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The Catastrophe of Entertainment:
Televisuality and Post-Postmodern American Fiction.

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Abstracts

This thesis examines the effects of television and entertainment culture on American fiction. Focusing primarily on the novels of Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace, with a secondary focus on the films of American film director David Lynch, the thesis proposes that post-postmodern fiction, fiction in which the familiarizing trends of postmodern fiction are reversed, is a response to the powerful influence of television and other forms of electronic media on American culture.

Le but de cette thèse est de considérer les effects de la télévision et le monde de spectacle sur le roman américain. Avec un centre d'intéret sur les romans de Don DeLillo et de David Foster Wallace et avec un deuxième centre d'intéret sur les films de réalisateur américian David Lynch cette thèse propose que la fiction post-postmoderne, la fiction dans laquelle les tendances dans la fiction postmoderne sont renverser, est une réponse à l'influence puissante de la télévision et les autres formes des médias électroniques sur la culture américaine.

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Prologue

I would like for this project to be read as a work of entertainment. A strange statement to make at the outset of a Masters thesis, but given the subject matter within, not a wholly disingenuous supplication. Graham Greene referred to some of what he considered to be his *less literary* works as "entertainments" and the subtle but obvious deprecative bent to that term as applied by Greene to his own works is not lost on me, just as I feel that it was not lost on Greene's numerous readers, his supporters and most obviously, his critics. In fact, an argument could be made that the term "entertainments" was applied by Greene to his own works simply to avoid or quell a critical savaging. But regardless, what this single, basic example tells us is that the idea of literature as entertainment does not sit well with many people, amongst them critics, theorists, editors, academics, and worst of all I feel, many writers themselves. As a prospective novelist and short story writer myself, it discourages me, even horrifies me, to read passages such as the following as it appeared in the 1998 edition of the *Novel & Short Story Writer's Market Guide*. The editors at the highly regarded *Ploughshares* literary magazine make it clear that they want "no fiction whose purpose is to *entertain* **rather than** to *illuminate*" (Kuroff 205 [*italics and* ***bold face*** *mine*]). Clearly, the editors of the aforementioned publication see the concepts of entertainment and illumination as irrevocably disparate.

What it comes down to for me, is this. What gets a work of fiction to move off a shelf, into somebody's hand and into their home, the catalyst to the entire money exchange by which writers can attempt to make a living and by which the book chains and publishing houses become increasingly well heeled, is the fact that the purchaser of the book, the consumer who makes the conscious choice to buy a work of fiction is looking for some kind of distraction, some kind of channel through which he or she, like the writers who write the fiction, can indulge their hedonistic fantasies, find temporary solace and escape in imaginary worlds. And any editor or publishing exec who's worth

his or her salt knows this: these people, the reading public, are looking to be entertained. And that's really what fiction has always been about.

In a day where the myriad forms of electronic media take up more of our time and space and demand more of our attention and energy; where the entertainment value of the novel has been subsumed by the immediacy and gadgetry of television and film, is it any wonder why the writers of contemporary American novels have begun to question the viability of their art form (their product) in the face of the waning popularity of typographic culture? Could we blame them, these writers of fiction, if their stories began to subsume some of the entertaining qualities and tactics of television and film in order to reclaim some of the territory of entertainment that is at stake? In a civilization that is virtually driven by entertainment and its ascendant technologies, this territory is vast and of great significance. It is part of our reality, a reality which it is fiction's job to interpret, and it is worth a whole lot of money.

Chapter One.
Waxing Televisual: The Emergence of Post-Postmodern Fiction.

In his 1985 work *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Neil Postman examines the effects of television and electronic forms of entertainment on the American populace. "Americans," writes Postman "are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world" (Postman 106). Referring to what he calls the Huxleyan warning, where people crave rather than fear that which is destroying them (the prevailing mindset in Huxley's *Brave New World*), Postman describes an America that is literally narcotized by technological diversions. He writes:

> Tyrants of all varieties have always known about the value of providing the masses with amusements as a means of pacifying discontent. But most of them could not have hoped for a situation in which the masses would ignore that which does not amuse. (Postman 141)

In light of this turning away from typographic culture towards a fixation with electronically disseminated media, one wonders what will become of the novel through the turn of the next century as clearly there is a general waning in the importance and popularity of the written and printed word. Neil Postman was not the first person to hypothesize on the fate of printed matter. In 1961, Philip Roth, in his now famous essay "Writing American Fiction," claimed that the job of fiction writing was becoming increasingly difficult in the face of a reality in which every evening's newscast told of events so horrible and fascinating that they made the work of serious and established fiction writers seem boring and passé. According to Roth, in an effort to combat the rapidly spreading dominance of television as the medium of choice for American households, newspapers and magazines were forced to find new ways to expand and maintain readership. As the printed media attempted to out-sensationalize televised accounts of the news, television, with all of its obvious advantages including immediacy and entertainment value, had no problem out-sensationalizing the newspapers, tabloids

and weeklies as seemingly American culture *was* becoming increasingly violent and the television cameras were there to document all.

One might rationalize and say that American society has always been violent and it is only in the second half of the Twentieth Century that a more technologically advanced media has been able to keep up with the violence and transmit it on an intercontinental and global scale with great speed. Then again, one might wonder whether or not American society is exhibiting a negative response to this heightened media coverage and is in fact becoming a more dangerous and frightening place to live because it feels it must keep up with what is being dictated to it on the television screen. Writing (and speaking) as a well established American novelist in 1961 (one can only imagine what Roth is thinking at this very moment with regards to the U.S.A. circa 1999), Philip Roth admits that finding new and interesting subjects to write about is becoming almost impossible in a nation where the daily, real-life events experienced and perceived by the average citizen are becoming far more interesting than anything the most talented of writers could concoct. To use Roth's own words:

> the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's one meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist. (Roth 120)

Basically, what both Postman and Roth are trying to say is that literature (and in Roth's case, the American novel specifically) is in trouble. Old enough to recall a time when print media was all that was available, when the latest novels were discussed with the same zeal and interest that today is reserved only for the most recent episodes of trendy, pot-boiler hospital dramas or twenty-something innuendo comedies, Postman feels that he is qualified to sound the death knell of the great age of American literature:

> the early decades of the twentieth century were marked by a great outpouring of brilliant language and literature. In the pages of magazines

> like the *American Mercury* and *The New Yorker*, in the novels and stories of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, and Hemingway, and even in the columns of the newspaper giants -- the *Herald Tribune*, the *Times* -- prose thrilled with a vibrancy and intensity that delighted ear and eye. But this was exposition's nightingale song, most brilliant and sweet as the singer nears the moment of death. It told, for the Age of Exposition, not of new beginnings, but of an end. Beneath its dying melody, a new note had been sounded, and photography and telegraphy set the key. Theirs was a "language" that denied inter-connectedness, proceeded without context, argued the irrelevance of history, explained nothing, and offered fascination in place of complexity and coherence. Theirs was a duet of image and instancy, and together they played the tune of a new kind of public discourse in America. (Postman 76-7)[1]

Although he does not come out and state it directly, it is not difficult to see that Postman associates the predominance of photography and telegraphy over all things typographic, in effect the advent of televisual culture, with what in recent years has come to be known more popularly as *postmodern malaise*. The above references to a lack of "inter-connectedness" and "context," the assumptions of a history that lacks any relevance to anything, and a general "fascination" with the immediacy and fleetingness of images and a resulting disdain for "complexity and coherence," mirror exactly the common knocks against all things postmodern -- from fiction and architecture to television and film.

The project of this thesis is to examine what has lately emerged to be a new genre of fiction; a fiction that is quintessentially American in its direct response to televisual culture: post-postmodern fiction. Although there are more than two novelists currently working in this emerging genre, there are only two, in this reader's opinion, who

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[1] I wish to point out that Postman's opinions regarding the state of prose as it is found in today's literary journals and magazines are solely his own. It is in such magazines as *Harper's*, *Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker* that some of the leading voices of contemporary American fiction, post-postmodern or otherwise, first made names for themselves. In my opinion, these publications and many others continue to publish the best that contemporary prose has to offer. The prose may differ from that of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, *et al.*, but this is to be expected after sixty plus years of literary innovation and progress and it does not mean that the quality of the writing is any less vibrant or relevant to the times. Still, the waning of the importance of literary culture as a primary source of entertainment is difficult to deny.

rather than just emulate the form of televisuality (the vapid irony, quick camera cuts and slick production of commercial television; the convoluted plots, fragmented narrative and arthouse bleakness of postmodern film) actually *use* television and film as central themes and subjects in the content of their novels and use them as a means to critique and expose televisuality for what it truly is: as Postman said, the end of the Age of Exposition. Those two novelists are Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace.

In the following chapters I plan to demonstrate that the emergence of the post-postmodern novel, which is defined by David Foster Wallace as fiction which "uses the transient received myths of popular culture as a *world* in which to imagine fictions about 'real' albeit pop-mediated characters" (Wallace "E Unibus Pluram" 50),[2] and the transition from the postmodern novel to its post-postmodern successor are in direct relation to the preeminent role played by television, film and electronic entertainment in American culture. In effect, what distinguishes the post-postmodern novel from all that has come before it, is its reliance on the conventions of film-making and electronic media production and dissemination as a legitimate and fruitful narrative form and strategy while simultaneously drawing attention to and criticizing electronic entertainment culture as the paramount factor in the annihilation of typographic culture and the literary arts.[3]

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[2] From this point on "E Unibus Pluram" will be cited under the abbreviation "E.U.P."

[3] Obviously, there seems to be a rather significant logical paradox at work here. If novelists like DeLillo and Wallace, and theorists and critics alike are interested in criticizing television and televisual culture on the basis that they feel that it has too powerful a hold on the consciousness and imaginations of America, why are they relying so heavily on television, film and televisuality in order to expose the inherent evils of these mediums? Not only does it seem counter productive, in the end drawing more attention to television, but it also smacks of hypocrisy. If these novelists, theorists and critics are so above television and entertainment culture to be able to criticize and debase it at length, it follows logically that they are very familiar, to the point of being referred to as experts in their fields, with television.

