature of human conception regarding vision, the external world, and the mind. In essence, Descartes’ understanding of optics and cognition enabled him to adopt skeptical doubts regarding the external world. In doing so, Descartes created a mode of understanding that endures in cognitive schema today,

including that of Wallace and the characters in *Infinite Jest*. Thus, delineating Descartes reveals the framework of a mind afflicted with solipsistic conceits.

In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes adopts the skeptical perspective that all features of the external world perceived by the mind throughout life are illusory, nothing more than the trick of an evil demon. He reaches this beachhead by noting:

Surely whatever I had admitted until now as most true I received either from the senses or through the senses. However, I have noticed that the senses are sometimes deceptive; and it is a mark of prudence never to place our complete trust in those who have deceived us even once. (14)

From here, Descartes reasons that he often believes the veracity of his experiences only to discover that he is dreaming—in fact, he may even be dreaming as he writes this meditation. Hence, he concludes, “eventually I am forced to admit that there is nothing among the things I once believed to be true which it is not permissible to doubt—and not out of frivolity or lack of forethought, but for valid and considered reasons” (16).

Descartes adopts this solipsistic position because he realizes that one cannot disprove its possibility. Therefore, he chooses to espouse the view—a difficult task for a doctrine he admits is “insane”—and attempts to reason his way toward some position of epistemic strength (16). Descartes writes “I am not unlike a prisoner who enjoyed an imaginary freedom during his sleep, but, when he later begins to suspect that he is dreaming, fears being awakened and nonchalantly conspires with these pleasant illusions” (17). In this way, solipsism holds one prisoner of his or her own private reality when in truth, according to Descartes, her reality is the dream while recognition of this (irrefutable) possibility awakens her. Descartes’ conception of solipsism makes an attractive candidate for discussing solipsism in relation to optics. Broadly speaking, the account is appropriate because Descartes reduces epistemology to sense perceptions—and optics is the science

governing the most active of human senses: visual perception. The persistent possibility of solipsism, according to Descartes, results from the high degree of fallibility in visual perception.¹⁷

Additionally, Descartes' account of solipsism is ideal because he also wrote an influential work on optics during his lifetime. I believe the *Meditations*—with its focus on visual perception—can thus be read as a (perhaps unconscious) synthesis of these two fields. The Dictionary of Literary Biography (DLB) records that “Descartes spent much of his time during his Paris years working on problems in optics... By 1628 Descartes had derived the law of refraction, which geometrically relates how light rays behave when they pass from one medium to another.” Descartes continued his study of optics throughout his life, eventually publishing an essay on optical science in 1637 called “La Dioptrique” (Optics) (DLB). Descartes, therefore, is not only the grandfather of solipsism but also an optical theorist with enduring contributions to the field. Wallace, through his treatment of optics and solipsism in *Jest*, owes him a heavy debt. Furthermore, in much the same way that optics plays a quantum role in *Infinite Jest* (in which an understanding of optics informs other themes in the text), Descartes' study of optics informed much of his other work. In his essay “Descartes' ‘Dioptrics’ and ‘Optics’ in *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*,” Jeffrey McDonough writes:

Optics figures centrally in Descartes' *The World, or Treatise on Light*... as well as, of course, his *Dioptrics*... It also, however, plays important roles in the three essays published together... the *Discourse on Method*, the *Geometry*, and the *Meteorology*, and many of Descartes' conclusions concerning light... persist... into the *Principles of Philosophy*. (6)

¹⁷ Some may be familiar with Descartes' *Meditations* and object to my distillation of his complex and well-reasoned discourse into a single proposition: solipsism is a possibility. For the skeptical reader, I include my own demonstration of the failure of Descartes' account to adequately banish the possibility of solipsism. It can be found in Appendix A.

Though primarily known for his philosophical meditations, Descartes' also studied optics throughout his life, and this study pervaded both his scientific and philosophical work. It seems appropriate, then, to view his *Meditations* in terms of optics, especially considering it was originally published in 1641, four years after Descartes published his book of optics. Moreover, my decision to adopt optics to understand solipsism in Wallace is no factitious exercise; it actually appears very much in line with the historical character of the doctrine. This is perhaps no coincidence. Descartes' preoccupation with optics provides a conceptual foundation for his solipsism, and historic corollary to a dynamic that arises in *Infinite Jest*, which I will discuss in section 2.4 below.

Wallace highlights his debt to Descartes when he names his work as an influence. Not only was Wallace familiar with Descartes' writings—a given, considering his philosophy background—he both idealized it and had qualms about its implications. During an interview for *Salon*, Wallace named Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* as one of the “stars you steer by” when writing, while in a letter to Don DeLillo, Wallace called the meditations “creepy” and “powerful”¹⁸ (*HRC Wallace Archive*). These accolades stem from Wallace's belief that Descartes broke through the solipsistic barrier (section 1.2) to form an intimate connection with him. Wallace described this connection with Descartes—and his other favorite writers—in *Salon*: “I feel unalone – intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness in fiction.” Ironically, Descartes connects with Wallace by failing to disprove the same solipsistic thought

¹⁸ He extended the same adjectives to Hilary Putnam's philosophy essay “Brains in Vats,” which I will return to in time.

experiments that Wallace's work incessantly fictionalizes. In short, Descartes broke through solipsism and resonated with Wallace by failing to disprove solipsism.

2.4 Solipsism and the Cartesian Theater

Descartes' influence on *Infinite Jest* is not limited to the novel's thematic content of optics and solipsism. It also appears in the modes of thinking of characters in *Jest*—perhaps even in Wallace himself. Critics of Descartes' dualism¹⁹ have noted that his theory of mind describes, what has come to be called, a Cartesian Theater, which many critics have decried as a misrepresentation of consciousness. The Cartesian Theater is an antiquated notion of when and where perception occurs. For Descartes, this process had a material epicenter in the pineal gland, which was no coincidence. Known historically as the third eye, the pineal gland is a small kernel in the brain nestled between its two hemispheres. Because of its centrality and singularity, Descartes believed this was the physical nexus where the mechanistic body's sensual stimuli intermingled with the immaterial mind (i.e., spirit, soul, etc.). Though an interesting and well-reasoned account, the theory is anatomically and physiologically incorrect, and was even thought to be so during Descartes' time (Lokhorst). Despite its falsity, the theory still revolves in our psychology today. Daniel Dennett explains:

Cartesian materialism is the view that there is a crucial finish line or boundary somewhere in the brain, marking a place where the order of arrival equals the order of "presentation" in experience because *what happens there* is what you are conscious of...the persuasive imagery of the Cartesian Theater keeps coming back to haunt us—laypeople and scientists alike—even after its ghostly dualism has been denounced and exorcized. (107)

¹⁹ In metaphysics, dualism is the theory that two sorts of substance exist: the material and the immaterial. When applied in philosophy of the mind—which occurs in Descartes' writings—the self is divided between a material body and brain and an immaterial seat of consciousness or soul. For Descartes, the brain and body are nothing more than machine, while the immaterial mind (which he called the soul) was the seat of cognition, capable of volition, which governed the body.

The Cartesian Theater is depicted in Figure 1 below²⁰.

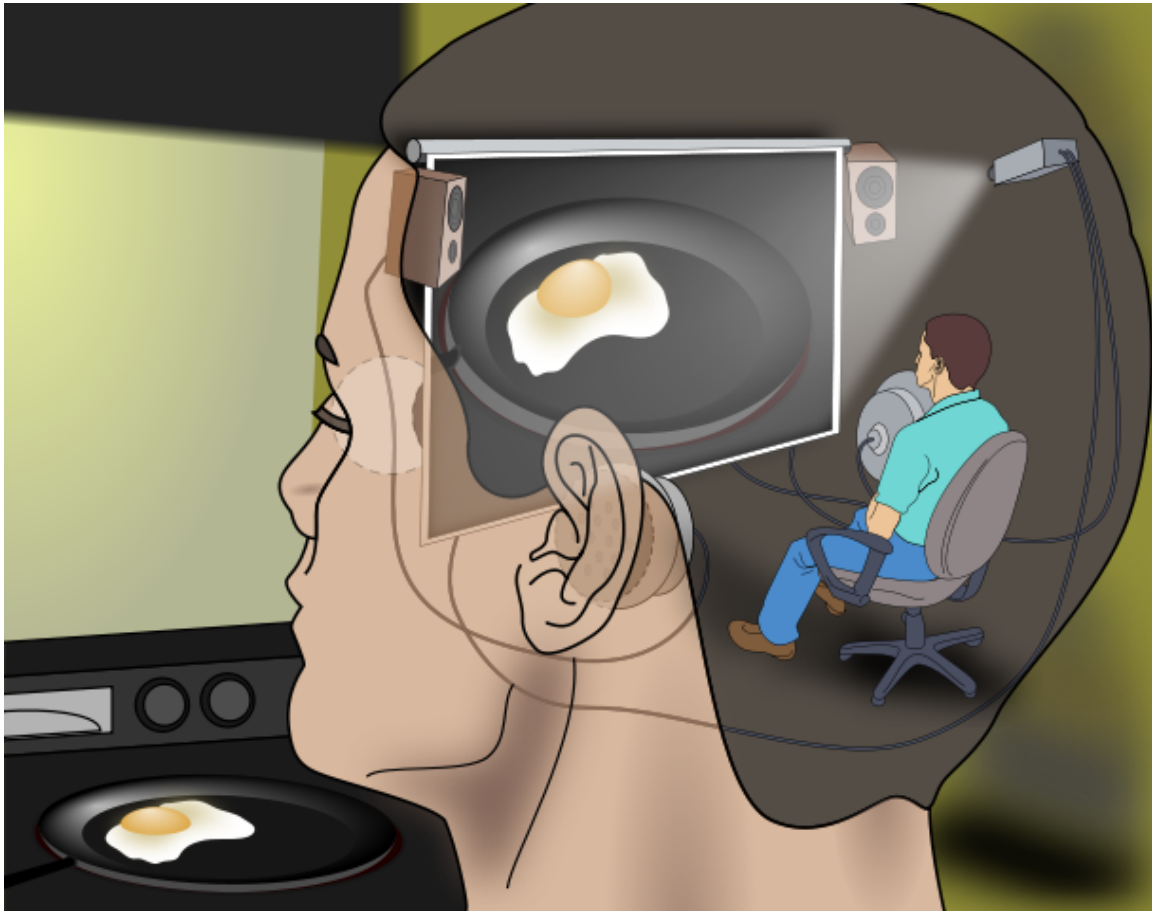


Figure 1

External experience is projected onto the brain for consciousness to view.

Note that this image is a conceptual representation. Descartes did not believe we sat in our heads to watch external experience on a screen (though that would be very much in line with this project). Rather, the image is meant to exhibit the fallacious notion that there is central point in the brain where (and when, which is the modern problem for science) “it all comes together” (Dennett 107). Looking at the image, one begins to

²⁰ Image retrieved on April 2, 2012 from http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/65/Cartesian_Theater.jpg/608px-Cartesian_Theater.jpg

understand how Descartes could entertain a solipsistic program. Because he believed that the seat of consciousness existed immaterially, i.e., apart from the physical world, it was not as significant to doubt the existence of the entire external world—which, from a materialist perspective, would necessarily entail a contradiction: self-erasure. Moreover, adopting a softer form of solipsism (the sort I will argue characters in *Jest* exhibit) becomes effortless. The individual is entrapped within the self by default in the Cartesian Theater. It standardizes the individual's solipsistic status. Because of this, it appears that the modes of thinking precipitated by the Cartesian Theater enable solipsism to take root in the psyche. But even the Cartesian Theater has a conceptual predecessor in Descartes' optics. In figure 2, Descartes theory of vision is pictorially represented²¹.

²¹ Image retrieved on April 2nd, 2012 from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091302204000196>

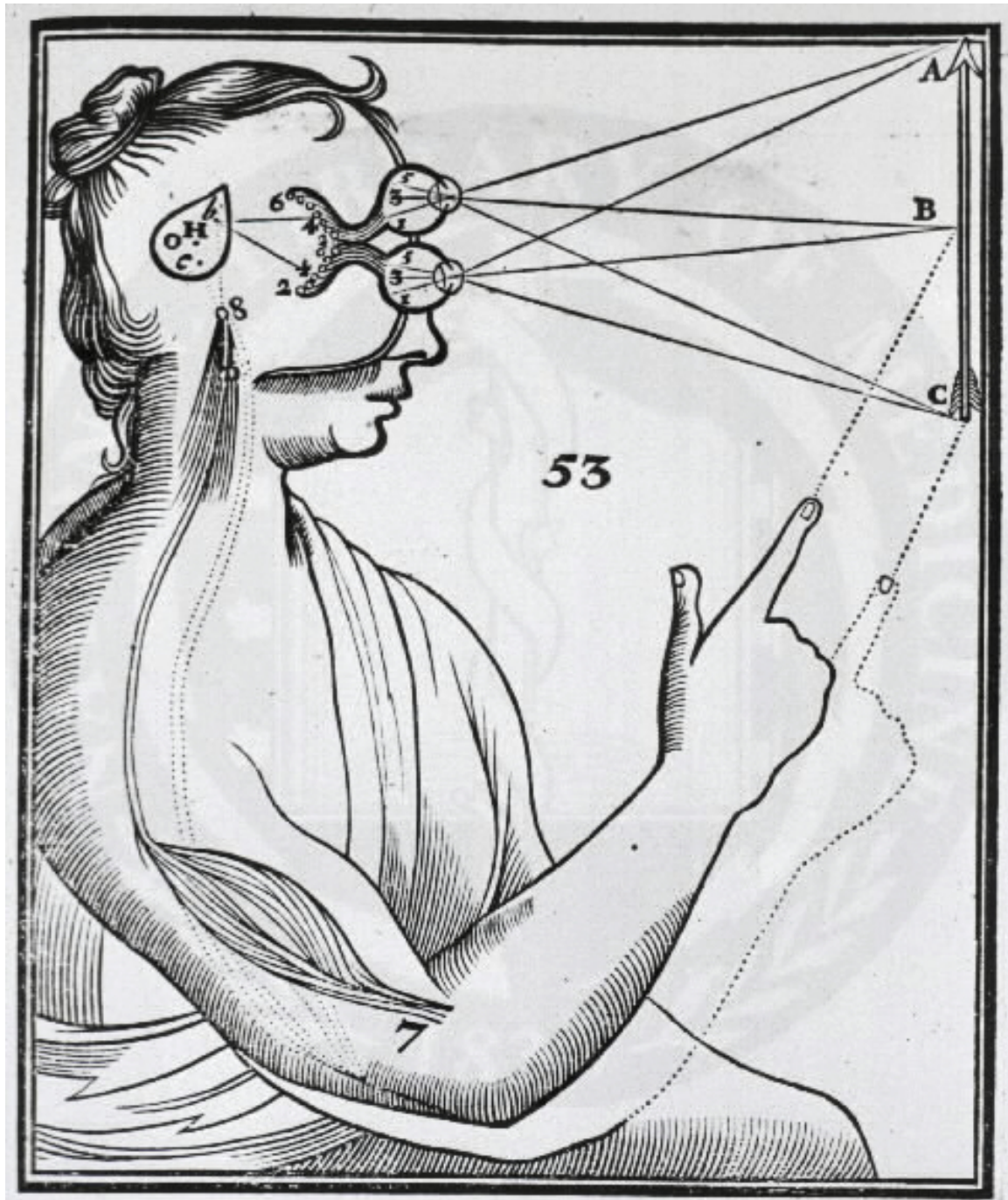


Figure 2
 “Vision and the Mechanism for the Response to External
 Stimuli,” Descartes (1677 woodcut).

As in the Cartesian Theater, Cartesian optics has a physical epicenter in the pineal gland. Moreover, the two theories evince the same mechanism of sensual stimulation. Though both theories emerge, fundamentally, from Descartes physiology (*The Treatise of man*, written at some point prior to 1637 but published posthumously in 1662), the similitude between these depictions of cognition (figure 1) and vision (figure 2) reveal how the line between the two can be blurred (Lokhorst). As fundamentally visual beings, we think not just through images, our thinking *is* images. Optics is not just a set of physical theories that explain the way we perceive the world; it filters into consciousness as a mode of thinking—moving from a means to perceive to a mode of conception. Though I’ve arrived at this beachhead through an analysis of Descartes, the same principles appear in *Jest*. Later in my analysis of *Jest*, I will explain how characters reduce reality and exist encaged within their heads. During those sections of analysis, bear in mind the construct of the Cartesian Theater and Descartes’ optics. Characters in *Jest* think in these dualistic terms. It’s clear that Wallace—perhaps as one of Dennett’s victims of the Cartesian Theater—borrows much from Descartes.

One instance of the conflation of Descartes work on optics and solipsism appears in *Jest* through use of the phrase “Men of Glass.” Hal wrote a college entrance essay called ““A Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass””—alluding to his father’s film of the same name²²—that recalls Descartes’ description for madness in *The Meditations* (IJ 7, 989). Descartes reasons, “there are many other matters concerning which one simply cannot doubt” such as the fact that he has hands and feet (14). He then asks:

²² Save for one difference: the replacement of the definite article “The” in the title of James Incandenza’s original film with the indefinite article “A” in Hal’s essay. This article swap—from a particular man to any man or a hypothetical man—could indicate Hal’s heightened level of abstraction from reality.

But on what grounds could one deny that these hands and this entire body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to the insane, whose brains are impaired by such an unrelenting vapor...that they steadfastly insist... that they are made of glass. But such people are mad... (*Meditations* 14)

Here, Descartes relates solipsism to madness. While there is much talk of madness in *Jest*—Incandenza’s sons called him “The Mad Stork,” while Hal considers whether or not the madness of Hamlet was truly feigned (*IJ* 238, 900)—the phrase also becomes an optical recapitulation of the Cartesian Theater. The notion of a “Man Who Began to Suspect He Was Made of Glass” becomes a symbol for the adoption of Cartesian dualism in *Jest*—specifically, in those characters that appear most solipsistic. The mind exists apart from the mechanistic body of man, which, like an optic, is formed of glass. Clear and fragile, the body becomes a mere portal through which the exterior world is refracted for absorption by the seat of cognition, which persists cloistered away in solipsistic isolation from all exterior reality.²³

Because Descartes is an important figure in optics, solipsism, and for Wallace personally—I would suggest specifically because of his influence in the two aforementioned fields—redefining solipsism for optics in *Infinite Jest* in terms outlined in Descartes’ *Meditations* is befitting. In spite of these congruencies, however, Descartes’ *Meditations* does not provide an explicit definition of solipsism. Descartes doesn’t define solipsism in his work, he only conceives of the concept. Owing to Johnstone’s identification of seven different types of Cartesian solipsists, however, we can categorize Descartes’ meditations into workable definitions.

