

## Himself's Figurants

Not contextualizing David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* as within a specific style makes the novel seem like a sadistic joke. The only narratives which resolve are subordinate to the central one, and the impulse, after more than a thousand pages, is to start back at the beginning. The novel would seem unfinished, full of holes, and confusing without writers like Erich Auerbach, Hilton Kramer, and George Kubler who've laid the foundations for interpreting art and literature.

While reading *Infinite Jest*, there are several questions that beg to be answered. Reading it is almost like a treasure hunt of figuring out if Helen and Hugh Steeply are the same person, and if the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment is actually 2009. Narratives like these serve as the novel's dominant climaxes even though they're peripheral to whether the *Samizdat* exists and where it's located. The master copy of the *Samizdat* is never found, and its existence is never confirmed, so, because of this, there is no climax to the novel's central narrative.

Instead, the pages of *Infinite Jest* focus on seemingly less important, every-day, banal things. The novel goes on endlessly about every minuscule detail of banalities like the tennis-warm-up schedule, the complete effects and compounds of complex drugs, and the actions of ancillary characters like Avril and Hal Incandenza, Don Gately, and Marathe. The novel's main character, James O. Incandenza, who is also referred to as Himself, only appears in the narrative as a child or a ghost despite the fact that if he were included as a living character we'd have a definite answer to both does the *Samizdat* exist, and where is it. He is the direct link between Enfield Tennis Academy and Ennet House, and he's the one who created the *Samizdat* and named it "Infinite Jest," but he's committed suicide before what the book considers the present day. As a result, the narrative is built by following less important characters doing less important things.

Such banality may seem pointless and annoying unless *Infinite Jest* is Wallace's attempt to convey a particular style. Erich Auerbach claimed in his book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* that style is determined by the way in which real life is represented, and he goes on to describe the history of styles from the days of Homer all the way until Virginia Woolf. In the case of *Infinite Jest*, real life is painted as a succession of seemingly unimportant moments, and it's because of this aspect that the novel is exemplary of the postmodern style.

Art critic Hilton Kramer wrote an essay in 1982 titled, "Postmodern Art and Culture in the 1980s," that makes a direct linkage between banality and realism. He does this with the inclusion of a quote from architectural critic Charles Jencks, who has written extensively on postmodernism. "It is realistic, because it accepts monotony, cliché and the habitual gestures of a mass-production society as the norm without trying to change them. It accepts stock response and ersatz without protest, not only because it enjoys both, finding them real, but because it

seeks to find those usually disregarded moments of interest (the fantastic hidden in the banal)."[1]

This idea is anticipated by a passage from art historian George Kubler's 1962 book, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. "Actuality is when the lighthouse is dark between flashes: it is the instant between the ticks of the watch: it is a void interval slipping forever through time: the rupture between past and future: the gap at the poles of the revolving magnetic field, infinitesimally small but ultimately real." [2]

Both Kramer and Kubler place emphasis on the banal, seemingly less important moments in life, and in combination with Auerbach's claim that style is determined by the representation of reality, Wallace's *Infinite Jest* seems to be perfectly fitting for what would be considered postmodern. It would be enough to support this idea in the text with allegorical examples like the fact that Orin Incandenza is anhedonic, Joelle envisions "The Ecstasy of St. Therese" by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, and Randy Lenz's main motivation is release, but the most illuminating example in this respect is a passage from late in the book when James O. Incandenza outlines his creative manifesto to Don Gately. The passage, which describes Incandenza's approach to filmmaking, including the concept of focusing on figurants instead of one central character, effectively serves as direct message from Wallace to the reader that provides the motivations behind the novel's style.

"The wraith says that he himself, the wraith, when animate, had dabbled in film entertainments, as in making them, cartridges, for Gately's info to either believe or not, and but in the entertainments the wraith himself made, he says he goddamn bloody well made sure that either the whole entertainment was silent or else if it wasn't silent that you could bloody well hear every single performer's voice, no matter how far out on the cinematographic or narrative periphery they were; and that it wasn't just the self-conscious overlapping dialogue of a poseur like Schwulst or Altman, i.e. it wasn't just the crafted imitation of aural chaos: it was real life's real egalitarian babble of figurantless crowds, of the animate world's real agora, the babble of crowds every member of which was the central and articulate protagonist of his own entertainment....Which is why, the wraith is continuing, the complete unfigured egalitarian aural realism was why party-line entertainment-critics always complained that the wraith's entertainments' public-area scenes were always incredibly dull and self-conscious and irritating, that they could never hear the really meaningful central narrative conversations for all the unfiltered babble of the peripheral crowd, which they assumed the babble(/babel) was some self-conscious viewer-hostile heavy-art directorial pose, instead of radical realism." [3]

*Infinite Jest* conjures how it feels to never reach "The Show" nor "I.D.," especially when nearing the end of the novel and it becomes abundantly clear that the days, weeks, and months spent reading it really aren't going to produce the nice, all-loose-ends-tied-up kind of conclusion. The fact that the novel's central narrative doesn't resolve would seem like a set-back if banality weren't a tenet of the postmodern style, but because of writings like those by Auerbach, Kramer,

and Kubler, its representation of reality as a succession of banal events can be understood not as a joke, but a literary achievement.

[1] Hilton Kramer, "Postmodern Art and Culture in the 1980s" in *Revenge of the Philistines: Art and Culture, 1972-1984* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 9.

[2] George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 15.

[3] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2006), 835-836.