During the early stages of researching this project, this paradoxical situation became very apparent and I was wrestling with the problem of how to approach the subject in these pages, how to justify the use of television as a means to criticizing television and exposing its culturally harmful properties. In what is perhaps one of the greatest ironic twists on display in this project, the answer presented itself courtesy of

Before this project proceeds any further I think it is necessary to provide an outline of how my argument will unfold and evolve. Definitions will be needed for two of the terms that will appear throughout, namely "televisual" and "post-postmodern." The remainder of this first chapter will provide those definitions as well as discuss various theories of televisuality, the rise of the electronic media over typography, and connect these electronic media phenomena to the emerging post-postmodern fiction. The second chapter will deal specifically with the novels of Don DeLillo, his preoccupation with the

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"Montreal's One to Watch" CFCF 12 -- yes: television. It was while I was taking a well deserved break from my studies that I sat down to watch an episode of *The Simpson's*. For those of you who are intimately familiar with the show, the particular episode that I was watching was the one in which Bart's nemesis, the disgraced TV-sidekick celebrity Sideshow Bob (whose voice is provided by *Cheers!* and *Frasier's* Kelsey Grammar) escapes from prison (again) and hustles off to the Springfield Air Show, held at the Springfield Air Force Base, in order to steal a nuclear warhead and destroy Springfield. Why? Because the people of Springfield watch far too much TV -- the medium that caused Sideshow Bob's downfall (in a jealousy fueled plot from a few seasons previous, Bob, in an attempt to gain production control and hosting duties attempted to frame his boss and much beloved TV persona Krusty the Klown for a convenience store robbery and when Bart and Lisa Simpson exposed Sideshow Bob as the true criminal, it was off to Springfield prison for the mop headed, erudite second banana). Anyway, as the gathered spectators sit in a stadium and are encouraged to divert their gazes to the giant video screen in order to view the fighter jets that fly directly overhead, Sideshow Bob, through some slick technical piracy, appears on the screen in order to announce to the gathered that he has stolen a nuclear war head and is going to put an end to all of this TV watching. The crowd gasps in horror (No more TV?!), Bob cackles maniacally, the giant video monitor becomes a field of hissing static and almost immediately, Sideshow Bob reappears on the screen in order to inform the crowd that he is well aware of the irony of appearing on TV as a means to decry TV (Similarly, Neil Postman writes that a political candidate cannot appear on TV and announce that one of his or her platform issues is to rid politics of campaign oriented TV commercials [Postman 130-1]). What I am trying to illustrate here is that like Sideshow Bob, these novelists and other media wary scribes are aware of the ironic position that they occupy, although their interests are not nearly as egocentric or apocalyptic. Just as in any critical endeavor, it is impossible to critique your subject if you cannot be involved with it on some intimate level. Being called a hypocrite is one of the risks of the trade. In the end, when Bart and Lisa have once again foiled Bob's apocalyptic scheme, the recaptured Bob addresses his captors; "How ironic! My crusade against television comes to an end so formulaic that it could have spewed from the powerbook of the laziest Hollywood hack!" This attention to television and irony will be examined in greater detail at a later point of this chapter.

Cold War and catastrophe, and the role of electronic/televisual culture in the American paranoia industry. Chapter three will serve as an in depth study of David Foster Wallace's novels, stories and essays and will also examine the influence of the films of American director David Lynch on Wallace's fiction as well as analyzing Lynch's own post-postmodern tendencies.

If the term *postmodernism* has been problematic enough to warrant a decades old debate simply about its etymology and what in fact the term defines or represents, one can only imagine what awaits a general acceptance of the term *post* - postmodernism. In his *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale attempts to unpack the term *postmodern* by giving a brief history of its origins and possible interpretations. All that McHale can say in the end is "[w]hatever we may think of the term [postmodernism], however much or little we may be satisfied with it, one thing is certain: the referent of 'postmodernism,' the *thing* to which the term claims to refer, *does not exist"* (McHale 4) and that "[n]othing about the term is unproblematic, nothing is entirely satisfactory. It is not even clear who deserves the credit -- or the blame -- for coining it in the first place" (McHale 3). One way of clearing the metaphysical air of so much solecism, to get down to the nuts and bolts of the term, is to see postmodernism not as a temporal concept, a period of time coming *after* modernity, but rather as a concept in and of itself that follows from the concept of modern*ism*.

> Thus the term "postmodernism," if we take it literally enough. . .signifies a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism, and not some hypothetical writing of the future. (McHale 5)

At the risk of quoting too extensively from McHale, who is indispensable on the subject, I am including the following lengthy excerpt form the opening chapter of *Postmodernist Fiction*.

> As for the prefix POST, here I want to emphasize the element of logical and historical *consequence* rather than sheer temporal *posteriority*. Postmodernism follows *from* modernism, in some sense,

> more than it follows *after* modernism. . . . it is this POST that has most bothered people about the term "post-modernism." It need not have. After all, the presence of the prefix *post* in literary nomenclature -- or of *pre*, for that matter -- merely signals the inevitable *historicity* of all literary phenomena. Every literary-historical moment is *post* some other moment, just as it is *pre* some other moment, though of course we are not in the position to say exactly what it is *pre* -- what it precedes and prepares the way for -- except retrospectively, while we are always able to say, in principle, what it is *post* -- what it is the posterity of. Postmodernism is the posteriority of modernism -- this is tautological, just as saying that pre-romanticism is the predecessor or romanticism would be tautological. But there is more than mere tautology to the relation between modernism and postmodernism if we can construct and argument about how the posterior phenomenon emerges from its predecessor -- about, in other words, historical *consequentiality* . . . . we need a tool for describing how one set of literary forms emerges from a historically prior set of forms. (McHale 5-6)

One thing I wanted to avoid in this project was the proliferation of the typically verbose and jargony language of contemporary literary theory and criticism. One reason for this is that I would like to think that the burgeoning post-postmodern fiction will allow for and foster a more New Critical, primary text-based branch of literary scholarship. The above excerpt from McHale is not nearly as jargon intensive as some (read "many"), but I think it serves to prove a point: that one possible reason why the term "postmodernism" has encountered so much semantic controversy is that the language used to discuss the subject is more often than not very dense, convoluted. Of course, I realize that the standard line of thought is that the jargon-laden prose of contemporary theoretical and critical practice comes as a result of the very abstract, difficult, mind-numbing mental acrobatics that go into interpreting, discussing and writing about the postmodern condition. But I'm not so sure. I'm tempted to say (and I'm sure I'm not he only one) that this hyper-verbosity has more to do with the fact that these theorists and critics have yet to come to terms with the very term they are voluminously discussing.

Despite all of the pre- / post- semantics in McHale, I've realized that a decision regarding the terminology of this project has to be made, as indefensible as it may seem

to be. Rather than adding my own useless and destined to be semantically savaged terms to the debate I have chosen to stick to the term that seems most in keeping with the tradition of literary scholarship, as regressive as that may seem in this instance. As Brain McHale has argued, literary movements follow from each other in a pattern of "historical *consequentiality*," the "posterior phenomenon" emerging from that which has gone before. This being said, *post-postmodern* will be the term used in the following pages to describe what has been variously labeled "Hyperrealism," or "Image-Fiction" (Wallace "EUP" 50), the genre of fiction which follows historically, is the "posterior phenomenon" to postmodern fiction. Why make matters more complicated than they need be when all that it will take to distinguish the post-postmodern from the postmodern is that additional "post-," a superfluous, intensifying prefix.

With that being said for the post-postmodern, it is now necessary to provide a definition of televisuality rather than discuss post-postmodern fiction at length. This strategy may seem awkward at the outset, but upon examining David Foster Wallace's essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" in the pages to follow, it will become clear that there is a very strong relationship that exists between post-postmodern fiction and televisual culture and because of this, I think it will be profitable to hold off on an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of post-postmodern fiction until both terms are adequately understood.

A very basic definition or description of televisuality should read something like this: televisuality is the prevailing cultural condition within which *everything* is designed as if it is explicitly meant to be seen on TV; where nothing has any meaning or context or basis in reality unless it can be represented through a electronic or digital medium in which everything is essentially devoid of context, the sole arbiter of this new reality being the television set itself. According to John Thornton Caldwell televisuality resulted from a number of "interrelated tendencies and changes in the [television] industry's mode of production, in programming practice, in the audience and its expectations, and in an

economic crisis in network television" (Caldwell 5). But what exactly is it about these "tendencies and changes" within the business of television that so thoroughly permeates and dominates American culture? Or, maybe we should be asking if there has been any "change" at all, as Richard Dienst does in his 1994 study *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television*. Dienst asks: "[w]hen does television replace the 'communication' of discrete messages with the profuse 'diffusion' of images? When does television cease functioning merely as a movement between distant points and begin shaping its own 'world,' gathering distances into itself in order to redistribute them according to its own program?" (Dienst 4). The answer, according to Dienst is: from television's very inception. It would seem that it is only in the latter stages of this century that media theorists and critics have come to realize that television is about much more than just entertainment. In his *Televisuality: Style, Crisis and Authority in American Television* (1995), John Thornton Caldwell examines this shift in conceptual and ideological frameworks as it became apparent in 1980's American mass-market television. Caldwell writes that it was a shift from a framework

> that approached broadcasting primarily as a form of word-based rhetoric and transmission . . . to a visually based mythology, framework, and aesthetic based on an extreme self-consciousness of style. (Caldwell 4)

Caldwell is careful to point out that

> this is not just to say television simply became more visual, as if improved production values allowed for increasing formal sophistication. Such a view falls prey to the problematic notion that developments in technology cause formal changes and that image and sound sophistication are merely by-products of technical revolution. (Caldwell 4)

For Caldwell, technology has had very little to do with the form/content revolution of television. Like Richard Dienst, Caldwell sees television as having its own agenda; an agenda that goes beyond merely providing high quality entertainment through electronic and digital equipment that is continually evolving to ever increasing heights of user friendliness and efficiency. It is through this clandestine agenda that televisual culture has

galvanized its hold on the consciousness and imagination of American culture. The subject of television is no longer the daily news, the midday soaps, or nightly sitcoms, or gameshows. In the televisual world the subject of television is television itself. Caldwell theorizes that the style of television" long seen as a mere signifier and vessel for content, issues, and ideas, has now itself become one of television's most privileged and showcased signifieds" (Caldwell 5). Neil Postman agrees. An inveterate anti-television crusader, Postman too, is skeptical about the widely held belief that television exists solely as a means of entertainment. In fact, Postman goes as far as to *deny* that television is entertaining. Television, writes Postman "has made television itself the natural format for the representation of all experience," adding that "[t]he problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining. . . . Entertainment is the supraideology of all discourse on television" (Postman 87).