2.5 (re)Defining Solipsism for Optics in *Infinite Jest*

²³ This concept will become the focus of section 3.2 below.

In his thorough analysis of Cartesian solipsism, *Rationalized Epistemology: Taking Solipsism Seriously*, Johnstone identifies Descartes as the theoretical trunk from which different branches of solipsism have sprouted. He names three “long-standing skeptical problems in epistemology,” each of which is “traceable in its modern form to the writings of Descartes” (xi). For ease of use, I’ve numbered Johnstone’s descriptions. They are as follows:

- 1) The first problem (the one commonly associated with Descartes) is whether the world is real rather than a dream or personal illusion, or the conjuration of a devious demon bent upon deceit.
- 2) The second problem is whether things in the world (and indeed the world itself) continue to exist when not perceived by oneself.
- 3) The third is the classical problem of the existence of a world external to one’s sensations, that is, whether there does in fact exist a world similar to one’s own private representations of it. (xi)

Johnstone’s summary of these three skeptical problems parallels ontological concerns Scott Bukatman describes. Bukatman notes that as electronic technology rises, it poses “a set of crucial ontological questions regarding the status *and power* of the human” (2). We see these same concerns in Descartes skepticism. Because Descartes’ skepticism casts the status of man in doubt with regard to the external world, man begins to question his ability to effectually interact with that world; solipsism entraps him, and he feels powerless to interact with the world and other minds. In this way, characters in *Infinite Jest*—themselves, only reflections of the individual in the Information Age—confront the same questions Descartes left unanswered but in a new digital context.

From these three skeptical doubts, Johnstone identifies seven different types of Cartesian solipsists, six of which naturally fit into two groups that represent the first two “long-standing skeptical problems” as numbered above. These groups Johnstone calls

“Unreal World Solipsists”—who believe the world may be an illusion—and “Observed World Solipsists”—who question whether objects exist when not perceived directly (15). This leaves the third skeptical problem that defies categorization in the other two groups and corresponds to the seventh form of solipsism. Johnstone terms this seventh form “Sensa Solipsism” and describes it as follows:

What is perceived of the everyday world is demoted to the status of a mere idea bearing no resemblance to an external source; the everyday world is construed to be an aggregate of the solipsist’s private impressions or ideas or private representations or images. (6)

Sensa solipsism is the form best suited for optics and most prevalent in *Infinite Jest*. Its pertinence is manifold. First, consider the concept in relation to optics. As described in *The Manual of Photography*, optics is the scientific theory of visual perception, which is broken down into the imaging chain. This begins with light’s emission, followed by its absorption and transformation by the human eye, and ends with the viewer’s impression of that image. The imaging chain reduces the everyday world to a series of private images or impressions—as does the sensa solipsist. As such, sensa solipsism naturally pairs with the equation of the imaging chain. If the imagining chain is a process that is constantly occurring in all of us during visual perception, sensa solipsism develops when an individual is aware of this process (i.e. the imaging chain) and uses this awareness to distance herself from external reality. Not only is each step of the imaging chain, and each image of the exterior world, a reduction of reality, but also cognizance of the total process performs a broader reduction: reality is no more than the individual’s private impression.

Sensa solipsism is additionally apropos for optics in *Infinite Jest* because of its ability to delineate entertainment in solipsistic terms. The theory of optics governs

entertainment, which has been explained as no more than an electronic imaging chain writ large. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace writes that this cartridge entertainment impels “so very much private watching of customized screens behind drawn curtains in the dreamy familiarity of home. A floating no-space world of personal spectation. Whole new millennial era...total freedom, privacy, choice” (*IJ* 620). As in the imaging chain, entertainment reduces the everyday world to private images. Unlike in the imaging chain, however, entertainment further abstracts the real world by providing it to the viewer in their home, thus mediating the real world before its absorption through the imaging chain. In addition, Wallace’s description of entertainment in the above passage—the “dreamy” home, a “no-space world”—echoes both Descartes, “I am not unlike a prisoner who enjoyed an imaginary freedom during his sleep, but, when he later begins to suspect that he is dreaming, fears being awakened and nonchalantly conspires with these pleasant illusions” (*Meditations* 17), and the Cyberian program—“personal spectation,” “total freedom,” “choice.” As was argued in this project’s introduction, the Cyberian’s notion of freedom is an illusion in *Jest*; co-opted by governments and corporations, the freedom of choice actually imprisons the individual. In Wallace’s dystopian future, entertainment viewers experience only the dream of freedom while locked in a solipsistic prison. Thus, Wallace’s quote bridges the distance between Descartes and the Cyberians, effectively updating Descartes’ solipsistic metaphor to the digital age.

2.6 Advancing Masked

In his helpful compendium of differences between the published text and *Infinite Jest*’s first draft²⁴, Steven Moore notes one explanatorily fecund reference to Descartes.

²⁴ Which can be found at: http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/ij_first.htm

He reports that “Incandenza’s founding Latin motto (*IJ* 81) was originally *LARVARDUS PRODEO*—a slip for *Larvatus prodeo*, “I advance masked,” which was the young Descartes’ motto.”²⁵ The words originally appeared in Descartes posthumously published juvenilia. The most comprehensive translation of the original passage reads, “As comic actors, warned not to let shame appear in their faces, put on a mask, so I, about to mount the stage of the world of which I have so far been a spectator, come forward masked (*larvatus prodeo*)” (Pritchard). It’s no coincidence that Wallace originally had Incandenza adopt this phrase as E.T.A.’s founding motto. The phrase resonates both with the philosophy of E.T.A.—where youngsters train to mount the stage of professional tennis (a.k.a. “The Show”)—and with the solipsistic entertainment network of *Infinite Jest*—where the opposite is true: the stage of the world is disseminated to viewing rooms on screens “so high-def you might as well be there,” allowing everyone to remain a spectator forever (60). The “image culture” outlined in Bukatman’s *Terminal Identity* offers another reading of Descartes’ words. Bukatman describes how “Reality has moved inside an electronic ‘nonspace’:

Everything has become data... In the fictions of cultural theory and SF [Science Fiction], a new subject emerges, one that begins its process of being through the act of viewer-ship: “The TV self is the electronic individual *par excellence* who gets everything there is to get from the simulacrum of the media.” (35)

While Bukatman’s account identifies this trend as a feature of postmodern fiction, Descartes’ journal exposes the roots of the concept. The origins of identity have long

²⁵ There is another interesting parallel that might explain why Incandenza selected Descartes’ motto as a “star to steer by.” In the second discourse of his essay *Dioptrique*, “Descartes attempts to derive the law of reflection (known since antiquity) and the law of refraction (first published in the *Dioptrics*) through a series of ingenious, mechanistic analogies to the behavior of tennis balls” (2 *McDonough*). Therefore, it is in Descartes, and not Wallace, that tennis and optics were first considered in tandem.

begun through viewer-ship. Wallace's treatment of the concept in *Infinite Jest*, however, redefines "advancing masked" in solipsistic terms.

The young Descartes' motto (*Larvatus Prodeo*) also recalls the "videophony" passage of *Infinite Jest*. This passage, like the novel's entertainment network, also terminates in a sort of eternal spectation for the individual. This section chronicles the rise and fall of video-telephoning, which allowed callers to see each other face to face on screens during phone calls, and pushes the notion of appearing masked before the world to its solipsistic limits. In *Jest*, videophony partially failed because it broke people's solipsistic delusion that they, and only they, could hold a phone conversation while taking care of little domestic chores or hygiene tasks. With videophony, they discovered that everyone was engaged in the same act of faux-primary-attention giving. *Jest* describes how "this bilateral illusion of unilateral attention was almost infantilely gratifying from an emotional standpoint: you got to believe you were receiving somebody's complete attention without having to return it" (*IJ* 146). The narration continues, "But the real coffin-nail for videophony involved the way caller's faces looked on their TP screens during calls." Confronted with the image of their own faces on video—and, the novel suggests, the realization that they appear before others as others appear before them—consumers "perceived... a shiny pallid *indefiniteness* that struck them as not just unflattering but somehow evasive, furtive, untrustworthy, *unlikable*" (*IJ* 147). As a cure, videophony users donned "form-fitting polybutylene-resin mask[s]" that, as trends continued, were enhanced—created blemish-free and younger looking—until the masks didn't at all resemble their owners. At this point, videophone users became hesitant to leave home and "interface personally with people, who, they feared, were now

habituated to seeing their far-better-looking masked selves” (*IJ* 148-149). Finally, at the tail end of the trend, videophone users began purchasing “*Transmittable Tableau*” that were “simply high-quality transmission-ready photographs...fitted with a plastic holder over the videophone camera, not unlike a lens-cap” that depicted an “incredibly fit and attractive” model—who looks just vaguely like the user—“amid the sumptuous but not ostentatious appointments of the sort of room that best reflected the image of yourself you wanted to transmit” (*IJ* 149).

In the videophony episode, Wallace adapts Descartes’ notion of appearing before the world masked out of shame to fit with modern optical technology, giving new meaning to the phrase, “I advanced masked.” Advancing masked for Wallace is a defense mechanism used to extend a solipsistic delusion. Videophony destroys the user’s solipsistic illusion that the self is unique and singular—that only I don’t give my full attention. When watching themselves on-screen, these users find themselves “indefinite.” Their narrow, insular conceptions of self are no longer expressly defined when fractured by the reality of others’—similarly self-indulgent—existences. Thus, like Descartes’ dreaming prisoner who chooses the illusion of freedom over the reality of imprisonment, videophone users, when confronted with the reality that they are merely one in a host of other self-absorbed individuals, choose to shield themselves from the truth first with masks, then through fabricated tableaux, which allows them to retain their solipsistic perception while supporting the illusion for others. For the *sensa solipsist*—for whom the everyday world is demoted to an idea “bearing no resemblance to an external source,” “an aggregate of the solipsist’s private... representations or images”—masking allows for the physical demotion of reality through its extreme enhancement; a reality in which the

mask “actually resembled you the caller only in such limited respects as like race and limb-number” (*IJ* 149). The mask itself becomes a symbol; a physical substantiation of a mental solipsistic barrier.

The motif also exists outside of the videophony passage. Joelle recalls that Orin showed her a “collection of husks of Lemon Pledge that the school’s players used to keep the sun off,” including, “a battery of five-holed masks hung on nails from an upright fiberboard sheet.” (*IJ* 223). Commenting on American culture in *Jest*, the narrator remarks that, “We enter a spiritual puberty where we snap to the fact that the great transcendent horror is loneliness, excluded encagement in the self. Once we’ve hit this age, we will... wear any mask, to fit... We are shown how to fashion masks of ennui and jaded irony” (*IJ* 694). Masks in *Jest* remove the individual from the physical world; an exterior projection of the internal solipsistic barrier between individuals. Incandenza also appears masked but his masking appears to be an effort to connect with another consciousness instead of a shielding mechanism. Incandenza meets with an eleven-year-old Hal in disguise as a “professional conversationalist;” his identity, however, is withheld from readers until Hal realizes the illusion near the end of their exchange (*IJ* 27). In this way, readers and Hal are immediately distanced from Incandenza’s perspective by the mediating device of disguise. Incandenza, however, is under the impression that his guise as a professional conversationalist will enable conversation between him and his son. Though Hal speaks to his father, Incandenza (delusional, we learn) still believes his son remains silent before him. Thus, the stratagem fails and the mask remains, as in the other cases outlined above, a physical counterpart to the internal barrier dividing father and son.

Wallace also suggests that the external, artificial mask for the individual has an internal, biological counterpart—and that this counterpart cannot be taken off easily. Perhaps that is why Incandenza believes Hal is not fully revealing himself during their interview. While Incandenza wears an external mask, Hal wears an internal one. The novel's first chapter again suggests the possibility of an internal mask when Hal's consciousness—the seat of his cognition and personality—is obscured by some unexplained ailment²⁶ that hinders his ability to communicate. Hal's state substantiates the disconnect between one's internal self and the self one projects to others. He claims, "I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions...I'm not just a *creātus*, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function," seeming to say: I'm more than a mask, there's something affective and human inside of me (*IJ* 12). Though Hal desires to shed his mask and reveal himself to the admissions director, he is inexplicably unable to do so.

In the case of Joelle Van Dyne, this inability to shed the mask is embraced. Joelle masks herself with a veil, we learn, because she is a member of the "Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed" (U.H.I.D.) (*IJ* 533). Though Wallace leaves the nature of Joelle's alleged deformity unclear,²⁷ he does give the masking theme another twist during Joelle's description of the U.H.I.D. to Gately:

What you do is you *hide* your deep need to hide, and you do this out of the need to *appear* to other people as if you have the strength not to care how you *appear* to others... You feign acceptance of your deformity. You take your desire to hide and conceal it under a mask of acceptance. (*IJ* 535)

In Joelle's case, the physical masking provides layers of both physical and emotional concealment. It also shifts the masking paradigm. So far, masking has been an

²⁶ The text provides many explanatory possibilities for Hal's state. None, however, are definitive.

²⁷ Cf. Hal's mention on page 634, Molly Notkin's account on pages 792-795, and Joelle's own profession on page 538 and counter claim on page 940.

unconscious, or subconscious, external projection of the masked person's internal isolation—in Hal's case, the external masking is known but inescapable. In contrast, "U.H.I.D. allows members to be open about their essential need for concealment" (*IJ* 535). Here, individuals kowtow to the essentiality of internal masking by donning external masks that allow them to hide their internal desire for concealment.

What are we to make of advancing masked in Wallace's fiction? Perhaps Julie, in Wallace's short story "Little Expressionless Animals," puts it best when she says that "the whole point of love is to try to get your fingers through the holes in the lover's mask" (*Girl with Curious Hair* 32). Through the layers of abstraction, reversal, and ironic inversion of convention, Wallace simply suggests that to truly know someone, to break through the solipsistic barriers inherently dividing people, the individual must penetrate the masks of others.

2.7 Reducing Reality

In the section 2.5 above, I identified *sensa solipsism* as the form of solipsism particularly suited for *Jest* because it directly translates optical systems—such as the imaging chain and entertainment—into solipsistic terms. However, *sensa solipsism* is more valuable in that it affords us a new mode of understanding character behavior. Outfitted with this understanding, we find a number of characters in *Jest* reduce reality to a collection of observed facts or a private impression. Hal's optical references from *Jest*'s first chapter (e.g., "The Brewster's-Angle light of the tabletop appears as a rose flush behind my closed lids") appear *sensa solipsism* (*IJ* 10). Not only is Hal physically unable to communicate with others in this section—and thus mentally isolated from other minds—Hal's heavy use of optical language exhibits a high level of scientific

understanding that, as in *sensa solipsism*, “demotes” the phenomena of the world to “mere ideas.” Thus, Hal is mentally distanced from other minds as well as reality itself.

James Incandenza exhibits the same reduction capacity during his remembering of “The Awakening of My Interest in Annular Systems” (*IJ* 1034). During this section, Incandenza describes helping his father move a mattress and repeatedly phrases the scene in geometric terms. He reports:

The lawn sloped at an average angle of 55°... his side [of the mattress] rose in an arc... exceeded 90°... and began to fall over... we were able to get it into the hall and lean it vertically at something just over 70° against the wall... the dihedral triangle I’d imagined the mattress forming with the box spring and my body had not in fact even been a closed figure: the box spring and the floor I had stood on did not constitute a continuous plane. (*IJ* 494-501)

Again, reality is demoted to a collection of facts. The greater reduction of reality for Incandenza, however, occurs in his role as director of *après-garde* films that “always involved some sort of technical hook” and were so “aesthetically ambitious” that viewers and critics alike found them “boring” (*IJ* 787, 947). Incandenza’s films offer such an abstract depiction of reality that they were uninteresting—unrecognizable, even—to audiences.

Orin also demotes reality to a collection of representations. Orin’s doubles partner from E.T.A., Marlon Bain, reports of Orin: “I think he has come to regard the truth as a *constructed* instead of *reported*. He came by this idea educationally, is all I will add” (*IJ* 1048). This passage suggests that Orin also views the world in *sensa solipsistic* terms. For Orin, truth has become merely the composite of a certain number of details that need not bear any semblance to the state of affairs in the actual world.

Joelle van Dyne—who also exists in isolation from others—performs a *sensa solipsistic* reduction of reality in a bathroom at Molly Notkin’s party. She describes how

“Her glass of juice is on the back of the toilet...The back of the toilet is lightly sheened with condensation...These are facts. This room in the apartment is the sum of very many specific facts and ideas” (*IJ* 239). Joelle removes herself from visceral experience by viewing her surroundings in the abstract. As for Orin, the veracity of reality becomes merely the amalgamation of distinct facts.

It may seem to confuse my argument that Joelle performs this reduction as she attempts to commit suicide by intentionally over-dosing on cocaine. With that in mind, Joelle’s abstraction of reality appears as a perverse strategy to distance herself from the fear and pain of suicide, rather than as an effect of solipsism. She seems to support this conclusion: “The idea of what she’s about in here contains all other ideas and makes them banal” (*IJ* 239). However, even as Joelle admits that suicide trumps all other meaning in life, she phrases her experience in terms of “ideas.” Thus, Joelle reveals she has already retreated into a state of *sensa solipsism*. We learn this earlier in the same section: “Joelle’s been in a cage since Y.T.S.D.B.” and “the encaged and suicidal have a really hard time imagining anyone caring passionately about anything” (*IJ* 224, 227). As such, it appears that Joelle does not use *sensa solipsism* as a tool to distance herself from reality, affecting *sensa solipsism* for the purpose of suicide. In fact, I argue the contrary: Joelle’s disconnect results from her *sensa solipsism*. Joelle admits she is trapped in “a cage” of the self. When trapped in this cage, reality becomes a series of abstract images rather than a state to interact with and experience. As dictated by *sensa solipsism*, reality is no more than a mere representation when seen through the bars of the cage.

2.8 The Dangers of Abstraction

James Incandenza and Joelle's progression from *sensa solipsism* to abstraction of reality, substance abuse, and suicide exhibits a trend repeated across *Infinite Jest*.

Wallace suggests in the text and elsewhere that the abstraction of reality—through the reduction of experience to images, entertainment, or drug use—is a dangerous step that leads to anhedonia²⁸, depression, and death.

