

Infinite Jest as an Art Object

Intermittent references to Gian Lorenzo Bernini's baroque-era artwork "The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" serve to portray David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* as an art object. The artwork provides context for the novel's ability to activate the reader as a character in its narrative in a style more akin to theater than literature. Writings by Arnold Hauser, Peter Bürger, and Michael Fried create the lens through which the novel's theatrical style can be seen.

"The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" is a life-sized artwork sculpted from marble with gold detailing. It's presented in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, Italy, where it towers over and envelops its viewers. The artwork depicts a theater with audience members watching the scene of a hovering angel jabbing a spear downward toward a climaxing St. Teresa. [fig. 1] Viewers of the artwork become witnesses not only to the events on stage, but also to the audience members who are depicted as watching the stage. The result is an acknowledgment of the viewers' world, which activates aspects outside of the artwork, including the viewer's environment and the act of viewing.

Arnold Hauser mentions such theatricality characteristic of the baroque era in his 1951 book, *The Social History of Art: Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque*. "[T]he tendency is to make a picture seem not a self-contained piece of reality, but a passing show in which the beholder has the good luck to participate just for a moment..."[1] Such a description of the theatrical aspect of baroque art, and how it forced the participation of its viewers, explains how "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa" can be seen as an icon for the style portrayed by *Infinite Jest*.

Either statement could be true of the novel's style: it's huge because its narrative is so long, or the reason its narrative is so long is because it needs to be huge. Both interpretations are possible when considering the idea that literature is the only medium which can effectively

combat postmodernism's illusions because it still takes a long time to both produce and consume. Peter Bürger outlined this idea in his 1974 book, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. "[O]ne may summarize the importance of technical development has for the evolution of fine arts in these terms: because the advent of photography makes possible the precise mechanical reproduction of reality, the mimetic function of fine art withers. But the limits of this explanatory model become clear when one calls to mind that it cannot be transferred to literature. For in literature, there is no technical innovation that could have produced an effect comparable to that of photography in the fine arts." [2] With this statement it's possible to consider Wallace an artist working in the only medium capable of combatting a world reproduced to the point of simulation. What's beneficial about such a consideration is that it names a stylistic motivation not only behind the novel's gigantic size, but also, when combined with the idea of theatricality, sheds light on how *Infinite Jest* can be considered an art object.

Like an artist's book, the novel refers to its own objecthood at certain points in the narrative, and such self-reference activates the reader as a player in the theater of reality. This is accomplished most effectively with the three-page correspondence between Helen Steeply and Marlon Bain, the presentation of which refers to the aspects of illusion in the reader's experience. The correspondence serves the narrative, but it's the presentation of the text on the page which is striking about this section. This is because nowhere else in the novel does a presentation of the text appear in a way that brings such tactile attention to both the objecthood of the paper and the actual act of reading. The tactile relationship the reader experiences is similar to the action of referring to the endnotes, or having to lug the dictionary-sized object, but is unique in that the text constructing the narrative self-referentially correlates with its presentation. In essence, the pages presented to the characters in the narrative become the actual

pages the reader is holding in his or her hands, and, as a result, the reader is activated as an unwritten character in *Infinite Jest*.

In his 1967 essay, “Art and Objecthood,” Michael Fried defines objecthood as the condition of non-art, and describes how art that doesn’t seem like art, what he calls, “literalist art,” activates those whose experience it in a theatrical way. “[E]spousal of objecthood amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre... Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters a literalist work. Whereas in previous art ‘what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it],’ the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder...*”[3] Fried’s idea of literalist art and how experiencing it activates its beholder’s surroundings describes perfectly how these three pages activate readers in *Infinite Jest*. This is because the novel references itself most explicitly in this section, and therefore acknowledges aspects outside its text, including the reader and his or her surroundings.

Considering *Infinite Jest* as an art object helps to clarify why the novel looks and feels the way it does. Exemplary of a style more characteristic of the fine arts, the novel’s theme of theatricality is signified by sporadic references to “The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa.” Its objecthood combats the pitfalls of postmodernism by welcoming readers in to Wallace’s world.

Figures

1.



Tom Winchester, "The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" (2016)

Notes

[1] Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art Vol. 2: Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 177.

[2] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 32.

[3] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), Section III.