If it seems that there is a not too subtle strain of hysteria to the ideas of Postman, Caldwell and Diesnt as expressed above, there is. Neil Postman is even willing to advertise that his fear of television as a malignant force in American culture has reached a fever pitch. On the back jacket of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* there is a blurb from *Mother Jones* magazine that describes Postman's book as " 'A lucid and very funny *jeremiad* about how public discourse has been degraded' " [*italics mine*]. It leads one to wonder whether or not these critics and scholars actually have anything valid to say, anything worthwhile to contribute to media and cultural studies when their studies, particularly Postman's, come across as highly negative, television-bashing polemics.[4]

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[4] It has been brought to my attention by more than one reader of these pages that it seems strange that I rely heavily on Postman's critique of television and culture, which is clearly a very *moral* critique, and include comparatively little when it comes to more *theoretical* approaches to the subject. I have been asked to justify my reliance on Postman's writing. I find that Postman's arguments, which are indeed based on a very overt, moral opposition to the state of American culture in the televisual age are relevant to this project *because* of their blatant lack of a "more theoretical" approach. The people Postman is trying to reach through his argument, the popular audience that he wishes to captivate, are

They even go so far as to say that television is *not* entertaining, and regardless of what you think about the decline of typographic culture in light of the dazzling rise of televisual culture, you have doubtless found at least a few minutes of comfort and pleasure in front of TV. David Foster Wallace writes:

> Most scholars and critics who write about U.S. popular culture. . . seem both to take TV very seriously and to suffer terrible pain over what they see. There's this well-known critical litany about television's vapidity and irrealism. The litany is often even cruder and triter than the shows the critics complain about, which I think is why most younger Americans find professional criticism of television less interesting than professional television itself. I found solid examples of what I'm talking about on the first day I even looked. The *New York Times* Arts & Leisure Section for 8/05/90, simply bulged with bitter critical derision for TV, and some of the most unhappy articles weren't about low-quality programming so much as about how TV's become this despicable instrument of cultural decay. (Wallace "EUP" 27-8)

Where the majority of television critics are just that, very critical in the negative sense about what is being transmitted/disseminated across the airwaves, Wallace is of the mind that television's entertainment value cannot be denied and that, as we shall see later, the programming geniuses behind this supposedly malignant agenda have done nothing more than render ineffective and redundant the critics' means to critique television by subsuming the one rhetorical weapon that the critics had on their side for several years, but no more. The weapon: irony.

But all of this does not go very far in helping to provide a clearer definition of the televisual. Apparently, like postmodernism, televisuality seems to suffer from a profusion of possible interpretations; fitting, since one of the major criticisms of televisuality is that

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the very same people who are captivated by television: the average American. A heavily theoretical discussion of the effects of televisuality on American culture would not go very far in persuading the average American of *anything* and it would most likely drive them right back to their place in front of the television set. Postman's highly emotional, "hysterical" attack is, at the very least, entertaining. *Amusing Ourselves to Death* did indeed reach a very wide readership and in my opinion, Postman's refusal to lapse into a heavily theoretical discussion and to instead appeal to his readers' emotions was a very cunning and effective tactic on his part, really no different than the literary tactics of Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace which will be discussed in the following chapters.

it has inundated American culture with a profusion of disjointed, context-less images. To better understand televisuality it is necessary to go back to the man who has been seen as a prophet of televisual culture; one of the first to recognize the waning power of the written and printed word, Marshall McLuhan foresaw the eventual decline of typographic man and culture writ large in the current of the electronic media.

Central to any discussion of televisuality or media theory in its broadest aspects is Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). McLuhan's argument for just how the electronic age came to its position of dominance over human consciousness is a complex and lengthy, and some may argue even a bit of a dated one, but its prophetic vision speaks for itself. It is truly the progenitor of all media theory and criticism. Television was not even an every-household appliance in 1962 when McLuhan posited that in the electronic/technological age "the very instantaneous nature of co-existence among our technological instruments has created a crisis quite new in human history" (McLuhan 14). True, McLuhan may have been referring more to such electric/electronic devices as telephones, radios and Turing machines than he was to televisions, video cameras and personal computers, but those three more contemporary devices are merely the updated, logically extended versions of earlier, more primitive models. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* takes a decidedly psychological/physiological tack with regards to unravelling the ideologies and events behind this crisis.

One of the numerous psychologists, anthropologists and media theorists who McLuhan quotes in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is J.C. Carothers who wrote "'it was only when the written, and still more the printed, word appeared on the scene that the stage was set for words to lose their magic powers and vulnerabilities'" (McLuhan 29). Here, the argument offered by McLuhan and Carothers is very close to the one offered by Walter Benjamin who in 1955 in his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," stated that the processes of mechanical reproduction (which were very much at work in Gutenberg's printing press, an invention through which

technology gave humanity a great advantage over more primitive, mechanical means of reproduction) detach the thing that is reproduced, in this case the printed word, from the "domain of tradition" (Benjamin 221). The "aura" of the thing reproduced, that mysterious quality that made it special and unique before it was subjected to technology, is annihilated. The technology "substitutes a plurality of copies for [what was] a unique existence" (Benjamin 221).

A further example of this is that for the ancient Greeks the phonetic alphabet, a "means of arrested visual analysis," was as novel and mystifying as "the movie camera to our century" (McLuhan 33). Yet the Greeks adapted to the technology and the new form of communication, the phonetic alphabet, became a highly stylized, beautiful tool in their hands. The means of reproduction was at the time still mechanical (i.e. handwritten), and as a result the aura was still largely intact. The significant change then, that set the stage for the decline of typography was ironically the very inception of typography. As soon as verbal communication was no longer the sole mode of communication, it was possible for people to imagine ever evolving, increasingly efficient and productive methods through which information and ideas could be distributed and stored.

A related phenomenon can be observed in the effects of a newly introduced, phonetic alphabet on native populations (i.e. isolated, un-Westernized, tribal cultures) "for as they *are* in relation to the phonetic alphabet, so we once *were*" (McLuhan 27). Tribal, technologically primitive cultures tend to be orally based cultures, and therefore the idea of a static, passive form of communication such as the phonetic alphabet not only seems obviously foreign, but completely regressive as a means through which information and ideas can be exchanged. This break between the eye and the ear, "between semantic meaning and visual code" is possible only through the phonetic alphabet, writes McLuhan. As a result "only phonetic writing has the power to translate man from the tribal to the civilized sphere, to give him an eye for an ear," and through

this it has been observed that "most civilized people are crude and numb in their perceptions, compared with the hyperesthesia of oral and auditory cultures" (McLuhan 38).

Central to the crisis of the televisual over the typographic is the theory that

> [m]an the tool-making animal, whether in speech or in writing or in radio, has long been engaged in extending one or another of his sense organs in such a manner as to disturb all of his other senses and faculties. (McLuhan 12)

What the electronic/televisual age has done, claims McLuhan, is extended our senses and faculties into areas where there is no interplay between them; this interplay being an integral component to human consciousness and the operation and maintenance of a viable, progressive culture. Our *private senses*, states McLuhan, are *not* closed systems, as they are 'endlessly translatable' into one another "in the experience we call consciousness" (McLuhan 13-4). Our *extended senses*, the tools we have created for ourselves, *are* closed systems. When technologies were slow (i.e. the wheel, the alphabet, money), or at least slower than the immediacy of the televisual "the fact that they were separate, closed systems was socially and psychically supportable." But technologies now demand the "interplay," in effect, the *consciousness*, the "rational co-existence" (McLuhan 14), that is reserved for our private senses. Hence the crisis that McLuhan has alluded to.

> Those who experience the first onset of a new technology, whether it be alphabet or radio, respond most emphatically because the new sense ratios set up at once by the technological dilation of eye or ear, present men with a surprising new world, which evokes a vigorous new "closure," or novel pattern of interplay, among all of the senses together. But the initial shock gradually dissipates as the entire community absorbs the new habit of perception into all of its areas of work and association. But the real evolution is in this later and prolonged phase of "adjustment" of all personal and social life to the new model of perception set up by the new technology. (McLuhan 33)

So, why has the "initial shock" caused by the new technology not yet "dissipated" into contemporary culture? McLuhan's answer is that unlike the ancient Greeks before us,

Twentieth Century humanity has had to deal with an enormous backlog of literature and mechanistic technology. Postman adds that "[t]elevision is not old enough to have matched printing's output of junk" (Postman 16), but rest assured, at the rate television is expanding and producing material, it will make up for lost centuries with stunning proficiency. It goes without saying that throughout this century, humanity has proven that it is hardly capable of understanding or controlling those "older" technologies, so it should come as no surprise that the more advanced, logically extended versions of those older technologies are beyond our ken. There is merit to McLuhan's theory of adjustment and dissipation, but it does not explain the logic behind what, simply stated, is a large scale case of addiction to the glamour, catastrophe and entertainment that is projecting out of the most cherished piece of furniture in virtually every home in America. I am want to say that the problem is that for the most part we do not realize or are unwilling to accept the fact that our contemporary technologies are indeed beyond us, in effect, controlling us the long way around. Neil Postman argues, and I think very convincingly, in favour of this point, but believes that the new habits of perception *have* been absorbed into the general community of American culture -- their very internalization being the fulcrum of the televisual crisis.