In the sections above, I catalogued characters in *Jest* who exhibit *sensa solipsism* by relegating reality to a sequence of abstract images. Wallace also describes anhedonia as an abstraction of reality in *Jest*. Kate Gompert, a depressed person and recovering marijuana addict at Ennet House, says that she's "always thought of this anhedonic state as a kind of radical abstracting of everything, a hollowing out of stuff that used to have affective content" (693). Over the course of the narrative, Hal also comes to this realization. Hal says that he "theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human...is...generally pathetic" (*IJ* 694-695). The narrator connects this fear of being human with anhedonia, remarking, "One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia" (695). Here, Wallace alerts us to Hal's anhedonia and—by identifying the sentiment as American—suggests it's a societal ill. It's not made clear, however, whether or not Hal is aware of this desire in himself. In the footnotes, however, we learn that Hal has reached this plateau of understanding: "This had been one of Hal's deepest and most pregnant abstractions, one he'd come up with once while getting secretly high in the

²⁸ *Infinite Jest* footnote 280: "*Anhedonia* was apparently coined by Ribot, a Continental Frenchman, who in his 19th-century *Psychologie des Sentiments* says he means it to denote the psychoequivalent of *analgesia*, which is the neurologic suppression of pain" (*IJ* 1053)

Pump Room. That we're all lonely for something we don't know we're lonely for. How else to explain the curious feeling that he goes round feeling like he misses somebody he's never even met? Without the universalizing abstraction, the feeling would make no sense" (1053). To understand his anhedonic feelings—which are described by Gompert as “a radical abstracting of everything”—Hal must first abstract them. Thus, Hal appears so anhedonic—and thus, solipsistic—that he must perform anhedonic translation to understand his anhedonia.

Wallace also seemed conscious of anhedonia in his personal life. In a postcard to Don DeLillo, written in the year 2000, Wallace said of digital publishing: “it seems part of the increasing abstraction of everything. It's too aphysical. There's nothing to hold and get coffee stains on.” Further explaining his thought, Wallace wrote the equation: “Digital= abstract= sterile, somehow” (*David Foster Wallace Archive, HRC*). Clearly, Wallace believed digital books were more abstract than conventional physical copies. In cognizance of *Infinite Jest*'s focus on abstraction, it appears that Wallace believed digitalization—like solipsism—results in abstraction, which in turn causes anhedonia. Although Wallace wrote these words about digital publishing specifically, I believe they can be applied more generally to our digital society, and especially the society depicted in *Infinite Jest*. With this postcard, Wallace reaffirms the progression he develops in *Jest*: abstraction endangers the individual.

CHAPTER 3

OPTICAL ALLUSIONS

Introduction—The Incandescent Family—Spectroscopic Progenitors: The Black Hole and the Sun—House of Mirrors—Optical Allusions: The Late Auteur’s Filmography—The Entertainment—Peeking Behind the Veil

3.1 Introduction

As Joelle Van Dyne walks through a party of doctoral students at Molly Notkin’s apartment, an unnamed party guest remarks, “This is a technologically constituted space” (*IJ* 231). Amid the party chatter, Joelle later hears another snippet of the same conversation, “No no I’m saying that *this*, this whole thing, what you and I are discoursing *within*, is a technologically constituted space” (*IJ* 232). While the conversation serves to satirize esoteric academic discussion, the words have additional substance. Wallace speaks through this party guest to suggest that *Infinite Jest* is a technologically constituted novel—*Infinite Jest* is the “*this*” that the academics, and all the novel’s characters, are discoursing “*within*.” While this notion is patently true at the physical level (the novel is the product of digital typesetting and printing), I argue that *Jest* is technologically constituted at the thematic level as well. In his book *Terminal Identity*, Bukatman describes a progression toward technological constitution in postmodern literature that he calls “*implosion*.”

Many have noted a passage [of postmodern literature] into such a state of *implosion*, the passage of experiential reality into the grids, matrices, and pulses of the information age. The rhetoric of expansion and outward exploration has been superseded by one dominated by the inward spirals of orbital circulation—in cybernetic terms, the feedback loop. (33)

Once again, *Infinite Jest* models this progression: it includes mathematical diagrams, prolix descriptions of film cartridges, and extended narrative sequences of dialogue from Mario Incandenza's kids' adaption of *The ONANtiad*. It is also arranged non-chronologically with important details so scattered that one is likely to flip back and forth through the book before finding oneself back where one started and still without an answer. In the first chapter of my investigation, I cited Hayles to support this reading of *Jest*: "Imagine a huge novel that has been run through the recursive feedback loops of an intelligent agent program and then strung out along the page." (684). Manifestly, *Infinite Jest* exhibits the postmodern novel's translation of reality into the figures and feedback loops of the information age. Moreover, I argue that *sensa solipsism* enables characters within *Jest* to convert their reality into grids, matrices, and pulses, while optical physics explains these conversions. Not only is the novel delineated in these terms, it depicts characters making these conversions in their own lives—from their own isolated perspectives. As a result, the individual in *Jest* becomes a node on a grid, a cell on a matrix, or a pulse of light—though they aren't cognizant of the transition. However, Wallace pushes the progression further still, past the level of physical grids, matrices, and pulses, and onto the abstract plane of mathematics.

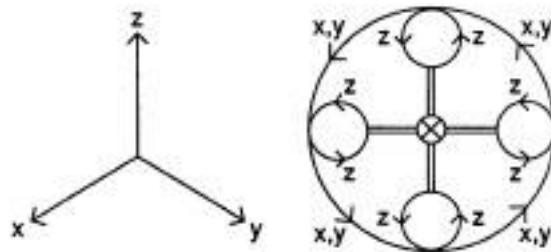
In his essay "Kingdoms of the Blind: Technology and Vision in Douglas Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma* and Stephen Spielberg's *Minority Report*," Christian Berkemeier argues that technology relies fundamentally on mathematics:

Recent inquiries into the relation of technology and medium and the inclusion or incorporation of technologies and media have highlighted the special status of technological media, i.e., those media that exist by scientific developments that affect their representational nature. These scientific developments and their applications rely on mathematics as the founding discipline. The formation of knowledge gained through experimental procedures bases itself on medial

abstractions and thus representational devices developed by scientific method are to be seen as second order medial functions. As several parallel or subsequent mathematical operations are part of the representational function, the outcome has been seen as a mise-en-abyme of mathematical discourse, a multiplication of the logical, a product of the hyper-rational. The primary influence of this series of rationalizing operations is the field of optics. (100).

Berkemeier's claims are manifest in *Infinite Jest*. Berkemeier identifies optics as the primary form of mathematics on which technological media relies. I also reached this conclusion in study of *Infinite Jest* (section 2.2 above), and, subsequently, produced this investigation of optics as a useful heuristic for understanding solipsism. In *Jest*, as Berkemeier predicts, Incandenza's discoveries in optical physics affect second order medial functions in his world. Recall, for instance, the adolescent James Incandenza's reduction of reality to abstract images and ideas during the mattress-moving episode with his father. Incandenza describes the scene:

The round knob and half of its interior hex bolt fell off and hit my room's wooden floor with a loud noise and began then to roll around in a remarkable way, the sheared end of the hex bolt stationary and the round knob, rolling on its circumference, circling it in a spherical orbit, describing two perfectly circular motions on two distinct axes, a non-Euclidian figure on a planar surface, i.e., a cycloid on a sphere:



...This was how I first became interested in the possibilities of annulation.
(IJ 502-503)

Thus, the reader observes Incandenza abstracting his experience into a mathematical model that he later uses to produce into the biggest scientific discovery of his age—a

discovery that makes cold annular fusion possible and creates the Great Concavity (*IJ* 63-64). In section 2.7, I quoted sections from this passage as an example of *sensa solipsism*, an instance of the individual reducing reality to a series of abstract images. While this is still the case, one can understand the scene as not just the demotion of reality to the abstract but also the transformation of reality into the underlying mathematical models that govern the information age of *Jest*—specifically, the age of annular fusion. In addition, because these models can be said to exist only abstractly²⁹, they form the apex of abstracted thought that *sensa solipsism* produces—for, unlike other abstractions of reality, these concepts do not have physical referents in the real world. Once again, optics and solipsism coalesce in the novel in provoking and unpredictable ways. Hal extends the concept to nonmathematical abstractions: “he finds terms like *joie* and *value* to be like so many variables in rarified equations, and he can manipulate them well enough to satisfy everyone but himself that he’s in there, inside his own hull, as a human being” (*IJ* 694). Hal views everyday concepts in their abstract forms and treats them like variables in an equation. Thus, it is not just the world that is reduced to its underlying mathematical abstractions, but the concepts we use to assess the world: value, judgment, good and evil.

Berkemeier’s analysis impels a close reading of *Jest* to uncover the solipsistic symbolism contained in the novel’s “hardcore-math-based-optical science” (*IJ* 81). I argue that Wallace’s insertion of these themes technologically constitutes *Infinite Jest*. In this chapter, I will develop the more technical side of optical symbolism in *Jest*, which, in

²⁹ In his book on infinity *Everything and More*, Wallace writes that mathematics deals in “objects and concepts at the very farthest reaches of abstraction, things we literally cannot imagine: $n > 3$ manifolds, quantum choreography, fractal sets, dark matter, square roots of negatives, Klein Bottles and Freemish Crates and Penrose Stairways. And ∞ ” (24).

concert with the classical roots of the discourse, delineates characters in optical terms that serve to reveal their solipsistic state.

3.2 The Incandescent Family

As an optical physicist turned Après-Garde filmmaker, James Incandenza is the character most clearly aligned with optics in *Infinite Jest*. Other members of the Incandenza family, however, exhibit more subtle ties to optics. First and foremost of these is the family's optical nomenclature. The family name, Incandenza, calls the word "incandescent" to mind, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "the fact or condition of glowing with heat; the emission of light by a body heated to a high temperature." The name fits: Wallace portrays the family as a source of light in the novel, and thus they become a source of optical interest. This theme continues in the first names of family members. James O. Incandenza names his first-born son Orin, after his own middle name. The name Orin is derived from the Celtic Odhran, meaning pale-skinned or white. Hal tells us that his brother "got the Mom's Anglo-Nordo-Canadian phenotype," suggesting that his name matches his fair complexion (*IJ* 101). In contrast, the etymology of Hal's name sets him opposite from his brother: "The name handed down paternally from an Umbrian five generations past" (*IJ* 101). Umbria is a region of Italy renowned as the birthplace of umber, a dark brown pigment. Hal's complexion matches this etymology. The narrator explains:

Hal is the only extant Incandenza who looks in any way ethnic. His late father had been as a young man darkly tall, high flat Pima-tribe cheekbones and very black hair ... Himself had looked ethnic... Hal is sleek, sort of radiantly dark, almost otterish, only slightly tall, eyes blue but darkly so... (*IJ* 101)

These descriptions physically manifest Hal's alignment with his father and Orin's alignment with his mother, the beginning of an interfamily dichotomy that sets into

contrast a variety of physical and personality traits. Within the Incandenza family, dark is juxtaposed with light, father with mother, and brother with brother.

Hal also recognizes the visual difference between he and his brother, noting, “his parents’ pregnancies must have been all-out chromosomal war” (*IJ* 101). The war rages both between the brothers’ names and within contrasting explanations for those names. Though Orin has been identified as white or paleness, “orin” is also an anagram of “noir,” French for black. Similarly, Hal, the Umber brother, is also referred to by the nickname “Halation” (*IJ* 97, 104, 218). The chapter on halation in *The Fundamentals of Photography*³⁰ gives a visual description:

Sometimes in a photograph there appears to be a blurring of the bright parts over the dark parts of the picture, and if lamps or other very bright lights are included they may appear in the print as bright spots surrounded by a dark ring beyond which is another bright ring... This curious effect... is called "halation."

I’ve included the chapters’ first two photographs explaining halation (figures 2 and 3 below).³¹ In the first, we see a number of halations occurring around light sources, in this case, street lamps; in the second, a simple diagram of the sort of reflection that causes halation.

³⁰ Full text available at: <http://chestofbooks.com/arts/photography/The-Fundamentals-Of-Photography/Chapter-XI-Halation.html>

³¹ Figure 2 source URL: <http://chestofbooks.com/arts/photography/The-Fundamentals-Of-Photography/images/Fig-98-Halation-in-Print.jpg>
Figure 3 source URL: <http://chestofbooks.com/arts/photography/The-Fundamentals-Of-Photography/images/Fig-99-Simplest-Form-of-Reflection.jpg>



Figure 3
A halation in print.

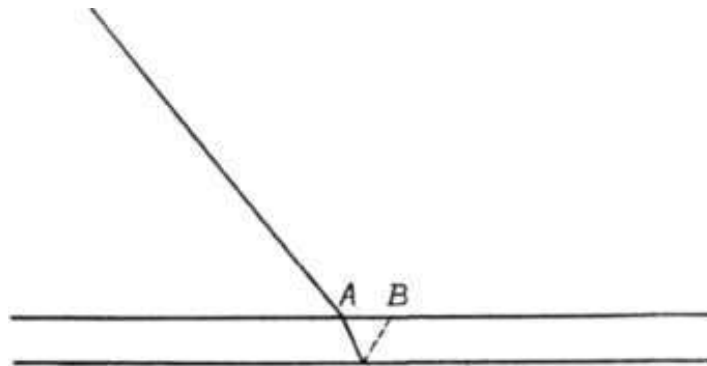


Figure 4
The simplest form of reflection that causes halation.

Hal's relation to halation is significant for a number of reasons. First, the obvious contrast with his name's Umbrian origins. Like Orin, Hal's name contains both light and dark etymologies. In addition, the use of an optical effect as a nickname further establishes a connection between Hal and his optical physicist father. Halation forms an annular shape, reminiscent of Incandenza's invention of annular fusion and the annulus, a recurring symbol for infinity in the novel. Further still, halation is mechanistically solipsistic. Halation is light's incomplete passage through a boundary—more precisely, “Halation is caused by light which passes completely through the emulsion and also through the glass on which the emulsion is coated and is then reflected back into the emulsion from the

back of the glass” (*Mees*). In a sense, this reflection of light is like solipsism. If one imagines the essence of our being as a light, or source of luminance, and our body as the mechanical apparatus through which the light of our being passes to the external world—to be absorbed by other mechanical bodies and transmitted into other cores of being—halation appears to diagram solipsism. It portrays the solipsist’s inability to effectively communicate or to project their internal self for others. Something is lost in translation for the solipsist. While attempting to interact with the world, a part of him is reverted back inside; the solipsistic barrier becomes a mirror that reflects the being.

Passages in *Jest* support this correlation between light and the effective transfer—or communication—between the seat of a person’s identity and the external world. We may recall that in section 2.7, I explained how Mario is described as a lens: he is “*not*, verifiably *not*, retarded or cognitively damaged or bradyphrenic, more like refracted, almost, ever so slightly epistemically bent... in the manner of all refracted things” (*IJ* 314). Mario’s ability to interact with the world is described as refracted. During his appeal at the beginning of *Jest*, Hal claims, “I am not just a boy... I’m complex... But it transcends the mechanics. I’m not a machine” (*IJ* 11-12). Here, Hal suggests that his being is something beyond his material body or the mechanical—his physical body does not contain the seat of his identity or the ‘light’ of his being, if you will. Incandenza reiterates this association. As a wraith, Incandenza tells Gately that he fears for Hal’s “fall into the womb of solipsism” (*IJ* 839). In an attempt to draw his son out, Incandenza appears before a young Hal as a professional conversationalist. During their exchange, Incandenza says he “used to pray daily for the day his own dear late father would ... not turn that newspaper into the room’s fifth wall... And who after all this light and noise has

apparently spawned the same silence” (*IJ* 31). Here, Incandenza depicts meaningful communication—in opposition to solipsistic silence—as light and noise. Halation’s mapping of solipsism is further strengthened by the body’s repeated alignment in *Jest* with a mechanical device. Hal describes champion jr. tennis players as “grim machines,” while during narration for Mario’s film *Tennis and the Feral Prodigy*, Hal tells us that he has learned how to “keep your attention’s aperture tight,” correlating the functioning of his mind to the mechanisms of a camera (*IJ* 438, 174). In the section on anhedonia, Hal admits that, “he’s far more robotic than John Wayne... inside Hal there’s pretty much nothing at all” (*IJ* 694). Therefore, the text supports viewing halation as a diagram for solipsism, a diagram where the light of being filters incompletely through the mechanism of the body.

3.3 Spectroscopic Progenitors: The Black Hole and the Sun

Apart from their surname, James and Avril Incandenza do not share in the family’s optical nomenclature. Others, however, repeatedly portray the two parental figures in optical terms. Throughout *Infinite Jest*, Avril is aligned with the emission of light and brightness, while James represents the absorption of light and darkness. In the last section of this investigation, using halation as a diagram for solipsism revealed a correspondence between light and the essence of an individual’s being. The halation analogy suggests that the more light one emits, the less closed off and solipsistic the individual. Inversely, absorption of light in the text seems to indicate a high degree of solipsism. If we apply this analogy to better understand Avril and James, we can use it as

a spectroscope³² to observe the emission and absorption of being by the progenitors of the Incandenza family, particularly in relation to solipsism.

James Incandenza makes an unusual character in that he is the novel's seminal figure—as father of the Incandenza family, founder of E.T.A., one of a “half-dozen” important scientists behind annular fusion, and creator of the fatal Entertainment—yet he also remains entirely isolated from the reader and all other characters in the book, his family included.³³ He is the paragon of solipsism and optics in *Infinite Jest*. Though James Incandenza's given name does not have optical significance, Incandenza's nickname, ‘Himself,’ given to him by his sons, immediately suggests his solipsistic role. Hayles relates the nickname to Incandenza's solipsistic inability to meaningfully communicate: “These failures are evident in James's relations with his sons, who call their father “Himself,” as if to acknowledge the man is so inward-bent that any nominative referring to him must include an intensifier of selfhood” (Hayles 689). Imagery describing Incandenza affirms his condition of utter selfhood.

Incandenza is associated with absorption and darkness in the text as a spectroscopic symbol of his solipsism. Joelle describes how “Jim's internal life was to Orin a black hole...his father's face any room's fifth wall³⁴” (*IJ* 737). Incandenza's alignment with a black hole is spectroscopically fecund. For starters, a black hole is the ultimate example of absorption and darkness in our universe. A black hole is formed

³² “An instrument specially designed for the production and examination of spectra” (*OED*). Or, the instrument used to measure properties of light.

³³ The reader is finally given access to Incandenza's thoughts and feelings when he appears as a wraith to Don Gately, as if his being could only be free and communicative after the destruction of his physical body. All accounts in the text suggest that Incandenza remained completely enclosed and isolated from others during his lifetime.