Herein lies the fundamental difference in the ways that Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman formulate their theories. In McLuhan's formulation, the internalization of new technologies (whether they be the shift from oral/auditory based communication to typographic/phonetic alphabet-based communication or the shift from the typographic to the televisual) generate changes in the way people organize and interpret the world. For McLuhan, the change is a mental one wherein the "interplay" of the senses is altered in the attempt to absorb or master the new technology. But in the televisual age, where electronic and digital equipment can compute at a much faster rate than the human mind, that interplay, that "rational co-existence" of the senses, is an impossibility, hence the present crisis of the televisual age. Having the distinct advantage of living and writing

twenty-three years after *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and being able to observe first hand the rapid and monumental changes in the technology and agenda of television, Neil Postman's argument differs from McLuhan's in that Postman is adamant in his belief that changes in technology/media have *absolutely no effect, elicit no changes* "in the structure of people's minds" nor in "their cognitive capacities" (Postman 16). What does change when these new habits of perception are absorbed, according to Postman, is public discourse -- our notions of truth, intelligence, justice, education, information, faith, etc. Postman writes that the "most significant American cultural fact of the second half of the twentieth century" is that

> the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television. . . . [have] dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse, since two media so vastly different cannot accommodate the same ideas. (Postman 8)

In effect, what changes are our *epistemologies* and it is along these epistemological/ontological lines that McLuhan and Postman differ. Postman believes that television has "achieved the status of 'myth,'" in the same way Roland Barthes uses the word "myth".

> [Barthes] means by myth a way of understanding the world that is not problematic, that we are not fully conscious of, that seems, in a word, natural. A myth is a way of thinking so deeply embedded in our consciousness that it is *invisible*. This is now the way of television. We are no longer fascinated or perplexed by its machinery. We do not tell stories of its wonders. We do not confine our television sets to special rooms. We do not doubt the reality of what we see on television, are largely unaware of the special angle of vision it affords. Even the question of how television affects us has receded into the background. . . . Twenty years ago, the question, Does television shape culture or merely reflect it? Held considerable interest for many scholars and social critics. The question has largely disappeared as television has gradually *become* our culture. (Postman 79)

It is this "invisible epistemology" of television that worries Postman, who adds:

> There is no more disturbing consequence of the electronic and graphic revolution than this: that the world as given to us through television seems natural, not bizarre. For the loss of the sense of the strange is a sign of

> adjustment, and the extent to which we have adjusted is a measure of the extent to which we have changed. Our culture's adjustment to the epistemology of television is by now all but complete; we have so thoroughly accepted its definitions of truth, knowledge, and reality that irrelevance seems to us to be filled with import, and incoherence seems eminently sane. (Postman 79-80)

It is at this point of *adjustment*, where that which was once thought of as strange becomes familiar, that televisual culture and post-postmodern fiction collide.

When asked by interviewer Larry McCaffery if there are ways in which "the postmodern world has influenced or changed the role of serious [fiction] writing" (McCaffery 140), David Foster Wallace replies that indeed the postmodern world has

> inverted one of fiction's big historical functions, that of providing data on distant cultures and persons. The first real generalization of human experience that novels tried to accomplish. If you lived in Bumfuck, Iowa, a hundred years ago and had no idea what life was like in India, good old Kipling goes over and presents it to you. And of course the post-structural critics now have a field day on all the colonialist and phallo-centric prejudices inherent in the idea that writers were *presenting* alien cultures instead of "*re-presenting*" them -- jabbering natives and randy concubines and white man's burden, etc. . . . but fiction's presenting function for today's reader has been reversed: since the whole global village is now presented as familiar, electronically immediate -- satellites, microwaves, intrepid PBS anthropologists, Paul Simon's Zulu back-ups -- it's almost like we need fiction writers to restore strange things' ineluctable *strangeness*, to defamiliarize stuff, I guess you'd say. (McCaffery 140)

It is this idea of today's fiction restoring that "ineluctable *strangeness*" to strange things that have now been rendered familiar by televisual culture that is central to the whole concept of post-postmodern fiction. As Wallace sees it, where (modern) fiction from the early part of the Twentieth Century had a beneficial concern in describing the rest of the unknown world to oblivious westerners, televisual culture has continued on in this project, only not is such good faith, and the resulting, quintessentially postmodern blur of context-less images, narratives and histories has had a negative effect on the way people relate to and talk about the real world. If, as Wallace claims, the inherent strangeness in strange things is truly ineluctable, then clearly the sense of familiarity that televisuality has brought to these strange things is a *false* sense of familiarity, a wholly disingenuous

and extremely potent illusion. Again, the change in people brought on by televisual culture is not in the way they *are* (ontological), but rather in the way they think and know (epistemological).

Speaking as a young American writer to his contemporaries, Wallace tells McCaffery

> For our generation, the entire world seems to present itself as "familiar," but since that's of course an illusion in terms of anything really important about people, maybe any "realistic" fiction's job is opposite what it used to be -- no longer making the strange familiar but making the familiar *strange* again. It seems important to find ways of reminding ourselves that most "familiarity" is mediated and delusive. (McCaffery 140-1)

Wallace's analysis of the "mediated and delusive" illusions of television and his arguments as to how these illusions have affected the reading and writing of fiction are quite simply put, formidable. What television is very good at, says Wallace, is gauging what American viewers want to see. "If we want to know what American normality is -- i.e. what Americans regard as normal -- we can trust television. . . . Television, from the surface on down, is about desire. And, fiction-wise, desire is the sugar in human food" (Wallace "EUP" 22). This "desire" works on much deeper levels than the simple desire for entertainment and it manifests itself in different ways. The illusion that everything on television is entertaining is the psychic umbrella under which the various forms of desire camouflage themselves.

The act of *watching* is commonly seen as the foremost desire of the TV viewer. To sit and passively watch whatever happens to be happening on the television screen is what millions of people do for several hours a day, from the time they walk in the door in the evening until they get into bed. As a result, a common criticism of television is that it has turned American into a "nation of sweaty, slack-jawed voyeurs" (Wallace "EUP" 23). But Wallace finds this criticism to be incorrect, citing the fact that true voyeurism is all about the act of espial, or "watching people who don't know you're there as those people go about the mundane but erotically charged little businesses of private life. . . .

Television does not afford true espial because television is performance, spectacle, which by definition requires watchers" (Wallace "EUP" 23). So, what is it about watching television performers performing, in effect just doing what they are paid to do, that attracts millions of rapt viewers every single day? It must have something to do with the fact that almost without exception everyone on television is at the very least an attractive person with no small amount of these "attractive" people being flat out beautiful. The unself-conscious appearance of these attractive television personalities, the aloof, cool personas that they project are just that -- projections. It is this illusion of unself-consciousness that preserves the *illusion of voyeurism* for the viewer. "This self-conscious appearance of unself-consciousness," writes Wallace "is the real door to TV's mirror-hall of illusions, and for us, the Audience, it is both medicine and poison" (Wallace "EUP" 25-6). As television viewers, we want to be those suave, good looking people who say witty things and perform breath-taking heroics every single night. Escapism used to come in the form of a book. Now no one has to bother with the turning of pages and the scanning of lines to find an hour or twos worth of pleasure. The work is done for the viewer and all they have to do is stare at the screen and give in to the illusion that what they see there is ultimately the way real life should be: unself-conscious and perfect. The knowledge that it is all done in a highly stylized, controlled environment does not seem to phase the average TV viewer.

> There might be lots of reasons why these unrealities are so swallowable, but a big one is that the performers behind the glass are -- varying degrees of thespian talent notwithstanding -- absolute *geniuses* at seeming unwatched. Make no mistake -- seeming unwatched in front of a TV camera is an art. Take a look at how non-professionals act when a TV camera is pointed at them: they often spaz out, or else they go all stiff, frozen with self-consciousness. Even PR people and politicians are, in terms of being on camera, rank amateurs. And we love to laugh at how stiff and fake non-pros look on television. . . . The man who can stand the megagaze is a walking imago, a certain type of transcendent semihuman. (Wallace "EUP" 25)

Clearly, some kind of very serious and very real epistemological change has taken place on a culture wide scale. When you are involved in reading a good piece of fiction you may get temporarily swept up in the action, the well wrought prose, the development of the characters, but when you put the book down, was there ever really any doubt that what was going on within the pages of the book was really nothing more than a good piece of fiction? Probably not. Once the book is put aside, the illusion is broken. Not so with television, and where Wallace says that this illusion is toxic to viewers, it goes double for young writers who watch TV "scanning for data on some reality to fictionalize," not knowing or hopefully just forgetting that what they are witnessing on TV is "*already* composed of fictional characters in highly formalized narratives" (Wallace "EUP" 24).