³⁴ Interestingly, Incandenza makes the same claim of his own father (*IJ* 31). There seems to be a discrepancy within Incandenza concerning his perceived ability to communicate versus his ability to communicate as perceived by others.

when “the escape velocity from the surface of a star exceeds that of the light [which the star produces]” (Davies 1315). In other words, when a star becomes extremely dense, its gravitational pull becomes so strong that any light the star emits does not have sufficient energy to escape the star (creating what’s known as an *event horizon*). The energy the light expends attempting to travel outward increases its wavelength—longer wavelength = lower energy—until it reaches the lowest energy spectra, red, in a process called a “redshift.” Thus, the event horizon causes two propagations of light toward infinity: light that escapes the event horizon and travels outward toward infinity for an infinite duration, and light that doesn’t escape, which redshifts without limit (i.e. infinitely) and subsequently “takes longer and longer to travel to infinity” (Davies, 1316). Inside the event horizon, the star’s light cannot be observed from any distance because its wavelengths increase to such a degree that the light leaves the spectrum (*events* occurring in the star vanish, hence event horizon) and “Within the briefest moment the star effectively disappears from the universe” (Davies 1316). James Incandenza is portrayed in these terms. Above, Orin described his father as a “black hole;” Joelle relates that “Her mental name for the man had been ‘Infinite Jim’” (*IJ* 225); and Orin tells Joelle that his father “was so blankly and irretrievably hidden that Orin said he’d come to see him as like autistic, almost catatonic” (*IJ* 737). In life, James Incandenza failed to emit the light of his being to such a degree that he appeared to vanish; his emotions forever expanding inside of his event horizon toward an infinity they would never reach.³⁵ When viewed through the lens of spectroscopy, Incandenza gives new meaning to the term “self-absorbed.” Furthermore, note that the text again associates the emission of light with

³⁵ Or would they? Refer to section 3.5 below.

humanness while the solipsist's emotional darkness is called catatonic, "death in life" (*IJ* 839). With the black hole image, Wallace suggests that Incandenza's state of solipsism was so strong that the light of his being was completely unable to escape the event horizon of his own consuming solipsism. Like the light from a black hole in our universe, Incandenza's emotions remain completely hidden from his sons; he embodies an infinite regress of character.

The black hole has also been adopted as an image to describe the "implosion" of reality as a result of digital proliferation. Rather than reduce human communication to light, as I have done for my optical reading of *Jest*, the account uses the image of the black hole to exhibit a trend in information transfer. Thus, information becomes the quanta of interest, not light. However, the account provides an interesting parallel to my analysis and, in doing so, supports the broader arguments of this project. In *Terminal Identity*, Bukatman reports that for Baudrillard the black hole describes reality's implosion, "that massive anomaly which draws all into it and from which no information can reliably emerge. Below the event horizon lies only abstraction and hypothesis; direct experience is, by definition, impossible." (34) Baudrillard's conception of the black hole for information transmission rings true for my spectrometric analysis of the black hole as a symbol for solipsism. I previously identified James Incandenza as the paragon of optics and solipsism in the text; now, he appears even more so. Through the black hole image, we understand how Incandenza exhibits the implosion of the human experience in the digital age, a man who continuously mediates reality through alcohol or the lens of a camera; who absorbs all of his surroundings on film—the event horizon of cinematography; and who's own event horizon of being masks an abstracted internal self.

Furthermore, Baudrillard's use of the black hole image to describe communication supports my reading of the image as a symbol for communication—or, in the case of “Infinite Jim,” a complete lack thereof—in *Jest*.

In direct contrast to James Incandenza's absorption of light and failure as a father, the text repeatedly asserts Avril's efficacious motherhood and describes her as a source of light for the family. Orin emphasizes Avril's maternal dedication, describing how she acted “with enough depth of love and open maternal concern to almost make up for a father who barely existed, parentally”—notice again that James, in contrast, is so isolated from his sons that he “barely exist[s]” (*IJ* 737). Like James, Avril also has a nickname that further identifies her role in the family. Hayles notes that the Incandenza children call Avril “the Moms, as if the job she does is so heroic that it would normally require several mothers” (17). Early in the text, Wallace gives readers Avril's philosophy on mothering:

Avril feels it's important that a concerned but un smothering single parent know when to let go somewhat and let the two high-functioning of her three sons make their own possible mistakes and learn from their own valid experience, no matter how much the secret worry about mistakes tears her gizzard out, the mother's.... ultimately...she'd rather have Hal abide in the security of the knowledge that his mother trust him, and she's trusting and supportive and doesn't judge or gizzard tear...all so that Hal can enjoy the security of the feeling that he can be up-front with her about issues... and not feel he has to hide anything from her under any circumstances. (*IJ* 50)

All of Avril's interactions with her son in the novel support this characterization. Avril is a world-class mother. Avril is also repeatedly aligned with luminance or the emission of light in the text, as if she radiates light as a byproduct of her energy and positivity. The narrator relates that Avril is “a fiend for light” and describes her office as being lit by “a whole bank of overheads...two torchères and some desk lamps, and a B&H cigarette on

fire” (*IJ* 759-760). Pages earlier, we learn Orin supports this characterization. Joelle reports, “The Orin she first knew first felt his mother was the family’s pulse and center, a ray of light incarnate” (*IJ* 737). Orin’s description again identifies Avril a source of light for the family, only this time she is not merely associated with light but described as light itself—as if there is no solipsistic interference adulterating the essence of her being as it passes to the exterior world.

Though the text never explicitly makes the comparison, I believe Avril analogizes the sun in *Jest*, as her husband represents the black hole. The text repeatedly depicts Avril as a source of light in the text; it also hints at another aspect of her astrological identity. As a boy, James Incandenza relates how “My father’s mood surrounded him like a field and affected any room he occupied, like an odor or a certain cast to the light” (*IJ* 498). While this is yet another example of a solipsist abstracting his experience of reality, it also provides helpful insight toward understanding Avril. Other characters’ descriptions of Avril, which I provided above, suggest that she too projects a mood like a field—often literally as a beam of light. However, Avril’s surrounding field also attracts. Hal tells readers, “The Moms always had this way of establishing herself in the *exact center* of any rooms she was in, so that from any angle she was somehow in the line of all sight. It was part of her... but it was noticeable and kind of unsettling” (*IJ* 521). This description portrays Avril as the center of the Incandenza solar system; she is the sun around which other characters orbit. As such, she fully manifests her title of “stellar parent” (*IJ* 1051). Thus, both Avril and James can be linked to spectroscopic extremes of dark and light: the black hole and the sun.

Avril and James' preferred physical surroundings reflect their spectroscopic contrast and further characterize them as solipsistic archetypes. We learn that James keeps to himself in his dark, subterranean optical laboratory: "Himself went under ground... Himself went down in that little post-production closet off the lab for like a solid month," where Hal reports his father compulsively edits and reedits footage of the real world for his films³⁶, endlessly abstracting his experience of life in isolation from others (*IJ* 249, 704). Thus, Incandenza's preferred environment symbolizes his spectroscopic identity and solipsistic isolation from the world. His habitat is dark and removed from the exterior world, while his principle activity in this space is *sensa solipsistic*: the reduction of reality into a series of images. While James requires enclosure, isolation, and darkness for his work, Avril prefers openness, life, and light, further characterizing Avril as a spectroscopic and solipsistic foil to James Incandenza. Not only does Avril seem to glow uninhibited by any solipsistic barrier, she shirks all forms of physical enclosure. The narrator describes how Avril decorated the Incandenza home according to her own taste and psychological needs:

Another of [Avril's] unspoken but stressful things involves issues of enclosure, and the HmH [Headmaster's House] has no interior doors between rooms, and not even much in the way of walls, and the living and dining rooms are separated only by a vast multileveled tangle of house-plants in pots and on little stools of different heights and arrayed under hanging UV lamps. (*IJ* 189)

More than harboring a mere preference, Avril possesses a pathological dislike of enclosure and must be unbounded. As an external corollary to her internal life, she surrounds herself with other living things and even views them as offspring—Joelle reports that she calls them her "Green Babies" (*IJ* 745)—strengthening her identity as a

³⁶ And even this is not the real world but a facsimile, as Incandenza meticulously composes and lights each shot and uses actors instead of real people.

mother. However, the text suggests that Avril's radiance masks a darker sentiment; that, in reference to the definition of spectroscopy given at the beginning of this section, her light and energy are not self-produced but fueled by that of her sons.

Though Avril has been characterized as an excellent mother and a source of positive energy, communication, and light for the family, another of her aspects glints through to readers at moments in the text. First, the text indicates the hypocrisy of Avril's policy of trust and honesty with her children. While Avril stresses that her sons feel they do not have "to hide anything from her under any circumstances" (*IJ* 50), she lies to her children. She neurotically wants total trust and honesty but she's not honest about her many adulterous relations³⁷—which may have caused their father's suicide—or her political associations. Therefore, though Avril espouses communication, it's a hollow form—a false projection. This relationship appears more artificial when her sons reveal they're aware of her duplicity. Orin is no longer speaking to Avril³⁸ and readers learn in a letter from his childhood friend Marlon Bain that Orin's belief that the truth is constructed (refer to section 2.7 above) results from his studying "for almost eighteen years at the feet of the most consummate mindfucker I have ever seen" (*IJ* 1048). Initially, the title appears to refer to Orin's father, but as Bain continues, it becomes apparent that he's speaking of Avril:

Is [Avril's affection] mind-bogglingly considerate and loving and supportive, or is there something... *creepy* about it? ... Was this generosity for Orin's sake, or for

³⁷ The worst of which occurs between Avril and John Wayne, a student (and potential Pan-Canadian operative) at E.T.A. who is Hal's age and tennis rival. Interestingly, Pemulis—as he walks in on the pair—describes the scene's lighting in detail, "the... Dean's... office was a blazing rectangle of light... The room was lit overhead and by four standing lamps. The seminar table and chairs cast a complicated shadow" (*IJ* 552). With this scene, Wallace mires the association of light with communicativeness and positivity.

³⁸ The text never reveals his reasons, though other character's reports—and Orin's Oedipus complex—suggest that Avril and Orin may have had sexual relations. Less juicy explanations contend that Orin realized the extent of his mother's duplicity or that he blames her for his father's death. Given the information in the text, one explanation, a combination, or all of these theories are possible.

Avril's own? Was it Orin's "self-esteem" she was safeguarding, or her own vision of herself as a more stellar Moms than any human son could ever hope to feel he merits? (*IJ* 1051)

Bain here expresses Avril's dark side. Her energy and radiance are not produced for the benefit of her sons but offered so that she may, as Hayles puts it, "practice and confirm her own virtue" (691). This dynamic operates in much the same way as Incandenza's black hole of solipsism; only the event horizon is extended outside of the self and onto others. Rather than internally reflecting the light of her being like her husband, Avril projects light so that she may absorb its reflection off of others. Thus, both figures appear spectroscopically constrained by their own gravitational pull: inwardly-bent, self-absorbed, and solipsistic. Returning to the definition of spectrometry³⁹ given above, we can now understand that James's solipsism—the black hole—is a spectrometric system in which the radiation originates within the system. In contrast, Avril—the sun—seems to exhibit a hybrid system; while she also emits radiation, it's to enable her own absorption. Much like Wallace's annular fusion, Avril consumes her own light to enable her creation of more light.

Though she's the ostensibly positive and effective parent of the family, Avril's interaction with her children also maroons them in a state of solipsism. This progression begins with the sons' knowledge of their mother's duplicity. Hal tell his brother Mario, "You don't have to put on a Moms-act of total trust and forgiveness. One liar's enough" (*IJ* 784). While these details erode the reader's positive opinion of Avril's motherhood,

³⁹ "The study of physical systems by the electromagnetic radiation [i.e. light] with which they interact or that they produce... In certain types of optical spectroscopy, the radiation originates from an external source and is modified by the system, whereas in other types, the radiation originates within the system itself" (Herrmann et al.).

the indictment continues to reveal that, through her projections of trust and maternal affection, Avril exacerbates her sons' solipsism. Hal sums this up:

One of his troubles with his Moms is the fact that Avril Incandenza believes she knows him inside and out as a human being... when in fact inside Hal there's pretty much nothing at all, he knows. His Moms Avril hears her own echoes inside him and thinks what she hears is him, and this makes Hal feel the one thing he feels to the limit, lately: he is lonely. (*IJ* 694)

Here Hal reveals that the trust and openness Avril attempts to share with him is no more than bi-directional dishonesty. Moreover, Hal's knowledge of this further estranges him from Avril, as he both realizes her duplicity and realizes she is unaware that he keeps this secret from her. Thus, all "positive" communication between Avril and Hal is artifice because he adapts himself to fit within her perceptions of him. He knows she doesn't know this truth, and hence doesn't know the real him, and resultantly feels alone.

To solidify Avril and James' spectroscopic effects on the Incandenza family and their links to solipsism, let's turn to the only scene in the novel depicting the entire family together: the "last pre-Subsidized Thanksgiving," narrated by Joelle van Dyne (*IJ* 747). A ten-year-old Hal immediately steers our attention toward light in the scene when he "announced that the basic unit of luminous intensity is the Candela, which he defined for no one in particular as the luminous intensity of $1/600,000$ of a square meter of a cavity at the freezing-temperature of platinum" (*IJ* 745).⁴⁰ During her retelling of the dinner, Joelle reaffirms focus on light and shadow by describing how "A massive hanging garden behind Avril's and Hal's captain's chairs cut complex shadows into the UV light that made the table's candles' glow a weird bright blue," and then designates Avril as a source of illume: "The whole Thanksgiving table inclined very subtly toward Avril, very slightly

⁴⁰ Hal's reduction of the phenomenon of light to a quantitative definition reveals his ability to abstract reality at a young age. By the time Hal reaches the age of seventeen, this ability has metastasized into solipsistic isolation, as discussed in section 2.7 and 3.2.

and subtly, like heliotropes.⁴¹ This image again depicts Avril's solar presence by concurrently exhibiting her luminescence and her ability to pull attention toward her.

The scene also conveys the dark reality of Avril's radiance. Joelle describes how Avril propagates the "unsettling" feeling of which Bain and Hal speak. The narrator relates, "It took a long time for Joelle even to start to put a finger on what gave her the howling fantods about Orin's mother" (*IJ* 744). Joelle also reports that Avril systematically dominates conversation, as if to affirm her status as a perfect host: "Joelle noticed Avril also directed every fourth comment to Orin, Hal, and Mario, like a cycle of even inclusion" (*IJ* 745). Hayles also describes this ability, writing, "In a subtle way, Avril's positioning of herself as a mediator between father and son helps to ensure that no communication can take place without her, a dynamic that reinforces Himself's inability to communicate with his sons" (691). Avril's desire for perfect, effective communication is so intense that it stifles Incandenza's ability to communicate. His actions during the dinner scene reinforce this reading. While Avril regulates conversation, "Dr. Incandenza kept shading his eyes from the UV plant-light in a gesture that resembled a salute" (*IJ* 744-745). Avril's solar role, radiance, and communicativeness appear to aggravate James, who, we are told, shields himself from her luminescence with a deferential gesture as if submitting to a stronger power.⁴²

3.4 The Cage of Mirrors

⁴¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Heliotrope as "A name given to plants of which the flowers turn so as to follow the sun."

⁴² This line only implies the tension (animosity, even) between James and Avril. Though the details are never entirely revealed, what readers do find out is that James was upset by Avril's infidelities, Avril suspected James was romantically involved with Joelle (though other sources—including Joelle—claim he wasn't), and that James left a large annuity to Joelle at his death. At any rate, it's fitting that the two were at odds considering their antipodal light/dark, emission/absorption, sun/black hole spectroscopic correspondences.

Over the course of this analysis, solipsism has been symbolized by a number of terms—the majority coming out of Wallace’s own lexicon, either in *Jest* or from interviews. I’ve described solipsism as a prison, a barrier, a cage, and infinite regress, the imperfect passage of light through the lens of the self, and as the reflection or mirroring of the self. The symbol of the mirror for solipsism, however, deserves additional attention because it is optically significant and develops a reading of *Infinite Jest* as technologically constituted space—specifically one of mirrors. As Boswell writes in *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, “*Infinite Jest*, with its mesmerizing prose and its freewheeling comedy, is itself a funhouse into which the reader is seductively invited” (119). The question remains, however, whether or not the reader, like the solipsist in *Jest*, will ever find his or her way out of the house of mirrors.

Mirrors in *Jest* act as cages that entrap the solipsist by reflecting his image—his selfhood—back toward himself. Wallace develops the trope of the cage across *Jest* as a symbol for solipsism. Joelle asks whether “the allegedly fatally entertaining and scopophiliac thing Jim alleges he made... a cage or really a door?” (*IJ* 230). She calls her drug addiction “this cage, this unfree show” (*IJ* 223). Lyle describes fame as a cage to a troubled E.T.A student, “‘Fame is not the exit from any cage.’ ‘So I’m stuck in the cage from either side. Fame or tortured envy of fame. There’s no way out’” (*IJ* 389). In the field of optics, the perfect cage is the mirror, a device designed to reflect light back at its source. Mirrors crop up in the text during especially overtly solipsistic moments for the novel’s central characters—often in congress with other activities encaging the individual.⁴³ For instance, while Orin has sex with the Swiss hand-model, he describes

⁴³ Such as the sensa solipsistic reduction of reality to images or facts, drug use (for Hal and Joelle), or a sexual encounter (for Orin).

how they're positioned "so that Orin can see past her head the large hanging mirror" (*IJ* 566). As their encounter progresses, the mirror remains an object of focus: "his shirt off now, in the mirror;" "They are stripped in the mirror" (*IJ* 566). Gately describes how newcomers to AA are "desperate to escape their own interior... To avoid the mirror AA hauls out in front of them" (*IJ* 863). In these instances, the external reflects the internal: the mirror symbolically represents a character's isolation and solipsistic state, and, by reflecting the solipsist's image back at herself, intensifies her perception of selfhood with the intent of forcing her to confront—and eventually, overcome—her solipsism.

In a slightly different occurrence, Hal relates how a Quebecois terrorist cell "in the earliest unignorable strikes... snuck down from the E.W.D.-blighted Papineau region at night and dragged huge standing mirrors across the U.S. Interstate 87," causing motorists to veer out of the way of their own reflection and over the precipice at the roadside (*IJ* 311). This quote progresses the mirror symbol by changing the passive symbol of mirror-as-solipsism-reflector to the active symbol of mirror-as-solipsism-inducer. In essence, the terrorists weaponize the mirror literally and figuratively for the text. This becomes clear when comparing the mirror and the Entertainment. While the A.F.R. seeks to broadcast the Entertainment across the O.N.A.N. to imprison every individual in a solipsistic state (terminating in death), their less ambitious forerunners use the mirror for the same ends on a small scale. Motorists confront their image and meet their doom.

Wallace develops the mirror symbol best through Joelle van Dyne. In her most solipsistic moments, Joelle is surrounded by mirror images of herself. After the last time she freebassed cocaine (before her attempted suicide), Joelle "had wept and imprecated at

the mirrors” in her apartment, unable to escape the substance entrapping her and also, Wallace suggests, unable to confront her true self (*IJ* 225). Similarly, during her suicide attempt, Joelle goes into Molly Notkin’s bathroom and cooks the cocaine while facing her reflection in the mirror. As she works, the narrator describes how various activities look in the mirror’s reflection, finally culminating to the moment when Joelle

...pulls her face up to face the unclean medicine-cabinet mirror, twin roses of flame still hanging in the glass’s corner, hair of the flame she’s eaten now trailing like the legs of wasps through the air of the glass she uses to locate the de-faced veil and what’s inside it, loading up the cone again, the ashes from the last load make the world’s best filter: this is a fact (*IJ* 240).

In this passage, the mirror again serves to reflect externally the solipsist’s internal prison. In addition, the moment is capped by a solipsistic demotion of reality—specifically, the final instant of Joelle’s life—to a single fact. It is through Joelle that Wallace makes the symbol most explicit. Joelle describes her drug addiction as “this cage, this unfree show,” which the innermost part of her cannot live without, the part living within “all four mirrors of her little room’s walls,” i.e., her own head (*IJ* 223).

3.5 Optical Allusions: The Late Auteur’s Filmography

Infinite Jest’s most infamous footnote is number 24, which contains the entirety of Incandenza’s 78-piece filmography—complete with film gauge, film length in minutes, and color designation for each individual film. The filmography’s introductory paragraph, courtesy of the film scholars who compiled the collection, explains that the collection “comprises industrial, documentary, conceptual, advertorial, technical, parodic, dramatic noncommercial, nondramatic (‘anticonfluent’) noncommercial, nondramatic commercial, and dramatic commercial works” (*IJ* 985). Wallace includes this nine-page list for good reason: Incandenza’s filmography allegorizes, and satirizes, other themes in

the novel—solipsism included. In one sense, this is a natural product of the films' authorship: Incandenza represents his life and his environment in film and his world is the solipsistic, entertainment-saturated O.N.A.N. of *Infinite Jest*. Concurrently, however, this schema is the most direct, of many instances, in which Wallace uses optics as a vehicle to portray solipsism in the text. Because Incandenza's filmography readdresses many of the themes existing in the text itself, his film work can be viewed as an additional level of technologically constituted space. Thus, *Infinite Jest* the text is a technological construction, characters frequently represent the world of *Infinite Jest* through technology (as I argued in the introduction to this chapter), and Incandenza's oeuvre provides a technological constitution of the world of *Infinite Jest* within the pages of the novel itself.

Incandenza's work contains numerous references to optics and solipsism, which should come as no surprise. Incandenza's films parallel his life; he was an optical physicist and a solipsist, hence, his films are optically significant (beyond the simple fact that all film relies on optics) and metaphorically reflect his solipsistic status in life. On the importance of optics in Incandenza's film work, Joelle van Dyne remarks, "He was a self-acknowledged visual filmmaker;" "Lenses Jim said were what he had to bring to the whole enterprise. Of filmmaking. Of himself. He made all his own" (*IJ* 229, 939). Orin also supports this notion, claiming that his father ventured into "entertainment more from an interest in lenses and light" than films and that he "had a total fetish for weird lenses and chiaroscuro"⁴⁴ (*IJ* 1026, 1027). Further still, Incandenza is identified as "almost a scopophile," implying that the preeminence of viewership and perception in his work

⁴⁴ "The style of pictorial art in which only the light and shade, and not the various colours, are represented; black-and-white, or dark brown and white." (Oxford English Dictionary)

borders on obsession (*IJ* 622). Thus, optics for Incandenza's films transcends mere physical necessity to become a point of technical and artistic focus.

The first Incandenza film on the list can be viewed as a solipsistic symbol and makes use of the optical cage, i.e., the mirror, as argued in section 3.4. Described as a "soliloquized parody of a broadcast-television advertisement for shampoo, utilizing four convex mirrors, two planar mirrors, and one actress," the film smacks of solipsism: the film depicts a sole individual speaking to herself while surrounded by her reflection in mirrors (*IJ* 986).⁴⁵ This reading is driven home by the film's title: *Cage*. The film also communicates the extent of Incandenza's solipsism: the man is so utterly self-confined that even a mundane advertisement for shampoo becomes an optically complex symbol for a solipsistic prison.

Solipsistic symbolism and light imagery are represented in film after film of Incandenza's oeuvre. The filmography contains *Kinds of Light*, "4,444 individual frames, each of which photo depicts lights of different source, wavelength, and candle power;" *Cage II*, an allegory for the individual's solipsistic inability to communicate in which "Sadistic penal colony authorities place a blind convict... and a deaf-mute convict... together in 'solitary confinement,' and the two men attempt to devise ways of communicating with each other;" *Various Small Flames*, a representation of Incandenza's marriage that is described as "n-frame images of myriad varieties of small household flames... alternated with antinarrative sequence of a man... sitting in a dark bedroom drinking bourbon while his wife... [has] acrobatic coitus in the background's lit hallway;" *Cage III*, a metaphor for the O.N.A.N.'s dehumanizing entertainment complex

⁴⁵ Which commercial sounds almost identical to Joelle's scenes in the bathroom where she "had wept and imprecated at the mirrors" (*IJ* 225).

in which “The figure of Death... presides over... a carnival sideshow whose spectators watch performers undergo unspeakable degradations so grotesquely compelling that...the spectators themselves are transformed into gigantic eyeballs in chairs, while on the other side of the sideshow tent the figure of Life... uses a megaphone to invite fairgoers to an exhibition in which, if the fairgoers consent to undergo unspeakable degradations, they can witness ordinary persons gradually turn into gigantic eyeballs.” (*IJ* 986-989). The above list is only a small selection of Incandenza’s total filmic output, and painted here in broad strokes. The purpose of this overview is to communicate that nearly all of Incandenza’s films are optically and/or solipsistically significant—and many of the above films have sequels, prequels, or sister films, which, though filmed with separate actors and given separate titles, depict similar characters in similar circumstances.

Incandenza’s films also exhibit the translation of the individual into the blip of the information age. Bukatman reports: “we are living in the era of the blip... bombardment of the individual by these ‘short, modular blips of information,’ which can take the form of ads, news items, music videos, and so forth” (32). He continues to explain that the subject in this society has “*become* the blip: ephemeral, electronically processed, unreal” (33). By representing events from his life in film, Incandenza affects the same translation of the individual in *Jest*. Recall, for instance, *Various Small Flames*, which reflects Avril’s numerous infidelities and in which she is a character (played by an actress). Thus, Avril is transmuted through optics into a digital abstraction in a maneuver that translates, not just a feature of reality but an entire identity into a *sensa solipsistic* image. There are many other instances: *It Was a Great Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him*, is the film version of Incandenza’s interview with the young Hal: “A

father... suffering from the delusion that his etymologically precocious son... is pretending to be mute, poses as a ‘professional conversationalist’ in order to draw the boy out” (*IJ* 992-993). Incandenza’s film *The Joke*, however, provides the best example. The film utilizes “two...video cameras in theater [to] record the film’s audience and project the resultant raster onto screen—the theater audience watching itself watch itself get the obvious ‘joke’ and become increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile” (*IJ* 988). In this example, the audience is directly transformed into the film, bending the line between viewer and entertainment until it forms a constant ring: an annulation mapping the solipsistic conversion of the individual into the blip and back again.⁴⁶

The transformation into the blip can also be viewed as an additional form of solipsistic confinement. In section 3.2 above, I showed that *Infinite Jest* supports a reading of the individual as a beam or pulse of light. By capturing someone’s image on film, Incandenza is transforming the individual into light by way of her photonic trace. This process seems to then reflect back into the individual’s real-world thinking. Hal—after he has, possibly, ingested DMZ—represents this process in *Jest*. Other E.T.A. students report that he was “asking Loach if the pre-match locker room ever gave him a weird feeling, occluded, electric, as if all this had been done and said so many times before it made you feel it was recorded, they all in here existed basically as Fourier Transforms of postures and little routines, locked down and stored and call-uppable for rebroadcast at specified times” (*IJ* 966). Here Hal reduces the locker room of E.T.A. students to mathematical operations and then describes the blip transformation. While Incandenza’s custom lenses capture the individual—the light of their being—and

⁴⁶ In chapter four, I will argue that *Infinite Jest* the text forms a similar relationship with its readership.

translates him/her into a blip, the mechanism seems to also operate in reverse. The individual begins to conceive of him/herself as a blip, an abstract, singular, electronic simulacrum of the self. This thinking exhibits a *sensa solipsistic* reduction of the self, rather than reality.

The above analysis begins to reveal the multivalence of solipsism and optics in *Infinite Jest*. The themes operate synchronously at different levels of reduction. This feature comes best into focus when considering the smallest level of solipsistic abstraction: the dissemination of Incandenza's films over the "fiber-optic-InterGrid" of "Teleputers" (*IJ* 60). In her essay "The Scene of the Screen," Sobchack writes that:

Digital electronic technology atomizes and abstractly schematizes the analogic quality of the photographic and cinematic into discrete pixels and bits of information that are transmitted serially, each bit discontinuous, discontiguous, and absolute—each bit 'being-in-itself' even as it is part of a system. (56)

After a camera translates the individual into a blip, the blip is then further fragmented and abstracted before appearing as a pulse of light on a screen. Step back from this quote a moment to take in the nested levels of optical and solipsistic symbolism: characters in *Jest* abstractly segment their perception of reality—a reality that is already abstracted and segmented by ubiquitous entertainment and drug abuse—through *sensa solipsism* to remain isolated from each other; James Incandenza depicts these solipsistic tendencies (and his own) through his films, further abstracting his abstracted perception of reality; these films are then, as Sobchack writes, abstracted, atomized, and transmitted as individual pixels or pulses of light to be perceived by the solipsistic characters in *Infinite Jest*; and all of this takes place in a novel which is itself an abstraction of the real world and in which each character, segment, and story-line reads every bit as discontinuous, discontiguous, and absolute as the individual pixels of an image. "*Infinite Jest* creates

cycles within cycles within cycles” (Hayles 684). Moreover, notice that optics governs the solipsism existent at every level of this recursive structure.

The above analysis revealed that Incandenza’s films epitomize optical solipsism in *Infinite Jest*. The task remains, however, to identify his purpose in creating them. I argue that Incandenza designed his films to overcome solipsism. While the solipsistic motifs in his work may appear to contradict this purpose, the tension actually follows a method espoused by Wallace himself. Initially, certain aspects of Incandenza’s filmography appear diametrically opposed to freeing the individual from solipsism. For instance, the text identifies Incandenza as part of the après-garde movement in art. The curator of a Los Angeles après-garde studio describes this movement as follows:

The traditional concept of an Avant Garde holds the idea that technique should be sacrificed so that concept may prevail. Après Garde artists instead prioritize technical finesse over conceptual chops. Since there is no reality to which one can compare the end result, an understanding of an abstract or non-objective work of art depends on successful technique. The only way an audience can judge the success or failure of an Après Garde work of art is by considering its quotient of retinal delight; ultimately, it should be eye candy for the aesthetically deprived.⁴⁷

This may seem to confound things because a major solipsism-inducing factor in *Jest* is media saturation; since there is an overabundance of stimulation, “retinal delight” is the last thing anyone needs. In addition, many of Incandenza’s films are no more than visual representations of solipsism; how does this help anyone overcome solipsism? Doesn’t watching solipsistic individuals on film mirror the life of the solipsistic viewer and thus exacerbate the problem?

⁴⁷ This quote is taken from the curator’s statement of Gallery 1988, an outlet for après-garde art. It can be found at: <http://www.apresgarde.com/CuratorStmntPage.html>

These seeming contradictions can be explained through Incandenza's artistic intentions—which echo Wallace's own.⁴⁸ Much like Shakespeare, who is thought to have taken the stage as the Ghost in *Hamlet*, I argue that Wallace appears in *Infinite Jest* as the wraith of James O. Incandenza. Recall from section 1.2 that Wallace thought that serious fiction “is more apt to make you uncomfortable, or to force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort” (*Salon*). With this concept in mind, Incandenza's technical verve and difficult films, described as “self-referencing unentertaining formalism and unrealistic abstraction”⁴⁹ and loathed by both critics and audiences alike, echoes Wallace's philosophy for serious fiction (*IJ* 1027). As Steeply describes, “The filmmaker'd been a cutting-edge optics man. Holography, diffraction. He'd used holography a couple times before, and in the context of a kind of filmed assault on the viewer. He was of the Hostile School or some such shit” (490). This unpleasantness for the viewer—for Wallace, the reader—was explained in section 1.2 above as a means to break through solipsism. Incandenza uses the same paradigm. In essence, the artistic purpose of these films is to subject the viewer to an uncomfortable mirror of his or her own life to spark recognition, and ultimately, change; in this case, an escape from solipsism.⁵⁰ As a final note, because

⁴⁸ Anyone unfamiliar with Wallace's theory on this subject should read his wonderful essay on television “E Unibus Pluram.” In short, Wallace believes that television offers viewers the image of themselves that they want to see, a heightened degree of reality to which the actual can never compare. Because this allows the individual to escape his/her own reality while polluting their idea of normal, television is unhealthy, seductive, and should be avoided—or at least viewed with a grain of salt. In cognizance of this essay, Wallace's creation of the TP (where the viewer can watch whatever they want whenever they want) is clearly his imaging of the next step toward solipsism in entertainment.

⁴⁹ I like to imagine that Wallace wrote these criticisms to mirror how critics would respond to *Infinite Jest*.

⁵⁰ Although this was Incandenza's intention, his films don't always appear to have this effect. His audiences are composed mainly of film scholars and students who praise or decry his technical methods rather than absorb the films' philosophic message, while other films—specifically, *Infinite Jest*—have the opposite consequence and fully actualize solipsism for the viewer. I will give reasons for this disparity later in the chapter.

the world of *Infinite Jest* is heavily abstracted—by media proliferation, substance abuse, and (nearly) universal *sensa solipsistic* and *anhedonic* thinking—the *après-garde* becomes a necessary art form to reach the individual. Reality in *Jest* has ceased to become real—and films must reflect this transition through heightened levels of abstraction.

3.6 The Entertainment

No investigation of optics and solipsism in *Infinite Jest* could be complete without scrutinizing the book's namesake: Incandenza's last film, *Infinite Jest (V)*⁵¹. The film provides the apex of optics and solipsism in the text. Incandenza's filmography records that the filmmaker attempted to create the film five times before finally succeeding. The first instance is described as Incandenza's "first attempt at commercial entertainment;" the others, attempted remakes (*IJ* 986). We get a few more details in the filmography's entry which cites scholarship calling the film "'extraordinary' ... 'far and away [James O. Incandenza's] most entertaining and compelling work,'" and "critical allusions to 'radical experiments in viewers' optical perspective and context as *IJ(V?)*'s distinctive feature" (*IJ* 993). This depicts the film as optically significant even within Incandenza's output of optically complex work. The novel also abounds with rumors over the cartridge. During Molly Notkin's party, Joelle overhears a film scholar mention, "if it even exists it has to be something more like an aesthetic pharmaceutical."⁵² Some beastly postannular scopophiliacal vector. Suprasubliminals and all that. Some kind of abstractable hypnosis, an optical dopamine-cue" (*IJ* 233). The text does prove, however, that the film causes

⁵¹ To avoid confusion with *Infinite Jest* the text, I will refer to *Infinite Jest* the film by its designation in Incandenza's filmography: *Infinite Jest (V)*.

⁵² The text repeatedly compares the film to a drug. While this enriches the commentary on both entertainment and drug abuse in *Jest* as confining forms of recreation, the drug discourse is nonoptical and hence won't be considered in this analysis. Refer to Chapter 4 of Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace* for a detailed account of both themes in the novel.

viewers to become irreversibly catatonic. They desire nothing else but to watch and rewatch the entertainment, denying even food and drink (*IJ* 725). In one sense, this state appears like the anhedonia's complete takeover, a "death in life." The entertainment also portrays solipsistic viewership in extremis. The individual no longer chooses to view out of idleness, fear of interaction, or antisocialism; he is compelled to view, completely and inextricably subject to his impulses, and thus, *sensa solipsistic*. His world is reduced to the content of one cartridge, a single series of images. In addition, recall from section 3.5 above that "The only way an audience can judge the success or failure of an *Après Garde* work of art is by considering its quotient of retinal delight; ultimately, it should be eye candy for the aesthetically deprived."⁵³ With its intoxicating visuals, *Infinite Jest* (*V*) provides the quintessential piece of *après-garde* art, justifying Incandenza's description of his own work—related through Joelle—as "fatally entertaining" (*IJ* 230).

Investigation of *Infinite Jest* (*V*) reveals that the film conflates many other optical symbols identified during this analysis. First, let's establish the cartridge's content. Molly Notkin provides the most complete description of the film. She reports:

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

These details conflict slightly with the account Joelle provides during an interview with Steeply that appears in the footnotes. There she contends that she wore a floor length

⁵³ This quote is taken from the curator's statement of Gallery 1988, an outlet for *après-garde* art. It can be found at: <http://www.apresgarde.com/CuratorStmntPage.html>

gown and “leaned in over the camera in the crib and simply apologized” (*IJ* 939).

Gately’s description of the entertainment, described during a vision he has in the hospital, confirms the figure’s apologizing, identifies the figure as Joelle, but describes her “inhumanly gorgeous naked bod” speaking to him from across a kitchen table (*IJ* 850). Regardless, it’s clear that Joelle portrayed a mother figure who spoke into the camera as if the viewer were watching from an infant or child’s point of view (P.O.V.). Joelle supports this notion earlier in the text, remarking, “Jim had designed his neonatal lens to blur things in imitation of a neonatal retina, everything recognizable and yet without outline. A blur that’s more deforming than fuzzy” (*IJ* 222). Thus, Incandenza’s custom lens abstracts the images of reality for the viewer by obscuring the image’s details.

By placing the viewer in the infant’s perspective, the technique also accomplishes Incandenza’s desire to overcome solipsism for his audience; as Wallace put it, “to give the reader [in this case, viewer], who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves” (*McCaffery* 1). Joelle describes a similar P.O.V. technique in a previous Incandenza film, *Pre-Nuptial Agreement of Heaven and Hell*. She explains, “the alcoholic sandwich-bag salesman... was on-screen every moment...except for the four narrative minutes the ...salesman stood in the Vittorio’s Bernini room, and the climactic stature filled the screen.” This, she continues, let the “salesman escape himself, his tiresome ubiquitous involuted head ... Freedom from one’s own head, one’s inescapable P.O.V.” (*IJ* 742). *Infinite Jest (V)* accomplishes this P.O.V. freedom with even more success by imitating both the perspective and perceptual aspects of an infant; the viewer sees as the infant sees, and thus feels as the infant feels. If Incandenza successfully pulls the individual out of herself, why do viewers continually

watch the cartridge on “a recursive loop” until they are left with “No desire or even basic survival-type will for anything other than more viewing?” (*IJ* 54, 507). Has his art failed?