Television's close relationship with postmodern fiction can be no better witnessed than in metafiction. Just as television in the 1960's revealed its self-conscious, ironic nature, in effect becoming its own subject, the advent of metafiction produced fiction in which fiction became the subject of fiction. Storylines and character development were put aside in order to write fiction in which the mechanics of fiction were laid out before the reader in texts that referred to themselves, were conscious of themselves as works of fiction. Where the writers from the early half of the century saw themselves as a community of "do-ers and be-ers. . . a new vision of the U.S.A. as an atomized mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers" (Wallace "EUP" 34) was being fostered by the growing popularity of television. Metafiction was merely reflecting the new American reality, where everything that was on television self-consciously referred to television. And in this way metafiction was

> really nothing more than a single-order expansion of its own great theoretical nemesis, Realism: if Realism called it like it saw it, Metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing it. This high-cultural postmodern genre. . . was deeply informed by the emergence of television and the metastasis of self-conscious watching. And (I claim) American fiction remains deeply informed by television. . . especially those strains of

> television with roots in postmodernism, which even at its rebellious Metafictional zenith was less a "response to" televisual culture than a kind of abiding-in-TV. (Wallace, "EUP" 34)

Fiction that 'abided-in-TV' may have been emulating the self-conscious nature of television, but it was missing out on the element of entertainment that makes television and its illusions so wildly popular. If television was just about actors walking around being self-conscious, it wouldn't be nearly as popular as it is, to say the least. There has to be some kind of story, regardless of how banal or juvenile, for the audience to identify with, to escape into. The post-postmodern novels of Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace represent a return to more plot and character-driven, less self-conscious fiction because unlike high-postmodern metafiction, they are a "response to" televisuality; their emulation of television goes beyond merely mimicking self-consciousness of form and content. However some post-postmodern fiction, such as the novels of Mark Leyner and Bret Easton Ellis, although they do not emulate the self-conscious element of television, have fallen into the trap of relying on storylines and characters that resemble too closely the flat characters, hackneyed plots, rampant consumerism and vapid culture that television is all about. Leyner's *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist,* which is totally devoid of context, reads like a series of brief, disjointed television ad spots. Ellis's insanely violent *American Psycho* revolves around the trendy, elitist culture that emerges from television's hard-line consumerism. Ellis's characters are identifiable to the reader and to the characters themselves solely by their designer business clothing and their myriad material possessions, all described by Ellis in obsessive detail. For some readers, Ellis and Leyner provide excellent commentary on vapid consumerism and televisual ennui, but for others (myself and David Foster Wallace included) their novels, despite some post-postmodern qualities, still rely to heavily on the 'abiding-in-TV' -style fiction rather than providing a more complete 'response-to-TV' -style story. In effect, Ellis and Leyner are still caught up in the postmodern, whereas DeLillo and Wallace, as I plan to demonstrate, have successfully made the transition into the post-postmodern. In the

McCaffery interview, Wallace comments on the shortcomings of Ellis's *American Psycho*.

> [I]f the contemporary condition is hopelessly shitty, insipid, materialistic, emotionally retarded, sadomasochistic and stupid, then I (or any writer) can get away with slapping together stories with characters who are stupid, vapid, emotionally retarded, which is easy, because these types of characters require no development. With descriptions that are simply lists of brand-name consumer products. Where stupid people say insipid stuff to each other. If what's always distinguished bad writing -- flat characters, a narrative world that's cliched and not recognizably human, etc. -- is also a description of today's world, then bad writing becomes an ingenious mimesis of a bad world. If readers simply believe that the world is stupid and shallow and mean, then Ellis can write a mean shallow novel that becomes a mordant deadpan commentary on the badness of everything. (McCaffery 131)

If television has literally "*become*" our culture, as Neil Postman has stated, why is it that the culture as a whole knows so little about it? It seems that what is lacking is an adequate form of criticism. As noted earlier, one can point out the flaws of and be totally derisive of television until one is blue in the face and all that it really does is demonstrate that that person has a very vast and detailed knowledge of television, thus drawing more attention to television. And, with everyone watching so much television (the real hardcore watchers being the people who need to hear some criticism the most), who will hear the critics unless they appear on the screen, *a la* Sideshow Bob, to decry the very medium that has allowed them to appear before the largest possible audience? The irony is just teetering on the edge of tangible, but it goes without saying that it doesn't work very well as a method of criticism in the face of televisuality, because television has rendered irony ineffective as a means through which television can be criticized. For Wallace "the nexus where television and fiction converse and consort is self-conscious irony" (Wallace "EUP" 35).

> Irony in postwar art and culture started out the same way youthful rebellion did. It was difficult and painful, proactive -- a grim diagnosis of a long-denied disease. The assumptions *behind* early postmodern irony, on the other hand, were still frankly idealistic: it was assumed that etiology

> and diagnosis pointed toward cure, that a revelation of imprisonment led to freedom.(Wallace "EUP" 66-7)

Irony's dominance in contemporary American culture is nothing short of tyrannical. Hip, American-style irony is based on the idea that regardless of what anyone is saying, what they are *really* communicating is "I don't really mean what I am saying," and it has the overall effect of saying "How totally *banal* of you to ask what I really mean" (Wallace "EUP" 67). Irony has made it extremely difficult if not impossible to ever be able to know for certain if someone is speaking ironically, or if something is being represented ironically, because to reveal to the world that you are uncertain about irony is to reveal yourself as an un-hip, naive person. What American-style televisual irony is doing is "using the very tool that exposed its enemy to insulate itself" (Wallace "EUP" 68). In the "Golden Years" of television, there was attempt to keep the behind the scenes workings of the magical and illusion-filled nature of the medium just that, very much behind the scenes. TV shows did *not* refer to themselves, characters did not address the audience directly, revealing that they were aware that they were on camera and that there was a very large audience tuned-in. So, as a critic of television, it was always very easy, almost too easy, to point out that everything being seen on television is a complete mockery and mock-up of reality. The representation of *Realism* was always the ambition of those who sought to conceal the self-conscious and electronic side of the medium. Critical derision amounted to pointing out that the reason the actors and the shows *appeared* to be so natural, unself-conscious and realistic is that the TV producers, actors, programmers, technicians, writers and the myriad of other talented people involved were hyper-conscious of the self-conscious aspect that permeates every level and facet of television. So, when irony became the prevailing form of hip self-expression, TV -- the malignant agenda-wielding cultural juggernaut -- saw its opportunity to pull the rug out from beneath its critics' feet.

In the 1960's, at the height of anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian, anti-conformist thought in the United States, television began to evolve. The irony that had been for so long used against it as criticism for its failure to come clean on the subject of its closet self-consciousness, was now being turned against the standards of what was being recognized as an exceedingly hypocritical America. Television too, began to put on an ironic face. No longer bashful about its self-conscious reality, its illusion-making, technology-based medium, television began to refer to itself, pointing out that the "reality" that it had maintained on-screen for the first decade or so of its existence was not the real 'reality' of America. Rather than remaining TV the illusion-maintaining tool of hypocrisy, television put on a new public face, and on the surface became a much more proactive medium -- the blatantly self-conscious, illusion breaking irony-fest that we know and worship thirty plus years later. Of course, as noted, this change of televisual heart was only a change in how the viewing public perceived television. Without really changing its strategy other than having the people on screen be obviously self-conscious from time to time, and to have them make self-referential, ironic comments about television every so often, TV had drastically improved its status with its critics and its audience while simultaneously further consolidating its power over American culture. Wallace argues that

> by offering young, overeducated fiction writers a comprehensive view of how hypocritically the U.S.A. saw itself circa 1960 . . . television helped legitimize absurdism and irony as not just literary devices but sensible responses to a ridiculous world. For irony -- exploiting the gaps between what's said and what's meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are -- is the time-honored way artists seek to illuminate and explode hypocrisy. And the television of lone-gunman westerns, paternalistic sitcoms, and jut-jawed law enforcement circa 1960 celebrated what by then was a deeply hypocritical American self-image. (Wallace "EUP" 65)

Once television had subsumed self-conscious irony, making it its standard mode of expression, postmodern fiction suffered from appearing to be a poseur genre, trying to cut in on television's hip, irony packed success. But what postmodern fiction really ended

up being was "the too-successful rebel." The problem that this poses for young fiction writers is a serious one. "What do you do when postmodern rebellion becomes a pop-cultural institution?" The reason why postmodern irony has become so passé and diluted is that it has been "absorbed, emptied and redeployed by the very televisual establishment [it] had originally set [itself] athwart" (Wallace "EUP" 68). Wallace even hints that he feels that some of the post-postmodern fiction (i.e. the novels of Mark Leyner, Max Apple, William T. Vollmann) that has been published may be guilty of never fulfilling its own agenda. In an attempt to defamiliarize and expose the irony of TV/televisual culture, post-postmodern fiction has insulated itself from criticism through an overabundance, even a hyper-saturation of irony -- the very thing post-postmodern fiction is supposed to deride television for doing.

In his interview with David Foster Wallace for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Larry McCaffery poses this question to Wallace:

> Television may be more complex than what most people realize, but it seems rarely to attempt to *challenge* or *disturb* its audience, as you've written me you wish to. Is it that sense of challenge and pain that makes your work more "serious" than most television shows? (McCaffery 127)

To which Wallace replies:

> I had a teacher I liked who used to say good fiction's job was to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. I guess a big part of 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. Since an ineluctable part of being a human self is suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of *generalization* of suffering. Does this make sense? We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. . . . But now realize that TV and popular film and most kinds of "low" art -- which just means art whose primary aim is to make money -- is lucrative precisely because it recognizes that audiences prefer 100 percent pleasure to the reality that tend to be 49 percent pleasure and 51 percent pain. Whereas "serious" art, which is not primarily about getting money from you, 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. So it's hard for an art audience, especially a young one that's been raised to expect art to be 100 percent pleasurable and to make that pleasure effortless, to read and appreciate serious fiction. That's not good. The problem isn't that today's readership is *dumb*, I don't think. Just that TV and the commercial-art culture's trained it to be sort of lazy and childish in its expectations. But it makes trying to engage today's readers both imaginatively and intellectually unprecedentedly hard.
> (McCaffery 127-8)

And here, it would seem, we have come full circle and once again find ourselves asking the question that Philip Roth posed to the world of fiction writers almost forty years ago: How is contemporary fiction going to survive in the age of electronic media? Apparently the answer is: through post-postmodern fiction -- returning all that is familiar back to the realm of the strange by subsuming the power of the media and televisual culture to entertain and transfix and using it to expose televisuality's hold on the desires, imaginations and perceptions of reality of an entire, rapt culture. Let's keep this is mind as we now turn to the fiction of Don DeLillo.

Chapter Two.
The American Paranoia Industry: Catastrophe and Defamiliarization in the Fiction of Don DeLillo.