The purpose of the infant’s P.O.V. becomes clear after understanding Incandenza’s designs for *Infinite Jest* (*V*). As a wraith, Incandenza outlines his purpose in creating the entertainment to Don Gately. Gately explains:

The wraith...says he spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*... His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life... To bring him ‘out of himself,’ as they say. The womb could be used both ways. A way to say I AM SO VERY VERY SORRY and have it *heard*. (*IJ* 839)

Thus, we understand that Incandenza created the film to break Hal from his solipsistic confinement. With the infant P.O.V., it appears that Incandenza pulled Hal out of the womb of solipsism by nearly placing him in another, “the womb could be used both ways.” This appears to be an effective method. Earlier in the text, Hal identifies his internal self as an “infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool,” that “to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naïve and goo-prone” (*IJ* 695). The infant symbol also has optical significance. Boswell notes that “This metaphorical infant is Wallace’s image for the pre-mirror stage human, the *Kern unseres Wesen* (“nucleus of our being”) of Freudian psychology” (155). Thus, to effect Hal’s escape from solipsism, Incandenza creates an entertainment that puts him back into the stage before he became aware of his own self-hood, before he could recognize his own reflection in the mirror. For Incandenza, perception invariably leads to solipsism.

3.7 Peeking Behind the Veil

One of *Infinite Jest*'s many unanswered questions—and, I will argue, one of the most important for this analysis—is what lies beneath Joelle's veil. As I explained in a footnote in section 2.5, the text provides contradictory explanations for why Joelle dons the veil of the U.H.I.D.: either she received serious facial burns, and is subsequently deformed—as the veil would suggest—from a mishandled bottle of acid, or she dons the veil because she's so unbelievably beautiful that men immediately fall in love with her.⁵⁴ The best clues Wallace provides occur during the bathroom scene at Molly Notkin's party. As Joelle prepares the cocaine, the narrator describes how she "lift[s] her veil back to cover her skull like a bride." He continues, "The absence of veil dulls the bathroom's smells, somehow," and, "Her unveiled face in the dirty lit mirror is shocking in the intensity of its absorption" (*IJ* 235-238). Wallace's use of the word absorption simultaneously indicates Joelle's preoccupation with cooking cocaine and suggests reading the moment in terms of the James/Avril dichotomy. Once the veil is lifted, Joelle's face seems to exhibit the consuming pull of the black hole, imbibing the smells of the bathroom. This pull could explain why viewers of the entertainment are bereft of their human qualities, as Joelle's unveiled face becomes "The Black Hole of Human Attention" in *Infinite Jest* (*V*) that sucks viewers—the light of their being—inside, locking them in a cage of the self (*IJ* 521). The act of viewership becomes the event horizon of self-confinement.

Other details about Joelle support this reading. The text repeatedly portrays Joelle as a super-sensory apparatus capable of absorbing everything around her. During her

⁵⁴ Cf. Hal's mention on page 634, Molly Notkin's account on pages 792-795, and Joelle's own profession on page 538 and counter claim on page 940.

walk along Boston Common, Joelle sensa solipsistically dissects her surroundings into a number of observed facts: “people with sacks and grocery carts... the rustle and jut of limbs... people’s blue shoeless limbs extending... the little cataract of rainwater off the edge of each dumpster’s red annex... somebody going *Psssst* from an alley’s lip” (*IJ* 221). Joelle’s absorption moves beyond the physical in that she also absorbs the attention of others. Before donning the veil, others describe Joelle as the “P.G.O.A.T., for the Prettiest Girl of All Time” (*IJ* 290). Joelle explains the moniker later in the text: “I’m so beautiful I drive anybody with a nervous system out of their fucking mind. Once they’ve seen me they can’t think of anything else and don’t want to look at anything else and stop carrying out normal responsibilities and believe that if they can only have me right there with them at all times everything will be all right” (*IJ* 538). Here Joelle describes viewer response to her visage in similar terms to viewer response to the entertainment. Even after shrouding herself, Joelle gains attention through the veil, which becomes an object of interest to others throughout the text. Thus, Joelle appears as “The Black Hole of Human Attention” for *Jest*, aligning her with Incandenza and explaining why the entertainment exercises such an absorptive pull on viewers.

At other moments, however, Joelle seems to represent the other side of the James/Avril dichotomy and signify light in the text. During his vision, Gately describes Joelle’s face as a source of light. Gately reports that Joelle looks “not sexy so much as angelic, like all the world’s light had gotten together and arranged itself into the shape of a face” (*IJ* 850). As his vision continues, he feels as if “he’s seeing her through a kind of cloud of light” (*IJ* 851). Though Joelle appears spectrometrically linked to James Incandenza in the section above, these descriptions depict Joelle as an emitter of light, akin to Avril.

These contrary depictions can be reconciled, however, by returning to analysis of the black hole and how it can be said to reflect light just outside of its event horizon.

The black hole is solipsistically and optically significant beyond the fact that it absorbs light because its effect on light waves can be reproduced by a mirror. In his paper “Thermodynamics of Black Holes,” Davies writes, “From the standpoint of geometrical optics the situation outside the [event] horizon [of a black hole] is identical to the moving mirror system” (1326). Davies explains how a moving mirror is “a device for reproducing on the [electromagnetic] field the effect of the gravity of a collapsing star” (1323), i.e., a star as it transitions to a black hole. Davies shows—through a series of equations, which for brevity and clarity’s sake I will not reproduce here—how light reflecting off of a moving mirror (either oscillating or accelerating on a curve to infinity) will produce electromagnetic radiation, i.e., light waves, identical to that of a collapsing star.⁵⁵ This correspondence is of explanatory significance for the Joelle mirror scene. While Joelle is solipsistically confined, like James, by the event horizon of her physical body, her exterior, outside of the event horizon, acts as a mirror and reflects light back at the viewer who, through Incandenza’s neonatal lens and P.O.V., has been lured into a state of infantile humanness. Uninhibited by solipsism, free of the mask, the individual fully emits the light of her being, which Joelle—still solipsistically confined—reflects back toward them. In this way, Joelle embodies the James/ Avril dichotomy of light v. darkness, and absorption v. emission. The Entertainment becomes the ultimate spectroscopic symbol for a novel radiating with optical substance.

3.8 Believing is Seeing

⁵⁵ Note that this similarity exists only mathematically. It would be impossible to replicate the quantum equations at the physical level, i.e. create an oscillating or infinitely accelerating mirror.

Despite all positivist desires to uncover optics as a functional technology of the self capable of overcoming solipsism, optics seems to increase solipsism for the individual in *Jest*. This is most evident in Incandenza's filmography and especially *Infinite Jest* (*V*), which effects a solipsistic takeover in the viewer despite its intended purpose "to reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life" (*IJ* 839). In a failed effort to defeat solipsism, the film transports the viewer cinematographically into a pre-optical stage, seeming to suggest that perception inevitably drives the individual toward a solipsistic terminus, that "the act of viewing amounts to an act of surrender" to the self (Bukatman 39). The individual escapes the cage of the womb only to enter the cage of the self. However, I have also argued on behalf of characters in *Jest* (and Wallace, whose tenderness and earnest desire to help people help themselves comes through best in his fantastic commencement speech at Kenyon College, "This is Water") that optics—or any technology—can be an effective tool to defeat solipsism. Furthermore, *Jest* supports this reading, so long as the individual approaches the technology from the right angle and in the proper state of mind. This teaching is most evident through Mario Incandenza, whose symbolic depths have thus far remained unexplored.

Like his solipsistic brothers and father, Mario lives in relative isolation and reduces reality by converting the world directly into images. The narrator reports that his "life... [at E.T.A.] is by all appearances kind of a sad and left-out-type existence." He had been "inseparable" with his completely self-absorbed father, to whom he acted as an "honorary assistant" (*IJ* 314). Continuing his late father's craft, Mario also serves as E.T.A.'s unofficial sports videographer and documentarian, using "a trusty old Bolex

H64 Rex 5 tri-lensed camera bolted to an oversized old leather aviator's helmet," that Incandenza left Mario in his will (*IJ* 315). Part of Mario's documentary "consists of Mario just walking around different parts of the Academy with the Bolex H64 strapped to his head" (*IJ* 755). Mario reduces reality by physically converting the world around him into a series of images and then edits them into oblivion in homage to his late father, taking a mere resemblance of reality and further abstracting it. Not only is Mario's role as videographer externally substantiated through the Bolex on his head, the text also suggests that his being typifies a sort of lens. As noted above, the narrator insists that Mario is "*not*, verifiably *not*, retarded or cognitively damaged or bradyphrenic, more like refracted, almost, ever so slightly epistemically bent... in the manner of all refracted things" (*IJ* 314). The seat of Mario's identity is thus described as refracting through the lens of his warped body. Recording his surroundings and described as a "refracted thing," Mario represents both optical medium and output—the ultimate abstracted figure, a blip from birth. Yet, in spite of these features, there's also a wealth of textual evidence that suggests Mario is not a solipsistic figure.

Though Mario initially appears to fall in line with his solipsistic relatives, other evidence suggests that he lives happily outside of the cage of self. Mario's physical deformities provide the first indicator. He exists physically, cognitively, and emotionally infantile, suggesting that his "incomplete gestation" sustained the unsolipsistic character of the infant throughout his life (*IJ* 313). The narrator describes that, as a result of his premature birth, Mario is "huge-headed," diminutive—sized "somewhere between elf and jockey"—possesses underdeveloped arms which curl "in front of his thorax in magiscule S's," eyes "a bit larger and protrusive to qualify as conventionally human

eyes,” and skin of “an odd dead gray-green” (*IJ* 316, 313-314). Thus, Mario fits Hal’s description of the infantile self: “Mario is, quite literally, a ‘not-quite-right-looking infant...with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool’” (Boswell 157). Rather than leave his mother’s womb to enter the womb of solipsism, Mario had to be “scraped out... like the meat of an oyster” (*IJ* 313). Taken before his time, Mario retained the infant’s defense against solipsism: his inability to mask his infantilism.

Observing Mario’s interactions with others exposes his infantile shield against solipsism. Unlike the novel’s many sealed-off people, Mario is completely and earnestly open with other characters because he cannot hide his needy, infantile self.⁵⁶ This, in turn, impels others to open up to him. “It’s almost like they’re like: If nobody’s really in there, there’s nothing to be shy about”—the ironic truth here being that nothing’s “in” Mario because he doesn’t conceal his true self (*IJ* 80). Mario’s total emotional exposure operates as his shield against solipsism. As a result of his accessibility, other people’s “bullshit tends to drop away...deep beliefs revealed, diary-type private reveries indulged out loud; and, listening, ... [Mario] gets to forge an interpersonal connection he knows only he can truly feel, here” (*IJ* 80). Thus, Mario, irremediably open to others, finds others eager to share themselves with him—creating a positive community dynamic that protects him from solipsistic feelings of isolation.

⁵⁶ It’s helpful to note that Mario’s openness is distinct from his mother Avril’s policy of total honesty and trust because his is genuine. Mario hides nothing and exhibits unselfishness of the purest form that can only exist before even the notion of the self develops. For instance, “Avril remembers Mario still wanting Hal to help him with bathing and dressing at thirteen... and wanting the help for Hal’s sake, not his own” (*IJ* 317). At a time when most boys are ashamed of their bodies, Mario—without thought of himself—wants his brother to closely aid him, believing this human exposure will give Hal company and illustrate that the helpless, infantile part of all of us is not a loathsome thing needing suppression but the germ of humanness that should be shared openly.

Mario's radiant lack of solipsism also appears optically. Mario's name has a deferred optical significance that is finally revealed when the narrator reports he was named after Incandenza's grandfather, an "oculist who made a small fortune... by inventing those quote *X-Ray Specs!*" It's no coincidence, then, that Mario sees through the "masks of ennui and jaded irony" donned by others to view the "internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pulses and writhes just under the hip empty mask;" a unique ability which constitutes his "slow and silent" intuition (*IJ* 317, 695). It thus appears that Mario's Bolex is not a device for recording and abstracting reality, but a sort of all-seeing eye that cuts to the human core of those solipsists who stray in front of its X-ray lens. In addition, *Jest* again depicts humanness as a sort of luminescence through Mario. Hal believes that Avril views Mario—"the one truly human figure in the novel" (Boswell 158)—as "a very rare and shining thing," while Mario, as a result of his ability to connect interpersonally, goes through life "grinning like somebody squinting into bright light" (*IJ* 317, 229). Unimpeded by solipsism, Mario sees the light radiating from the core of everyone's beings.

Regardless of these unique abilities, Mario's true, unmediated openness is unable to affect other characters. Despite living inseparably from Mario, James Incandenza never realizes that the remedy to solipsism is standing next to him holding a lens case. Joelle reports "Orin had disliked him," a comment supported by the narrator's recollection of many instances of Orin bullying Mario (*IJ* 229), while Hal, who "almost idealizes, Mario, secretly," doesn't understand when Mario expresses the key to defeat solipsism (*IJ* 229, 317). This moment comes when Hal, after vocalizing his stress about giving up marijuana, impending exams and matches, and a fear of shaming his mother

and the memory of his father, asks Mario for advice. Mario replies, “I think you just did it. What you should do. I think you just did,” yielding silence from Hal in response. Then the scene ends. Though lost to Hal, it’s evident to the reader that Mario meant Hal had successfully opened up and exposed his puerile inner self—a self that Mario, deformed and infantile from birth, is unable to ever conceal. It appears that while Hal only “theorizes privately” of the existence of this infantile self, Mario both thoroughly understands it and believes the individual should unmask himself to expose it (*IJ* 694). Thus, for Mario, believing is seeing; the door to the cage is clearly marked *EXIT* and self-acceptance is the key.

While it appears this investigation has reached a new plateau in its attempt to schematize optics as an effective technology of the self, this is not the case. The same physical and mental handicaps that protect Mario from solipsism prevent him from communicating this lesson to others in *Jest*. Thus, living free from solipsistic confinement and concurrently unable to share this insight, Mario embodies *Infinite Jest*’s dichotomy of technology as a solipsistic temper versus technology as a solipsistic intensifier. Ultimately, it still appears that individuals in *Jest* exist in a recursive prison of the self. Now, the enclosure seems even more maddening, as the answer exists in the text but remains inaccessible to others.

CHAPTER 4

THE ART'S HEART'S PURPOSE

Introduction—Authorship as a Solipsistic Endeavour—The Art's Heart's Purpose—Solipsism Today

4.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I used optical technology to explore solipsism within *Infinite Jest*. After examining optics at length and using its substratal position in the text as a platform to consider a variety of other technologies (such as tennis and entertainment) and themes (such as masking, the reduction of reality, and mirrors), I've concluded that *Jest* either exhibits these technologies' failure to defeat solipsism or leaves their efficacy undetermined. Now, I will disengage from optics to consider the decisive status of solipsism in *Infinite Jest*. In chapter one, I argued that *Jest* is Wallace's great work on solipsism—particularly, that the text is a collection of many different technologies capable of bringing us out of our own solipsistic cages. I also suggested that *Infinite Jest itself* could be viewed as such a technology. One of the ultimate goals of this project has been to assess whether or not *Infinite Jest* is successful in its design to break through solipsism for the reader. Does *Infinite Jest* succeed as a technology of the self? While writing *Jest*, Wallace recognized this challenge. In an interview, he stated, "Whether I can provide a payoff and communicate a function rather than just seem jumbled and prolix is the issue that'll decide whether the thing I'm working on now succeeds or not" (McCaffery 9). Do readers ever receive that payoff? Does the novel function as an effective technology of the self?

4.2 Writing, Reading: *Infinite Jest* as a Solipsistic Endeavor

Initially, the novel seems to fail in its purpose to spring the individual from solipsism because it is itself solipsistic on so many levels. While considering *Infinite Jest* (V) the film, Joelle van Dyne muses, “Was the allegedly fatally entertaining and scopophilic thing Jim alleges he made out of her unveiled face... a cage or really a door?” (IJ 230). We can ask the same question of *Infinite Jest* the novel. Like James Incandenza, who reveals to Gately that he created the entertainment to “reverse thrust on a young self’s fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life” (IJ 839), Wallace provides readers with his purpose for writing *Jest* through his metric for successful fiction: “serious fiction’s purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves” (McCaffery 1). Through its narrative mode, the novel accomplishes this task. While Incandenza attempts to propel Hal out of solipsism by giving him access to a P.O.V. lacking a notion of selfhood and by blurring perception with a custom “neonatal lens,” Wallace attempts to achieve the same effect through opposite means (IJ 222). Fiction is unique as a narrative genre for its ability to give readers access to other minds—in this regard, it’s immediately superior to visual narratives at overcoming solipsism. *Infinite Jest*’s huge cast of characters (246, according to one character map⁵⁷) and frequent digressions from the three primary stories to relate the experiences of fringe characters ensures that the reader is plopped into many different heads. Rather than one P.O.V. without a conception of the self, Wallace provides hundreds of P.O.V.’s with fully developed conceptions of self. However, as my analysis has shown, characters in *Jest* are (almost without exception)

⁵⁷ Which can be found at: http://images.fastcompany.com/upload/IJ_Diagram-Huge-A.jpg

solipsistically isolated from one another. To read *Jest* is to descend into the heads of hundreds of lonely, depressed, and solipsistic individuals. Does this really help the reader overcome solipsism? If the reader is solipsistic—which I believe all of us are to the extent that we at times find it difficult to effectively communicate our thoughts and feelings—isn't reading *Jest* no more than entering a funhouse of mirrors populated with other solipsistic individuals? Is the individual just getting a reflection of him/herself on the page?

These aspects are especially pernicious in a novel of *Infinite Jest*'s infamous length and complexity. During the preface to this project, I defined technology for *Jest* as any practical art used to defeat solipsism. Writing is such a technology. It's a binary practical art composed of authorship and readership—part composition, part absorption. Both appear solipsistic with regard to *Jest*. The physical act of crafting a novel is a solipsistic endeavor in and of itself, especially for a novel of *Infinite Jest*'s prodigious length and complexity. When writing a work of this scope, the author must spend hundreds—if not thousands—of hours researching, writing, and revising, processes that require isolation, often accompanied by loneliness. Wallace must seal himself off mentally to write, physically instantiating solipsism in order to vie with it fictionally. Wallace noted the paradox in “The Empty Plenum,” describing how when writing “one's head is, in some sense, the whole world, when the imagination becomes not just a more congenial but a realer environment than the Big Exterior of life on earth” (221-222). For the author, the novel transcends virtual reality to replace actual reality—a reality of one, within one. Once the initial draft's completed, the object created still resists others' understanding. One need only look over the first draft pages of *Infinite Jest* to understand

how (fig. 1).