Riots, murders, freak accidents, mass suicides, air disasters -- as everyone knows, these things happen, with varying degrees of frequency. Horrible things are, unfortunately, happening somewhere right now. There is an old adage that goes something like this: the more severe the incident, the greater number of people injured or killed, the larger the explosion, the deadlier the famine, the more widespread the outbreak -- the further away the event seems to be from the individual hearing the news. The day before this paragraph was written, June 13th, 1999, two Serbian militia men, attempting to wipe out a Kosovar Liberation Army troop, were intercepted in their car by German NATO troops. The car containing the two Serbians was riddled with bullets from the NATO guns, the two occupants helpless against the enormous firepower. . . . But why am I explaining it to you? Maybe you saw it, as millions of people did on the nightly news. Not only were we the television viewers privy to watching two Serbian assassins gunned down in their car, the images coming from thousands of kilometers away, but we were also there as the cameramen descended on the bullet riddled car and opened the doors to inspect the damage inflicted on the two men inside. One man, the driver, was already dead. The passenger, in shock and bleeding profusely from untold gunshot wounds begged the camera men to shut the doors and allow him to die in peace, an English voiceover providing the translation of the man's agonized pleas.

Watching this footage in my parents' air conditioned home in Windsor, Ontario, I was seemingly as far removed as possible, both geographically and ideologically, from the war torn Balkans. But the event just witnessed, in all its spectacular gruesomeness, was less than a day old. Already, the networks had the film footage packaged and disseminated around the globe. The scene was captioned, narrated, and translated for its non-Slavic speaking viewers. The footage had obviously been edited from a longer

sequence of film for brevity. It's possible that some editing was done in order to enhance the sound quality. Content-wise, however, no editing was done. Closeups of grievously wounded, dying or dead men were shown uncut, invasive camera men capturing the scene as if it was a Hollywood production. It was the exorbitant violence and brutal reality, the *liveness* of what transpired that made it just perfect for the nightly news, ideal for household viewing. True, the station I watched the footage on prefaced the footage with a statement from the anchorman who warned that the footage that was about to be shown was of a particularly graphic nature and may be "unsuitable for some viewers" (children, the squeamish, those particularly sensitive to violence). What struck me about the anchor's solemn warning was that it was only directed at "some" of the viewers who *may* exhibit certain sensitivities towards gore and death, or who may be too young to cope. *Some*? The footage may not be suitable for *some* viewers? Who, I wonder, is this kind of graphic violence suitable for? I should hope that there isn't a living soul who finds this stuff suitable viewing. Now, I'm not saying that this visual information should *not* have been shown on television. I'm no proponent of censorship and I understand that the news from Kosovo is big news across the world, but maybe what the anchorman should have said was: "Nobody should watch this. It is horrible and violent but it is also reality, and we are going to show it anyway."

Whereas what the anchorman really *did* say may have indeed saved some of those particularly sensitive or younger viewers (who would let their child watch the nightly news anyway?) from the trauma induced by the footage about to be shown, it no doubt also piqued a lot of interest, drawing people in from other rooms, causing crowds to gather around a monitor on a sales floor or in a restaurant. And unfortunately, if the anchorman had said "Nobody should watch this . . .," as I proposed that he should have, it no doubt would have resulted in an even larger number of people making sure that they watched, regardless of the forewarning. And they would have watched because those words, that very serious warning, promises something not to be missed. It virtually

ensures, strangely enough, *entertainment*. It should come as no surprise. As noted earlier, one of Neil Postman's big problems with television is that it presents everything as entertainment and it has made entertainment "the natural format for the representation of all experience" (Postman 87). In *Mao II*, Bill Gray, a reclusive writer character created by Don DeLillo says "'There's the life and there's the consumer event. Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or film. . . . Everything seeks its own heightened version'" (DeLillo *Mao II* 43-4). David Foster Wallace makes the point that

> TV is the epitome of Low Art in its desire to appeal to and enjoy the attention of unprecedented numbers of people. But it is not Low because it is vulgar or prurient or dumb. Television is often all of these things, but this is a logical function of its need to attract and please Audience. And I'm not saying that television is vulgar and dumb because the people who compose Audience are vulgar and dumb. Television is the way it is simply because people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests and wildly different in their refined and aesthetic and noble interests. It's all about syncretic diversity: neither medium nor Audience is faultable for quality. (Wallace "EUP" 37)

But what Wallace doesn't take into account is that through generations of avid TV watching, we have become desensitized to violence in the real world as it is force fed to us in the form of entertainment. Television being a cultural constant, an equalizer, it follows that as a culture our vulgar and prurient interests have become increasingly vulgar and prurient. We can stop what we are doing, gather in front of the television, take in the instantaneously delivered footage of Houston Astros manager Larry Dierker collapsing in the team's dugout (also on June 13th, 1999), see the concerned and weeping ball players gather in prayer as Dierker is loaded into an ambulance and rushed to the hospital, turn to one another and say something regarding the "strangeness" of what we have just seen, knowing full well that no one in the room finds it at all strange because it is *on* TV. Moments later, the unfortunate occurrence on the television is either having very little if any lasting effect on anyone, or it is completely forgotten. Televisual "[l]iveness," writes John Thornton Caldwell "at least when linked to death and disaster,

is. . . disruptive but ultimately pleasurable since its coverage works to assure domestic viewers that the catastrophe is not happening to them" (Caldwell 30). But regardless of the intensity or seriousness of the live event being broadcast it is rarely *that* intense or *so* serious that it is immune from being interrupted by corporate advertising. The context-less nature of television programming makes it totally acceptable for networks to follow up a story or live coverage of something of the most disturbing nature with commercials for athletic apparel, luxury automobiles or an advertisement for television programming itself. Don DeLillo touches on this juxtaposing of disaster and commercialism in *Americana*. Within the pages of a magazine being perused by Sullivan, the young television network executive, the reader encounters this image: "[o]pposite a picture of several decapitated villagers was a full-page advertisement for a new kind of panty-girdle" (DeLillo *Americana* 112). It is the contemporary media's penchant for juxtaposing catastrophe and excessive and shocking violence with sexuality and personal image that drive Sullivan to thinking "I wanted to free myself from that montage of speed, guns, torture, rape, orgy and consumer packaging which constitutes the vision of sex in America" (DeLillo *Americana* 35). Our cultural desensitization to violence on television and in the media at large has reached a point where the people behind the programming of television can now show real people being actually shot and killed and we will watch.[5] A professional sports coach's collapse and seizure, although it is news and cause for concern, is now the stuff of good Sunday afternoon watching. Catastrophe is what sells. Sensationalism is the packaging. Neil Postman writes:

> There is no poverty so abject that it must forgo television. There is no education so exalted that it is not modified by television. And most important of all, there is no subject of public interest -- politics, news, education, religion, science, sports -- that does not find its way to

[5] This kind of viewing was at one time only possible through underground sources such as the videotape series "Faces of Death," in which news footage considered too shocking to be shown on regular, commercial television is presented in a raw, roughly edited, uncensored format.

> television. Which means that all public understanding of these subjects is shaped by the biases of television. (Postman 78)

As Philip Roth wrote in "Writing American Fiction," the job of the serious novelist is becoming increasingly difficult in light of the rising acceptance and normalcy of sensationalism on television and in the print media as the ragged entrails of typographic culture struggle to keep adrift in a sea of ever increasing electronic images of context-less disaster and hardship. And as I wrote in the Prologue to this project, could we blame any novelist for writing novels that are more widely read simply because they incorporate some of television's entertaining and sensationalist elements into contemporary prose fiction?

Of the six Don DeLillo novels that will be mentioned in this project, all six are preoccupied with the Cold War and its affects on American culture: *Americana* (1971), *End Zone* (1972), *White Noise* (1985), *Libra* (1988), *Mao II* (1991), and *Underworld* (1997)[6]. Of the six, two (*End Zone* and *Underworld*) are specifically concerned with nuclear holocaust. Both *Libra* and *Mao II* focus on political terrorism (foreign and domestic), conspiracy and intrigue. *White Noise*, although just as apocalyptically obsessed as *End Zone* and *Underworld*, focuses on military-industrial accident/government cover-up paranoia. *Americana*, DeLillo's first novel, although not so tightly governed by Cold War thematics as the others, is mentioned briefly in this thesis because it deals with television executives, their politics and motivations, and a television film crew travelling across America attempting to make a film called "Life". With *Americana*, DeLillo launched a literary project that has continued through to his latest novel *Underworld*. A project in which television and film serve as both subject and as the medium through which the subject is held up to criticism. If it can be represented on

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[6] From this point on, the following abbreviations will be used when DeLillo's novels are cited parenthetically: *Americana* (*A*); *End Zone* (*EZ*); *White Noise* (*WN*); *Libra* (*L*); *Mao-II* (*M2*); *Underworld* (*U*).

television or other forms of electronic media, or through the art of film, whether it be a college football game; a legendary National League pennant game played in 1951; a decadent, high society gala; home movie camera footage of an infamous assassination; a serial murder on a desolate stretch of highway; a nuclear blast, Don DeLillo is capable of turning the televisual world on its ear, making the mediated realities that are all too familiar to his readers seem not quite real, freshly bizarre, their ineluctable strangeness restored.

Don DeLillo's fiction has come under a lot of fire from critics who feel that the majority, if not all of DeLillo's eleven novels suffer from a certain sameness. In his book length study of DeLillo's fiction Douglas Keesey makes reference to one of DeLillo's harshest critics, Bruce Bawer, who writes:

> "While those of us who live in the real America carry on with our richly varied, emotionally tumultuous lives, DeLillo. . . continues, in effect, to write the same lifeless novel over and over again. . . . If anyone is guilty of turning modern Americans into xerox copies, it is Don DeLillo." (Keesey 199)

Bawer's criticism is a good one, in certain respects. Indeed, DeLillo recycles a great deal of his fiction, concerns and themes from earlier works reappearing and redeveloping in more recent works giving the novels a distinctive and formulaic "looping" quality.[7]

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[7] *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel*, is Tom LeClair's in depth study of the "looping" and reciprocal nature of DeLillo's works. Adhering to the metascientific model of "systems theory" as it was originally proposed by the Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1901-1972) in his 1968 work *General Systems Theory*, LeClair's study often becomes bogged down by the overcomplicated scientific principals and language/jargon he employs in getting his point across. Picking up on and praising the same repetitive aspects of DeLillo's novels that Bruce Bawer criticizes, LeClair writes: "*White Noise* recycles the materials of [Don DeLillo's] first two, *Americana* and *End Zone*. These larger loops. . . make DeLillo's novels a coherent fictional system that, as a whole, presents a comprehensive critique of the ideologies -- scientific, literary, and political -- in which he and his readers exist" (LeClair xi). LeClair holds that the looping strategies employed by DeLillo are a more accurate expression of the way human beings truly experience the world. Subsequently, LeClair sees systems theory as a more correct critical method for approaching DeLillo's novels as well as the works of the other authors who are included under LeClair's "systems novelist" heading: William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon and Robert Coover, most notably.

Televisuality provides a strong precedent as to why DeLillo's novels read like sequential rewrites and rehashings of the same basic ideas as television is also stringently formulaic in everything that it does; from the writing of shows, to the acting, production values, plots, and advertising. It is hard to believe that we find television so thoroughly entertaining. Viewers have grown so accustomed to and complacent with television's formulaic formatting that television shows which attempt to break away from this stringent conformity are as a rule shunned by viewers and more often than not end up paying for their non-conformity with their time slots -- they are cancelled.

Although they are separated by a dozen years and two other novels, *White Noise* and *Underworld* have more than just a few things in common: the general Cold War ethos that hangs over the two stories and the systems of communication and information that appear within their narratives; fixations with televised images of brutal violence and tragedy; similarities with regards to characters, domestic settings and situations; themes of waste management, and an ever present interest in pop culture, all help to reinforce LeClair's "looping" theory and make it seem as if either novel is the sequel to the other. So complete and seamless is the looping that it would be difficult to say which novel is clearly the predecessor of the other if one did not know the dates of publication. Indeed, a person who had the publication dates withheld from them may wonder whether *Underworld* is the sequel to and an expansion of the ideas originally developed in *White Noise,* or if *White Noise* is the sequel to, or a lost chapter from *Underworld* in which certain themes are recapitulated and reinforced. The uncanniness is at times so complete that the looping has the effect of defamiliarizing the reader with the novels themselves as it often becomes difficult to differentiate between the two -- keeping track of which events and conversations take place in which novel.

David Foster Wallace states that if you want to know what is considered "normal" in America, just turn on the television. Nothing provides insight into the realities of American culture like television can. Don DeLillo's post-postmodern fiction is so much like television in its preoccupations with sensationalism, conspiracy, and destruction that it seems highly improbable that his subject matter could have any basis in the real world. Opinions of DeLillo's fiction vary with regards to whether or not the content of the novels in any way represent a known reality or whether they are merely the eschatological ramblings of an obsessed mind. Many readers of contemporary fiction are not used to having the entertaining agenda of televisual culture delivered to them typographically. Post-postmodern fiction is still an unknown quantity (even learned critics like Bruce Bawer miss the point) and because of this its defamiliarizing objectives are particularly potent. According to David Foster Wallace, DeLillo's fiction is hyperreal, so real that when read, it comes across as uncanny and unfamiliar. In his article "Closer to Chaos: American Fiction in the 1980's," Malcolm Bradbury claims that Don DeLillo

> writes of the surreal banality and boredom of an American culture dominated by objects, images and media systems. . . . the chemical disaster, the political assassination, or the car chase is the norm of American life. Reality itself becomes an absurd fantasy, and a fictional paradigm, which allows extremity and disaster a place within the apparently neutral space of the real. (Bradbury 18)

Commenting on the elements of defamiliarization present in *White Noise*, Tom LeClair writes:

> DeLillo presses beyond the ironic, extracting from his initially satiric materials a sense of wonderment or mystery, finding in the seeming rubbish of popular culture a kind of knowledge that would provide a more livable set of systemic expectations about life and death. (LeClair 214)

LeClair later adds: "DeLillo collects the familiar sounds of American culture and universal fear; he then turns them up, exaggerating their foolishness for ironic effect and turns them down. . . . DeLillo's is the noise of disaster and the noise of mystery"

(LeClair 231). LeClair is correct in stating that DeLillo "presses beyond the ironic," and that DeLillo's is "the noise of disaster [and] mystery," but this second statement regarding DeLillo taking the "universal fear[s]" of American culture and "exaggerating their foolishness for ironic effect" is off base with regards to DeLillo's use of irony. DeLillo is not writing fiction that defamiliarizes his readers with televisuality and paranoia inspiring entertainments as a means to exposing to them the irony that their apocalyptic fears -- the fears they seek to forget through immersing themselves in television and other entertainments -- are nothing but foolish phantasms. Television fulfills that role for the viewers/readers by overlaying just about everything it communicates to its audience through by design context-lessness and a thick veneer of its own patented irony, making apocalypse and paranoia seem like nothing more than mindless fantasy and amusement. DeLillo's agenda of defamiliarization is quite the opposite of the televisual agenda as he takes these "universal fears" very seriously and finds nothing 'foolish' about them. Defamiliarizing his readers to the ironic cultural situation within which everything -- including the very real and immediate fears of nuclear catastrophe, terrorism and government conspiracy -- are seen as entertainment as a result of televisuality's awesome pervasiveness is the overarching project of DeLillo's fiction. This is how Don DeLillo "presses beyond the ironic." Irony is not his tone. Irony is not even his subject. Irony is what Don DeLillo is making people forget about. If the ineluctable strangeness of irony can be restored, if the overuse of irony on television can be made apparent, then Americans will come to the realization that their fears are indeed real and should not be thought of as a source of entertainment nor exploited as a source of network capital. The title of DeLillo's National Book Award winning novel *White Noise* provides an excellent example of the author's use of irony as a defamiliarizing force. Douglas Keesey offers an explanation of the concept of white noise:

> White noise, a sound containing a blend of all the audible frequencies distributed equally over the range of the frequency band, was originally invented to soothe workers in soundproof office buildings who might be

> disturbed by the silence, but DeLillo points out that the commercial noise intended to distract people from deadly silence can be equally deadly, that the sounds or electromagnetic radiation produced by commercial or industrial activities can be harmful to human health. (Keesey 146)

Within Keesey's explanation of white noise one can find a strong analogy to televisuality and its agenda of enveloping and rendering impotent universally held human fears under the rubric of entertainment, becoming an equally malignant cultural force as the fears themselves. Where Philip Roth viewed the fears and violent obsessions of the American public as detrimental to the survival of American fiction, DeLillo, admittedly not beyond the "universal fear" himself, views the culture that surrounds him as the perfect subject matter for his fiction. In a rare interview, Anthony DeCurtis poses this question to DeLillo: "There's something of an apocalyptic feel about your books, an intimation that our world is moving toward greater randomness and dissolution, or maybe even cataclysm. Do you see this process as reversible?" To which DeLillo responds: "It could change tomorrow. This is the shape my books take because this is the reality I see. This reality has become part of all our lives over the past twenty-five years. I don't know how we can deny it" (DeCurtis 304). In *Mao-II*, DeLillo's reclusive novelist character Bill Grey speaks about the role of and the trials facing the novelist towards the end of the Twentieth century:

> "Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. . . . we're giving away to terror, to tape recorders and cameras, to radios, to bombs stashed in radios. News of disaster is the only narrative people need. The darker the news, the grander the
> narrative. . . ." (DeLillo *M2* 41)

The character of Bill Grey provides deeper insights into Don DeLillo's motivations for writing post-postmodern fiction. The parallels between Bill Grey and literature's most famous recluse, Thomas Pynchon, are numerous. Grey himself says: "'When a writer doesn't show his face, he becomes a local symptom of God's famous reluctance to

appear'" (DeLillo *M2* 36). The writer of fiction, whether it be the fictional Bill Grey, the extremely reclusive Thomas Pynchon, or the low profile Don DeLillo, wants to avoid his own life becoming a source of cheap entertainment. The writer wants to be recognized for his writing, not for his face, not as a "celebrity". Unfortunately, for Thomas Pynchon, J.D. Salinger, and to some extent for Salmon Rushdie (although his reasons for keeping a low profile are quite different and personal survival-related -- and therefore the subject of numerous televised documentaries), their desires to remain private, non-descript citizens only serve to generate enormous amounts of speculation and a very lively, internet based industry devoted to uncovering their true identities or whereabouts. But how could shunning the media, especially photographers, *not* increase the amount of speculation and interest in one's personal life? In the televisual world, where celebrity status makes one stratospherically important, to purposely shun the attention of the media is an unheard of arrogance! Bill Grey pronounces on this dilemma: "'People may be intrigued by this figure [the reclusive author], but they also resent him and want to dirty him up and watch his face distort in shock and fear when the concealed photographer leaps out of the trees'" (DeLillo *M2* 36-7)."'[W]riters,'" says Grey "'are being consumed by the emergence of news as an apocalyptic force'" (DeLillo *M2* 72).

This "apocalyptic force" invoked by Bill Grey in *Mao-II* is also the "reality" referred to by Don DeLillo in the DeCurtis interview excerpt above. This reality, having infiltrated "our lives over the past twenty-five years" is the reality of the Cold War and the paranoid hangover it has left in the wake of its supposed dissolution. Eschatology, by definition, the branch of theology that concerns itself with the end times and the final destiny of human kind, has taken on a much more secular meaning since the dawn of the atomic age and the advent of atomic weaponry. Tom LeClair writes: "[t]he perspective from which DeLillo criticizes contemporary American life is not the platform of class or religion or race or sex or education or taste, but the long moral view of simple human survival -- the survival of the species and its individuals," and adds that "for every global

perspective, there are in DeLillo's novels specific human moments, details that prove his participation in systems small as well as large, in families and in space probes, in local fears and wide entertainments that hide these fears" (LeClair 27).