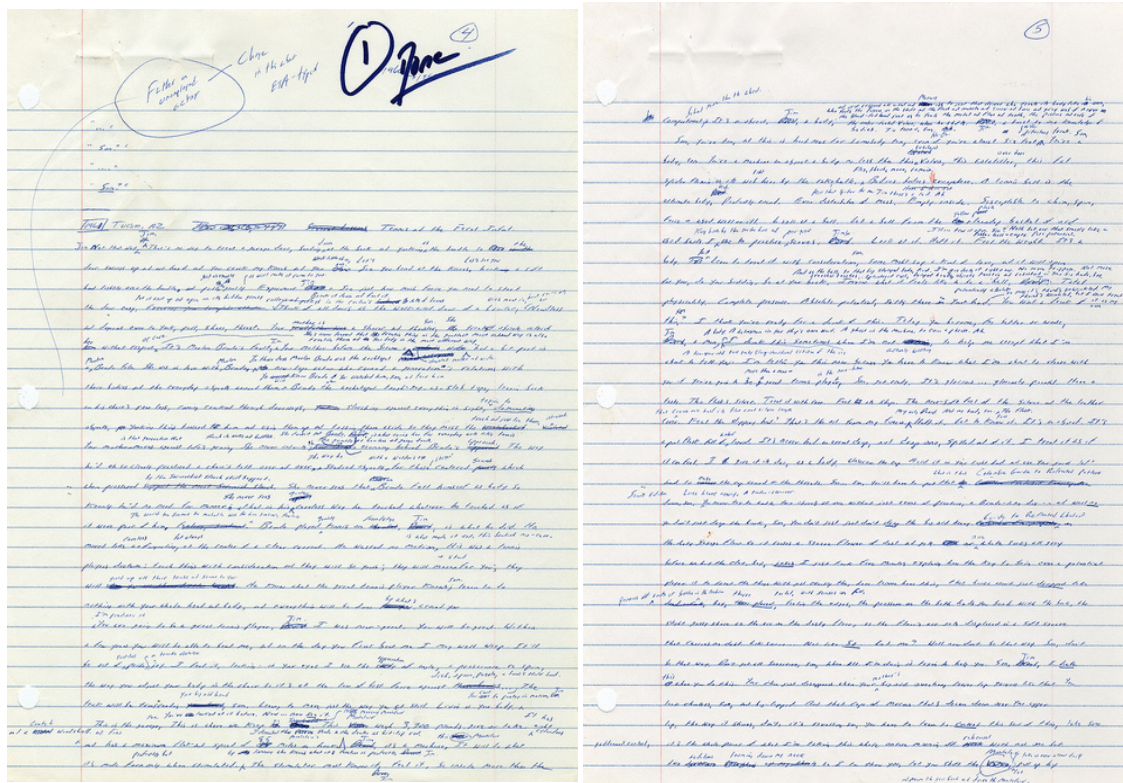


Figure 5
Handwritten first pages of *Infinite Jest*
(Wallace Archive, 15.4)

Wallace's prose is convoluted with revisions, additions, and personal notes—all written in a miniscule hand that requires magnification to read in person. Though Wallace has labored to pull thoughts from his mind and present them in rigorous detail, using rhetorical devices, symbolism, and constructing complex scenarios to best communicate meaning to the reader (in 1,079 pages, including 388 endnotes), the essence of his thoughts remains largely inaccessible. Even after a legible typescript draft is composed, the novel remains labyrinthine, enigmatic, and intensely personal. As Boswell notes:

The book features an enormous cast of characters numbering in the hundreds, employs an intricate and insular mock argot of coined terms and made-up slang,

engages directly and learnedly with such arcane subjects as theoretical math and lens technology and computer science, and concludes with a hundred pages of endnotes. (*Understanding* 118)

The greater the volume and specificity of detail, the more the novel reads like a clamorous journey through Wallace's mind—for whom else would connect entertainment, addiction, math, and tennis? Every page of *Infinite Jest* appears like a solipsistic reflection of its author.

The solipsistic qualities of authorship also extend to readership. Unlike Incandenza, who opts to obscure reality in an attempt to free his audience from solipsism, Wallace recreates it in vivid detail. However, this representational plenitude also fails to overcome selfhood, or at least still leaves us in doubt about the novel's efficacy. As I mentioned earlier, the number of characters and fiction's ability to drop into their heads allows the reader to access other minds. Yet, concurrently, the novel's length requires the reader to spend significant time alone with the text to finish it, and, owing to *Jest*'s aforementioned complexity and richness of detail, the text becomes during this time "a floating no-space world" for the reader apart from reality (*IJ* 620). For the solipsistic reader, *Jest* may appear as "all four mirrors of her little room's walls" (*IJ* 223). With these details in mind, *Infinite Jest* does not appear to be a successful technology of the self. Instead, it seems to follow the pattern established by its namesake and other technologies in the text: "what looks like the cage's exit is actually the bars of the cage" (*IJ* 222). *Infinite Jest* becomes a textual monument to solipsism, a text that's *shocking in the intensity of its absorption* for both the author and the reader.

4.3 The Art's Heart's Purpose

Although my account has thus far portrayed *Infinite Jest* as a failed technology of the self, I believe the novel can effectively overcome solipsism for the reader. Its appearance of failure is in part due to the reductive method of my analysis up to this point, whereas its success stems from certain emergent properties of the text. Schitt explains this distinction through tennis, where the “keys to excellence and victory in the prolix flux of match play is not a fractal matter of reducing chaos to pattern...it was a matter not of reduction at all, but—perversely—of expansion” (*IJ* 82). Similarly, the prolix *Jest*’s victory over solipsism occurs through its expansive, extra textual properties—specifically, its ability to form community between author and reader and between readers. In addition, many of the features of the text I’ve identified above as solipsistic intensifiers are designed by Wallace to have the opposite effect. The fact that they appear solipsistic is no fault of Wallace’s or readers’. The book is solipsistic in order to force us to confront an individual problem widespread in today’s society; the book is complex in order to force us into a community with the author and other readers.

By outlining Wallace’s purpose for *Infinite Jest*, the novel’s seemingly solipsistic qualities become a means to force the reader to confront their own solipsism. Like James Incandenza, Wallace appears to be a card-carrying member of the “Hostile School” of artistic creation (*IJ* 490). At times, *Infinite Jest* feels designed to frustrate any and all attempts at understanding. Boswell acknowledges this, calling the novel “deliberately difficult” (*Understanding* 118). Any one who has attempted to read *Infinite Jest*—and I suspect the number of attempts far outweighs the number of completions—will agree. But there is a purpose behind this difficulty that sets *Infinite Jest* apart from other complex fiction: Wallace wrote a challenging novel specifically to fortify the reader

against a solipsistic existence. Wallace thought that good fiction “is more apt to make you uncomfortable, or to force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort.” This quote alongside Wallace’s notion that good fiction should make us “less alone inside” compose Wallace’s dogma for fiction: (McCaffery 1).⁵⁸ In order to defeat solipsism, the author must craft difficult fiction that is demanding of the reader. In this way, the author and the reader form a trying relationship that jostles them out of the ease and banality of media entertainment and into a community with the author and other readers.

It follows that *Infinite Jest*’s onerous construction and solipsistic subject matter, which initially seem to heighten solipsism for the reader, are in fact designed to combat it. “I strongly suspect a big part of real art fiction’s job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people,” Wallace says, “to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us first to face what’s dreadful, what we want to deny” (McCaffery 8). Thus, all of the solipsistic symbolism in *Jest* is intended to make Wallace’s point *ad nauseam*, to force the reader to admit that they, too, sometimes suffer from solipsistic conceits. By dropping us into the heads of many different characters in different walks of life with different beliefs but who *all suffer from solipsism*, the reader is likely to find an archetype that speaks to her and impels her to introspect and confront the solipsistic aspects of her own life. This is the novel’s solipsism-defeating thematic structure.

⁵⁸ Here, it may appear that I’m running afoul of my objective (made in chapter one) to focus on Wallace’s fiction rather than use his nonfiction as a key to understand his fiction. However, this analysis is founded upon my in-depth study of *Infinite Jest* from the preceding chapters. As such, my use of Wallace’s interviews further illuminates arguments—which I’ve shown are—rooted in his fiction.

At the level of composition, the novel also works as a solipsism-defeating apparatus. Wallace's massive vocabulary—borrowing from multiple languages and using highly technical medical and scientific terms (“anthracnose,” “neutral density point,” “steatocryptotic”)⁵⁹ as well as bits of jargon and street slang (“crew,” “tearass,” “skeet”),⁶⁰ some invented by the author—can be read as an effort to break through the solipsism inherent in a text by communicating meaning in extremely precise detail. For instance, while the word *projection* may have different meanings and thus inherent ambiguity, the word *Bröckengespenstphänom*⁶¹ conveys meaning in unquestionable detail.

Wallace's verbosity can also be read as a response to Wittgenstein's linguistic solipsism. Ryerson reports that Wallace believed that Wittgenstein had “eliminated solipsism, but not the horror” (*McCaffery* 13). Wallace made this claim in 1993; around the time he finished work on *Infinite Jest*. Moments later, Wallace said “And if there's one thing that consistently bugs me writing-wise, it's that I don't feel I really ‘do’ know my way around inside language—I never seem to get the kind of clarity and concision I want” (13). Wallace describes this goal of lucid communication as an effort to succeed within Wittgenstein's fundamental problem of language, which states that we are inextricably “in” language and cannot attain a removed perspective to analyze the system holistically and determine its merit. According to Wallace, our inability to extricate

⁵⁹ **Anthracnose**, (n)- *the fungus responsible for powdery mildew. [p. 288]; neutral density point*, (n)- *the point at which a neutral density filter reduces the brightness of all colors equally, without affecting hue. A theoretical point. [p. 832]; steatocryptotic*, (n)- *a derangement of the sebaceous glands in which sebum fails to drain through the skin, and instead collects beneath it. [p. 187].*

⁶⁰ Definitions as used in text: **crew**, (v). *To work over, hustle, mug. [p. 131]; tearass*, (v). *to move quickly, run. [p. 132]; skeet*, (n). *heroin. [p. 133].*

⁶¹ **Bröckengespenstphänom**, (n)- *a complicated atmospheric phenomenon in which a person standing on a mountain peak sees his or her own shadow projected onto clouds below at enormous magnification. [p. 641]*

ourselves creates the ever-present “horror” of solipsism. In this light, *Infinite Jest*, with its colossal length, complexity, and vocabulary—more than twice the length of anything else Wallace had previously authored, and this edited down from 1700 manuscript pages⁶²—appears very much like Wallace’s attempt to achieve clarity and concision to the highest degree possible within language in an effort to assuage the horror of solipsism.

The novel’s other distinctive rhetorical features—prolix sentences and paragraphs, difficult syntax with nested clauses and parenthetical digressions, one multipage section absent of punctuation and written in street vernacular—also contribute to this purpose. While they help Wallace communicate meaning in a nuanced and complex way, they also require much of the reader’s attention. In the introduction to the novel, Dave Eggers tells how reading *Infinite Jest* “was occasionally trying. It demands your full attention. It can’t be read at a crowded café, or with a child on one’s lap. It was frustrating that the footnotes were at the end of the book, rather than on the bottom of the page” (*IJ* xiv). In this way, the book’s difficulty requires the reader to remain engaged, that Wallace’s message will not fall on deaf ears. These features absorb the reader into a relationship with the text, and also create a community with its author.

4.4 Perpetual Community

The novel’s tendency to create community provides its ultimate method to defeat solipsism. I dismissed Wittgenstein earlier in this project because his linguistic philosophy does not provide a productive concept of solipsism for this investigation preoccupied with vision, viewership, and perception. It is through Wittgenstein, however, that *Infinite Jest* finally defeats solipsism, specifically, through Wittgenstein’s notion that

⁶² Or so Wallace claimed in the Salon interview—and these are the page numbers of a novel with smaller than standard font size.

language is a “public phenomenon” (Ryerson 29). Ryerson explains how, according to Wittgenstein,

The meaning of words is their use; the use of words is a matter of following rules; and following rules is entirely a social affair. There cannot be thought apart from the use of language—and language can operate only within a set of social practices. Thus there is no private thought without a corresponding public reality. (29)

Because language emerges from community and because there is no thought without language, solipsism—in its strongest, ontological form that doubts the reality of the external world—is incoherent. The fact that one is thinking in words proves that there is an external community of individuals. For Wallace, this was “the single most beautiful argument against solipsism that’s ever been made” (13). Yet Wittgenstein’s communal language does not appear to address the softer solipsism in *Jest*—the *sensa* solipsist, who reduces the world to images to abstract herself from reality and others—which is also the form of solipsism that individuals exhibit in the world today. Though Wittgenstein has proven that the external world exists through public language, he hasn’t barred the individual from living in isolation from it. Wallace structures *Infinite Jest*, however, to form a Wittgensteinian community between reader and author founded on the text as a mediating device.

Wallace creates community and defeats solipsism through *Infinite Jest* by virtue of the novel’s difficulty and its withholding of a conventional narrative resolution. As I’ve discussed, by writing a “deliberately difficult” novel of prodigious length, Wallace forces the reader to engage with another consciousness, the author, in a way that other forms of entertainment (the literal sense of the word, as in entertaining) cannot (Boswell 118). He explains during the *Salon* interview:

... there is this existential loneliness in the real world. I don't know what you're thinking or what it's like inside you and you don't know what it's like inside me. In fiction I think we can leap over that wall itself in a certain way. But that's just the first level, because the idea of mental or emotional intimacy with a character is a delusion or a contrivance that's set up through art by the writer. There's another level that a piece of fiction is a conversation. There's a relationship set up between the reader and the writer that's very strange and very complicated and hard to talk about. (Miller)

Because a reader/character relationship is illusory, to create community in a text, the author must insert him/herself somehow to remind the reader that they are reading a piece of created content; that they are not alone with the text. Wallace applies this technique throughout *Jest*, but it's most obvious in the infamous endnotes. These “enhance the reader's intimacy with the text even as they highlight the story's artificiality” (Boswell 121). By jerking the reader out of narration to provide such useless information as endnote 216: “No clue,” the endnotes remind the reader that the text is a construct (*IJ* 1036). At the same time, they exhibit another technique that Wallace deploys to create community: a sometimes irreverent, other times casual voice that comments on the text itself. Though not confined to the endnotes, these bits of narration are often found there. Examine, for instance, endnote 192, “She didn't literally say *shitstorm*,” or endnote 197, “(Never yet having checked the side of a box of pasta for possible directions)” (*IJ* 1033). These notes don't provide character development or progress the plot. They only serve to digress from the story and provide bits of irrelevant, though funny, material in a voice that's clearly Wallace's. Unlike the narrator—who comments on events within the text from an omniscient perspective—this voice comments on the text itself, reminding the reader that he is not traveling this literary journey alone. Thus, Wallace successfully inserts himself into his fiction as a sort of “Infinite Jester” with regard to his own work (*IJ* 228).

Infinite Jest also forms community between readers. Wallace creates communities of readers best through the narrative's circularity and resolution. Readers will likely have the experience I had with the text: after struggling for weeks to read a 1,079-page novel, I finished the last page only to find myself completely without satisfaction. None of the loose ends were tied. Naturally, I assumed something was wrong—I had misunderstood or missed an important detail, perhaps my copy of the text was misprinted—and, times being as they are, I immediately used Google to search for answers. This led to my discovery of multiple websites devoted to *Jest*,⁶³ online communities that bring people together to discuss Wallace and his work. Thus, from the book's difficulty, virtual communities emerge—not to mention all the conversations readers are likely to have at dinner parties with other successful finishers of the marathon text. Little, Brown even created community before *Jest*'s release by “building anticipation for it, with monthly postcards, bearing teasing phrases and hints, sent to every media outlet in the country” (Eggers xiv). These teasers cause the prospective reader to discuss the book with other prospective readers, creating a community of readers before the book's release allowed community between the author and the reader. For these reasons, *Infinite Jest* is able to defeat solipsism by acting as a functional technology of the self.

A few difficulties remain, however. For readers to experience the community of *Infinite Jest*, they must actually finish (or make a valiant attempt to finish) the book, and *Jest* is well known as a book often started and seldom completed—not to mention, I've devoted many pages to understanding and communicating the purpose of the text. If it truly is an effective technology for defeating solipsism, shouldn't *Infinite Jest* accomplish

⁶³ Such as www.infinitemummer.org and www.thehowlingfantods.com/dfw

this on its own? Although Greg Burkam of the *Seattle Times* calls the book “surprisingly readable” on *Jest*’s back cover, most would disagree (perhaps it’s surprisingly readable in the sense that you assume it will be impossible to read only to find out that there are in fact no metaphysical obstructions to your completion of the novel. All you need is around a hundred hours of concentration and the ability to press onward in the face of boredom and convolution). Critics universally comment on the text’s difficulty, and if the experts struggle to get through the work, what hope do the less educated (and inspired) have? Is it wrong to suspect that this is the audience most desperately in need of *Jest*’s message?

Perhaps *Infinite Jest*’s absorptive potential cannot compete with that of television or other effortless visual entertainments. In an age of decreased attention and increased stimulation, can the public be expected to read this book? This is not an easy question to answer—perhaps even an impossible one. However, we can conclude that, as is the case for Mario, believing is seeing. One must attain the right state of mind and desire to read *Infinite Jest* before one is able to grasp its message and become solipsistically aware. Unlike with Mario, however, who possesses a cure for solipsism that he’s unable to share with anyone, nothing prevents the individual from reading *Jest*—aside from, of course, herself.

Drat!

After all this light and noise, it appears we still must triumph over an internal foe to even pick the novel up. The cage is inescapable! How big of an issue is this? *Infinite Jest*, on the whole, is a radical piece of fiction, “A Failed Entertainment,” as Wallace originally titled it, and a technology designed to defeat solipsism in both the author—for, Wallace claimed, “‘I EXIST,’ is the impulse that throbs under... all good writing”

(*Empty* 222)—and the reader, who must struggle to comprehend and, in doing so, will strangely find herself feeling “less alone inside” (McCaffery 1).

AFTERWORD

The State of Solipsism Today

I don't know—perhaps all these are the injunctions of a past age which I am carrying out at the moment when I have already progressed somewhat further. If I could only make the 'leap.' To leave behind me, on the other shore, my writings and my poetry, and to speak to men without judging, without shyness, without weighing every word! It seems to me that only then will I find the form wherein my spirit may breathe at ease. To speak to men, not to one or two, but to masses of men. To entwine my ideas with contemporary needs—economical, sociological, political. To speak and to move men concerning the present problems of their everyday lives. The idea—abstract, fleshless, philosophical—cannot satisfy the flesh-eating spirit...What you tell me is in truth my only worth—I struggle, I look forward like Odysseus, but without knowing if I shall ever anchor in Ithaca. (Kazantzakis 18)

In his preface to *Infinite Jest*, Dave Eggers writes that the novel contains “the same sort of obsessiveness, the same incredible precision and focus, and the same sense that the writer wanted (and arguably succeeds at) nailing the consciousness of an age” (xiii). My question is: which age does Eggers mean? The early 90s of *Jest*’s creation or the dystopian future the book envisions? It has been nineteen years since Wallace turned his draft of *Infinite Jest* into Little, Brown and sixteen years since the book arrived on store shelves, and it was just last year (or three years ago⁶⁴) that the world caught up to the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment, which means that it was just last November that Hal Incandenza lived the first words of *Infinite Jest*: “I am seated in an office, surrounded by heads and bodies” (*IJ* 1). I mention these details not to blur the line between fiction and reality, as Sidi Hamid Benengeli, the esteemed Arab Historian, does

⁶⁴ Boswell explains the difficulties in determining the calendar year of The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment in the endnotes to *Understanding David Foster Wallace*. There’s evidence that Y.D.A.U. (during which the majority of the novel transpires) corresponds to 2009, 2010, or 2011. I think he finally lights upon the definitive answer, however, when he points out that Wallace may have “planted the inconsistency in order to frustrate such fruitless, but interesting, exercises as this” (217).

in *Don Quijote*, nor to adopt some Borgesian concept of time; I mention them to highlight that through *Infinite Jest*, Wallace envisioned a dystopian future for society. It's easy to forget this detail while reading because, as Boswell notes, "*Infinite Jest* is a world all to itself, a virtual reality in the most literal sense of that term" (123). Certainly, the length and richness of the text creates a world apart for readers. However, at the same time that the novel appears other worldly, hyperreal, or perhaps simply absurd, it's meant to reflect societal trends Wallace noted in the early nineties and to project an image of that society into the future, a future that has now arrived. To modify Hal's words, *Infinite Jest* is just the real world—our world—in a dark mirror. And while initially this may appear patently untrue—annular fusion is not a reality, the Obama administration has not muscled Mexico and Canada into an Organization of North American Nations and turned upstate New York into a huge toxic waste dump—some of the novel's predictions for the future do appear eerily accurate; specifically, those pertaining to optics and solipsism.

We live in an age delineated by media, through media, and in media—media created, delivered, displayed, and observed through the principles of optics discussed in this analysis. In this digital age, reality constitutes the spaces between Netflix deliveries, loading screens, news feeds, Twitter updates, YouTube videos, wall posts, text messages, episodes of *Dexter*, emails, and Google searches. Individuals live life through the lenses of cameras, constantly reducing their reality to photos and videos to post on their social media portals—which they custom-tailor like *Transmittable Tableau* to project a model version of their life. As Bukatman notes, the space between the real and the virtual has imploded, leaving us in a true virtual reality, an electronic "nonspace" (35). Wallace developed this idea most fully through his "fiber-optic-InterGrid" of "Teleputers"

(*Infinite Jest* 60). In some ways, Wallace's vision appears prophetic. Skeptics need only to turn to page 416 of *Infinite Jest* to read Wallace's description of the Interlace corporation to realize that he essentially produced—years before the company was created—the business model of Netflix, a multibillion dollar on-demand streaming media company that revolutionized the way society consumes entertainment.⁶⁵ What Wallace does not predict, however, is the ubiquity of “social” networking and the Internet. It is in these areas that modern trends progress toward an alarming solipsistic terminus. Under the guise of increased connectivity, the Internet is increasingly becoming a cage of mirrors.

No longer a purely transcendental domain of connection and discovery, the Web has become an artificial environment realigning itself around the individual consumer. This transition occurs beneath the web's basic ability to foster communication (as in the online *Infinite Jest* communities). What's problematic is that we still think of the web as this domain—as a product of a philosophy espousing education and communication for all—when, in fact, it's increasingly a tool of industries, which—as in *Jest*—actualizes in solipsism-enhancing programs.⁶⁶ Though this movement is marketed positively as “personalization,” the individual must sacrifice a degree of freedom and community to get it. In *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding From You*, Eli Pariser explains how this shift occurred for Google searches in 2009:

Starting that morning, Google would use fifty-seven *signals*—everything from where you were logging in from to what browser you were using to what you had

⁶⁵ Financial data retrieved from Forbes.com.

<http://finapps.forbes.com/finapps/jsp/finance/compinfo/FinancialIndustrial.jsp?tkr=NFLX>

⁶⁶ My point here is not to critique capitalism, industry, or big business. I only aim to point out that because these groups want to sell you the things (and opinions) that you want, and because the web is fantastic at this, the Internet is becoming a YOUR space, rather than a community space. I make these points in more detail as the chapter progresses.

searched for before—to make guesses about who you were and what kinds of sites you’d like...it would customize its results, showing you the pages it predicted you were most likely to click on. (2)

While this may not seem problematic—it may even appear helpful—Pariser continues to explain how the trend is spreading to other sites, such as facebook, and is used by sidebar ads to sell you products it knows you want. “More and more, your computer monitor is a kind of one-way mirror, reflecting your own interests while algorithmic observers watch what you click” (Pariser 3). There are two things to think about this quote in cognizance of *Infinite Jest*. First, it appears that the real world in which we currently live has, to some extent, become *Jest*’s dystopian society in which huge corporations, paired with an absent government, prey upon the individual for economic gain. Secondly, also like *Jest*, this sort of predatory e-capitalism is walling the individual into a prison of the self. The Internet has become a cage of mirrors. This, however, is not the limit of my project’s weird semblance to reality. The mining of user data even transforms the individual into the blip. Corporations like Acxiom run server farms filled with user data. Acxiom translates “96 percent of American households” into a “list of data points about 1,500 items long” (Pariser 43). The individual currently exists in cyberspace as a collection of data points, and, because we all spend more time online, the tide is shifting from the external world to this virtual—by which I mean, with each passing day, more of us “exists” online.

Pariser’s book even suggests that we won’t be safe inside our heads one day, for as the server farms grow, “while the processors inside them shrink; that computing power will be unleashed to make increasingly precise guesses about our preferences and even our interior lives” (190). Put simply, the Web is increasingly becoming a hi-tech mirror.

Log on to find the virtual you staring right back. This virtual mirror substantiates the skeptical fear of solipsism in a very real way—a way that impacts our physical lives and consciousnesses. In a sense, the supposedly fallacious Cartesian Theater is actualized; the seat of consciousness becomes the computer chair.

This trend is most disconcerting in the political realm. Cass Sunstein, a Harvard Law Professor and current member of the Obama administration, argues that “Gravitating toward those newspapers, blogs, podcasts and other media that reinforce their own views, citizens carefully filter out opposing or alternative viewpoints to create an ideologically exclusive ‘Daily Me.’” Thus, the political field becomes more compartmentalized and groups grow more distant from each other. He continues to explain that this poses a potentially significant problem, however, for a “heterogeneous nation” that “faces an occasional risk of fragmentation” (9). Democracy subsists on a diet of rich political discourse. If our ability to filter ourselves—or web companies’ decision to filter our browsing for us—reduces the quality of this discourse, what will become of American society?

While the fears underlying my questions are—perhaps—far-fetched, they serve to indicate that Wallace’s concern for the solipsistic individual in *Infinite Jest* was not. It appears that *Jest*’s dystopian future has largely become our reality. Are we, then, living in solipsistic isolation from one another? Maybe so. Is it as horrible as Wallace thought? You decide. Wallace believed that solipsism robs us of all the meaningful qualities of humanness. My analysis has revealed that reading *Infinite Jest* provides us with a means to regain the self through the novel’s ability to create a community between Wallace and reader, or by compelling us to enter into a community about Wallace’s work, or even by

simply dragging a mirror in front of us, thereby revealing the degree of our self-absorption and shocking us to change. *Infinite Jest* is an uncommon artifact in this age of solipsistic absorption and mindless entertainment. In such a time, Wallace offers a rare gift: the means to live.

APPENDIX A

The Illusion of Community and the Reality of Solipsism in Descartes

The problem of other minds is the problem of how to justify the almost universal belief that others have minds very like our own. It is one of the hallowed, if nowadays unfashionable, problems in philosophy. Various solutions to the problem are on offer. It is noteworthy that so many are on offer. Even more noteworthy is that none of the solutions on offer can plausibly lay claim to enjoying majority support.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “*Other Minds*”

After engaging in a line of skeptical introspection, Descartes strips away the external world, the validity of his senses, and his body until only his mind remains. “Thought exists; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am; I exist—this is certain,” he concludes in the second meditation (44). Descartes continues to characterize the nature of his existence and eventually defines himself: “I am a thing that thinks... even though these things that I sense or imagine may perhaps be nothing at all outside me, nevertheless I am certain these modes of thinking... do exist within me” (47). By retracting all of his beliefs except the existence of his mind, Descartes reaches solipsism. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Descartes has adopted ontological solipsism, a view that holds that “the only things that can be meaningfully said to exist are ourselves or our mental states” (861). Descartes reasons his way out of this lonely pit of existence, however, by making arguments for the existence of God in his third meditation, proving he is not alone in the universe. On this subject, Descartes writes, “I am a thing that is incomplete and dependent, there comes to mind a clear and distinct idea of a being that is independent and complete, that is, an idea of God” (54). Once Descartes

establishes God's existence, he reasons top-down in mediations five and six to restore his belief in corporeal things: his body, his senses, and the external world. This restoration, however, stops short of other minds. In the analysis below, I aim to prove that Descartes' discourse does not prove the existence of other minds. Descartes ostensibly accounts for this difficulty by placing faith in all that "could have been made by Him" (i.e. God⁶⁷), but the ambiguity of this solution leaves the nature of the relationship between Descartes' mind and potential other minds in doubt. Although Descartes concludes other minds could exist—and perhaps should exist—they seem to only exist marooned from each other. Accordingly, any one individual mind exists isolated in a softer state of solipsism.

It is evident that we cannot directly perceive other minds. This is frequently expressed in the common phrase "I'm not a mind reader." Descartes, classifying minds as immaterial limited substance that exists exterior to our own limited mind, also admits this reality.⁶⁸ So how do we reason from Descartes' kernel of certainty, the thinking thing that is the mind, to other (presumably, thinking) minds? Descartes writes, "I have been constituted as a kind of middle ground between God and nothingness,"⁶⁹ where God is the lack of error and falsity and nothingness is total error and falsity (55). Given that, according to Descartes, the exterior world is full of falsity and error—though not the

⁶⁷ While this may be a reliable cornerstone for Descartes, Hal's words in the beginning of *Infinite Jest* suggest that the defense is not strong enough for characters in *Jest*: "I have administrative bones to pick with God, Boo. I'll say God seems to have a kind of laid-back management style I'm not crazy about" (*IJ* 40). Even Don Gately, the most positive character in *Jest*, claims at a White Flag AA meeting, "he still as yet had no real solid understanding of a Higher Power... The idea of this whole God thing makes him puke, still. And he is afraid" (442-444). Gately comes to realize that he need not understand God to achieve salvation from substance addiction; it's enough to just go through the motions as if he did understand. Though Wallace suggests that this blind submission gets results, Descartes argues much further. He believes we can achieve a clear and distinct idea of God, which conception is clear and distinctly absent from *Infinite Jest*.

⁶⁸ I limit my discussion here to perception; I will later consider the extent to which we can understand other minds.

⁶⁹ Note here and in all future instances: when Descartes says "I" he means "his mind," as he places the seat of identity in the mind. As such, when I refer to Descartes, I mean Descartes' mind.

complete nothingness antipodal to God⁷⁰—Descartes’ seems to suggest his mind exists somewhere in the middle ground between God and the world. As such, there are two ways to reason to other minds: upwards through God, or downwards through the world. Let’s begin by reasoning downwards through the world.

In the first mediation, Descartes learned to doubt his body, material substance, and the external world. In meditation six, he renews his belief in them, beginning with the body. Descartes argues that he possesses a passive faculty for sensing which receives and knows sensible things (i.e. corporeal substances). Because he knows the active faculty for these senses is not a part of his mind—“these ideas are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will” (64)—Descartes concludes that he must have a body. To affirm his conclusion, he repeats his earlier point from meditation four that “it is impossible for God ever to deceive me, for trickery and deception are always indicative of some imperfection” (54). From his body, Descartes reasons out through the senses—again by trusting that God is no deceiver—to restore his belief in substances that are the source of sensations, the world in which they reside in, and other bodies. Descartes reasons his way inside the human body and to a conception of the brain, but here he hits a brick wall. He presents only a vague idea of how the brain interacts with the body—sense data is “constituted by nature” to affect the mind and vice versa—and does not go on to discuss the nature of another mind (67). The disconnect between body and mind is reinforced in the axioms, where Descartes states: “Mind and body are distinct... we clearly perceive the mind, that is, a substance that thinks, apart from the body, that is, apart from any extended substance” (75). Our project, then, runs aground on Descartes’

⁷⁰ What that complete “non-being,” as Descartes calls it, would be I have no idea; Descartes never mentions it again or clarifies it further.

dualistic conception of mind and body, which does not allow us to prove the existence of other minds through mechanistic analysis. Let's, then, reverse course and attempt to reach other minds through God.

Beginning again at that kernel of certainty, the mind, we begin to reason upwards to God. Let's grant that Descartes has proven through reason that God exists.⁷¹ Descartes also contends that, while God is a perfect, limitless thing incapable of error, he is an imperfect, limited thing who errs (55). Here, we again hit a brick wall. While Descartes can conceive of God's existence through an understanding of certain attributes of his nature (perfection, limitlessness, etc.), Descartes cannot, as a limited thing, understand the mechanisms through which God causes events in the world. As such, Descartes cannot prove the existence of other minds by reasoning up through God and back down to the other minds God perhaps created. Descartes still provides a sort of bypass for this obstacle when he writes that "I have come to know with certainty only that I and God exist, nevertheless, after having taken note of the immense power of God, I cannot deny that many other things have been made by him, or at least could have been made by him" (55). The "many other things" that (could) have been made by God could, then, include other minds. This, however, is hardly satisfying proof of their existence. Descartes' reasoning groups other minds with unicorns, sarcopteryx⁷², and the fabled molten cheese volcano—all things that could exist through God's limitless power, none of which I will (probably) ever come into contact with. But the existence of other minds is more important than these imaginary things. Without certainty in the existence of other minds,

⁷¹ For an in-depth look at this, turn to meditation three (51). Although important, it is too far afield of my current line of reasoning to reproduce here.

⁷² What is a sarcopteryx you ask? You'll never know or meet one, but because I can image it, God could have made it, according to Descartes' reasoning.

how can I ever hope to meaningfully interact with another consciousness? I know God exists—and God seems like one hell of a guy—but he’s not much of a talker. Am I then excluded from a community of like beings? One can turn to Descartes’ conclusion that God, in accordance with his perfectness, is incapable of deception. Assuming I’m willing to agree that I think other minds exist, Descartes says the existence of this thought in me proves that they (probably) exist, for God does not want to trick me. However, this does not mean I will ever communicate with them. The image this account conjures is one of billions of bright, little, independent minds linked to God by tendrils of certainty of his existence, tendrils which in turn validate each minds’ idea of its own existence. These minds, however, are not connected to each other. They link to God and to the world through the senses, and can try to connect with each other but get stuck in the dualistic quagmire I explained above.

Descartes includes a catchall statement that may account for this problem. He writes, “For although perhaps there may exist countless things about which I have no idea, nevertheless it must not be said that, strictly speaking, I am deprived of these ideas but only that I lack them in a negative sense” (55). Here, Descartes implies that we are not necessarily deprived of community with other minds—there may not be some insurmountable barrier between us—rather, we may just be lacking the ability to communicate or connect with these minds, a circumstance (he seems to imply) that we may be able to overcome through additional learning and understanding. While this phrasing tempers God’s cruelty for creating my mind in a reality without access to other thinking things, it does little to assuage my feelings of loneliness.

Descartes' mention of "ideas" in the quote above brings up another way in which we may come to know other minds. What exactly are ideas? Do I have one of another mind? In meditation six, Descartes draws a distinction between "imagination and pure intellection" (61). He uses the example of a triangle and chiliagon: while a triangle can be both understood (as a polygon with three sides) and imagined (that is, the mind can form an image of it), a chiliagon cannot be imagined (the mental picture just looks like a circle) but it can be understood (as a figure with one thousand sides). Descartes, then, might respond to my arguments above by admitting that yes, we cannot imagine another mind (and are in that sense disconnected from it); however, we can understand one. Indeed, he says as much himself in mediation four: "In fact the idea⁷³ I clearly have of the human mind—insofar as it is a thinking thing, not extended in length, breadth or depth, and having nothing else from the body—is far more distinct than the idea of any corporeal thing" (54). I have two points in response to this. First, Descartes' understanding of mind results from his understanding of his own mind (for he reduces all reality to only these properties of his own mind in mediation two). He understands the mind more than corporeal things because it is the sort of thing that he is. He knows its limits because they are his limits, and etc. Nonetheless, the mere fact that Descartes has identified these properties of his own mind does not necessarily extend these properties to other minds or entail that other minds exist. Were they to exist, Descartes could understand their nature; however, they are still in the class of the sarcopteryxies—firmly in the realm of possibility, loosely in the realm of reality. My second point is that even if Descartes' understanding of his mind is proof that other minds exist—for God is no

⁷³ Though Descartes writes "idea," the description he provides for the mind reveals that he is referring to his idea of his understanding of the mind, and not an image of the mind.

deceiver—this does not preclude the billion-tendrils scenario I envisioned above. Each mind, then, is still marooned inside its skull, unable to communicate with the outside world.

Descartes' meditations do not soundly dismiss solipsism. At most, they weaken it from its ontological form to a softer variant in which minds know of each others' existence but remain unable to meaningfully communicate. The closest thing to community that can be constructed from Descartes goes as follows: when I attempt to communicate with another mind, I communicate with their mind through the best means available, that being, language and the senses. However, my own experience of often being unable to communicate the richness of my experience with appropriate specificity through language mars the attraction of this idea. If I cannot properly communicate, I must assume that other minds—if they are like me—also have this difficulty. Thus, two minds “communicating” with each other is, more precisely, two entirely distinct but theoretically similar things both attempting to encapsulate the irreducible experience of existence through spoken or written language for absorption by the other mind through the fallible senses. From this it appears that true empathy is an illusion and community is an impossibility in Descartes. Solipsism still remains.

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