DeLillo's preoccupation with the morbidities of disaster and apocalyptic death are not as far removed from realism as some of DeLillo's detractors would like to make it seem. Malcolm Bradbury writes that DeLillo is very much in tune with the not-so-secret fears of the American people, the fears they have been harbouring since the beginnings of the Cold War in the 1950's. D.T. Max of the *Miami Herald* writes: "DeLillo's nifty trick is to outdo reality by embellishing it, to harness on behalf of his fiction the enormous energy of those few moments of history we all share" (Max 1). Here, D.T. Max echoes Wallace's idea of the "transient received myths of popular culture" (see pg.6 of this thesis), one of the integral elements of post-postmodern fiction. But Don DeLillo is not merely trying to out-sensationalize the evening news. The reality that Don DeLillo knows -- *fin de siècle* America -- is a culture that is equally preoccupied with a pending apocalypse that has now gone from being the immediate and well publicized looming threat of global annihilation, to a colder, more clandestine, underground phenomenon. The fears of the Cold War are still at work in the American mindset, and through his novels Don DeLillo is successful in challenging the electronic media's predominant role in the American paranoia industry (in which the aesthetics and secrecy and imminent doomsday-isms of the Cold War are converted into a highly profitable, sensationalized source of entertainment), and in making the eschatological teleologies and epistemologies of America's very real fears appear unfamiliar to the people who harbour them.

High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, & Comedy is Patricia Mellencamp's 1992 study of the impact television has had on the psychological profile of America. Catastrophe coverage, the continuous live coverage of disaster or anything of a highly charged, stressful nature is the quintessence of televisuality. Mellencamp suggests that all televised disaster coverage is merely a dry run of the ultimate catastrophe coverage event,

nuclear holocaust, which, if the electronic infrastructure and anyone capable of covering the story survives, will obviously be the greatest media blitz in history, even if the audience is greatly diminished, or non-existent. But until Armageddon, there will be uncountable smaller, less catastrophic catastrophies that will nonetheless capture the attention of the nation. The San Francisco earthquake of 1989 is Mellencamp's prime example of catastrophe coverage.[8] Every major network, every small town and major city affiliate, every cable based news source in North America offered continuous, around the clock coverage of the wide spread destruction, looting, and human tragedy. Mellencamp claims that in this instance and in every other instance of catastrophe coverage "TV created fear, which necessitated more TV coverage spreading throughout the day, to all channels. Constant viewing and channel switching are audience rituals which uncannily resemble classic Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) behavior" (Mellencamp 29).

As strange of a leap as this may seem to be at first (the leap from televisuality, defamiliarization and the Cold War to obsessive compulsive behavior), Mellencamp presents a very powerful argument for exposing the link between television and a nation of avid television watchers who are constantly checking in with the electronic media (local and national network coverage, special interest cable channels, news and information radio stations, internet news services) in order to make sure that all is right with their world and in order to make sure that if something has gone wrong, or is about to go wrong, some cataclysmic event about to befall them (Y2K/millenium hype being a perfect example), they will be well prepared or at the very least, they will not be caught by surprise -- TV will either help them survive or numb the blow. "Alleviating fear," writes Mellencamp "has become a profitable enterprise" (Mellencamp 31). And what better way to ensure that there is always some fear to alleviate than by generating fear,

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[8] Additional standout examples include the Rodney King Verdict Riots in Los Angeles, the O.J. Simpson Bronco Chase (once again, Los Angeles), and the heavily televised Gulf War and the various, subsequent attacks on Iraq that have peppered the 1990's.

uncertainty and doubt and broadcasting it around the world. The audience will always be there, so it is not as if the networks will have to try and convince people to allow them to cash in on their phobias. The networks only have to vie for the audience's attention with other networks and here again, we arrive at Philip Roth's observation with regards to the various media continually working to out-sensationalize their competitors.

Throughout the 1990's, television production became more frenetic. "Big Reality" news magazines such as *A Current Affair* and *Hardcopy* feature loud, abrasive sound bytes that accompany the equally abrasive and visually disorienting graphic montages that begin the program and flash before the viewer before and after every commercial break. An atmosphere of urgency hangs over everything that happens on these shows, the contents of which are invariably scandal, disaster, mayhem and celebrity related gossip and tragedy. It is spectacle in its truest form. Everything, it seems, has taken on the appearance and stressful overtones of catastrophe coverage in order to maintain the attention of viewers. These "Big Reality" shows and (in an attempt to remain stylish and up-to-date) even some of the more traditional market-oriented, down-to-earth news and information shows such as *The Today Show*, are constantly updating and announcing their own schedule and as noted in chapter one, one of the chief components of televisuality is the idea that increasingly, the subject of television is becoming television itself. Mellencamp associates this 'repetitive and compulsive' checking of the content of television by television itself with OCD, as well. If the programming itself is incessantly making sure that the viewer is aware of what is upcoming on the broadcast, it only follows that the viewers, who are surfing back and forth between channels, will eventually begin to exhibit some of the OCD behaviors themselves. John Thornton Caldwell writes:

> Everything on television now seems to be pitched at the viewer as a special event -- from non-descript movies of the week to the live coverage of some local catastrophe on the eleven o'clock news -- so much so in fact, that the term *special* is now almost meaningless. Showcase and event

> strategies that used to be limited to sweeps now pervade the entire year. No programming confesses to being commonplace. (Caldwell 9)

What is the entertainment value here? You would think that this would drive people away from their TV's because of the sheer boredom this would produce but instead, it keeps people tuned in -- they are afraid of missing anything touted as "important" or "newsworthy".

Obsessive Compulsive behavior resembles very closely the behaviors associated with drug addiction, eating disorders and post traumatic stress disorders as "[a]ll involve 'intrusive, reprehensible thoughts or images that are resisted. . . . The intrusive content frequently shift[ing] to new preoccupations'" (Mellencamp 32). Don DeLillo's novels are dominated by "reprehensible thoughts [and] images," his characters obsessed with their impending dooms and the daily cornucopia of catastrophe and violence on television. In *End Zone*, Gary Harkness's morbid preoccupation with the possibility and associated statistics of nuclear war results in his having to withdraw from the University of Miami. Gary explains:

> It started with a book, an immense volume about the possibilities of nuclear war -- assigned reading for a course I was taking in modes of disaster technology. The problem was simple and terrible: I enjoyed the book. I liked reading about the deaths of tens of millions of people. I liked dwelling on the destruction of great cities. Five to twenty million dead. Fifty to a hundred million dead. Ninety percent population loss. Seattle wiped out by mistake. Moscow demolished. Airbursts over every SAC base in Europe. I liked to think of huge buildings toppling, of firestorms, of bridges collapsing, survivors roaming the charred countryside. . . . People burned and unable to breathe. People being evacuated from doomed cities. People diseased and starving. Two hundred thousand bodies decomposing on the roads outside Chicago. . . . I became fascinated by words and phrases like thermal hurricane, overkill, circular error probability, post-attack environment, stark deterrence, dose-rate contours, kill-ratio, spasm war. . . . What was wrong with me? Had I gone mad? Did others feel as I did? I became seriously depressed. Yet I went to the library and got more books on the subject. (DeLillo *EZ* 20-1)

It is interesting to note that Gary's fascination with nuclear technology and apocalypse and his subsequent depression stems from information found in books. In the above

excerpt, DeLillo demonstrates the power of typography over televisuality as a form of communication. Because contemporary nuclear weapons have never been deployed outside of testing purposes, no images exist of the widespread death and destruction that these weapons are designed to inflict. Everything is hypothetical, based entirely on scientific calculations. Without the filter of the electronic media, something to show that this catastrophic destruction *is* possible but *simultaneously* proves that it has not happened to the individual viewer, an aura of uncertainty, mystery and chance surrounds the information Gary finds in the books. Without the intervening medium, these "reprehensible thoughts" and images exude a frightening randomness, an unprecedented, unexpected reality; they are completely unfamiliar as they are wholly devoid of the candycoat of televisual irony. Again, the familiar has been rendered strange. It would be easy to shift these horrific and reprehensible thoughts from DeLillo's characters to DeLillo himself, to say that he uses his fiction and his readers as mediums through which his own fears are alleviated, and although this could very well be the case, when one takes into account DeLillo's agenda of post-postmodern defamiliarization -- making the familiar strange again -- it becomes more likely that this incessant revelling in Cold War paranoia and violent apocalypse is the medium DeLillo chooses because it defamiliarizes the reader with the real world as it is represented to them through the electronic media. DeLillo critiques and exposes television by subsuming the power of television.

The problem of how a writer should approach the subject of nuclear destruction has been studied by Paul Boyer in *By the Bombs Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (1985). How does a novelist or a journalist describe a nuclear holocaust through language? What is the proper tone? What is the "appropriate aesthetic" (Boyer 250)? What is the doomsday style? Boyer points out that as "[o]verwhelming as the bomb was, except for a few scientists and several hundred thousand Japanese, it was not a lived experience. The central reality of a new era, it was not yet accessible to the creative core of consciousness" (Boyer 250). In an effort to cope

with the advent of the atomic age "[s]ome scientists and scientific popularizers, eager to explain the bomb in nontechnical terms, affected a breezy, colloquial style embarrassingly ill-suited to the matter at hand" (Boyer 248). Even more embarrassing is the electronic media's contribution to the language and ethos of nuclear destruction. Where science avoided long-winded, scientific explanations of the bomb and its destructive potential in order to placate the fears of Americans, the spectacle and sensationalism of atomic power was too tempting a subject for television and the print media not to exploit. Their objective was not to placate fears but rather to instill and cultivate them, providing gruesome details and nerve wracking statistics, whether they were factual or highly exaggerated, in order to ensure the largest possible audience. The advent of the Cold War and the advent of television are contemporaneous and under the guise of being patriotic and civically minded, television was able to entertain and provide much needed public awareness. While all of this may seem on the up and up, television interspersing its usual output of frivolous entertainment with moments of serious, socially conscious and audience-beneficial programming, at the source television remained true to its sole agenda of entertainment and profit. Neil Postman writes:

> I raise no objection to television's junk. The best things on television *are* its junk, and no one and nothing is seriously threatened by it. Besides, we do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant. Therein is our problem, for television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations. (Postman 16)

How does DeLillo deal with the problem of representing nuclear disaster? A key element to DeLillo's fiction is that the threat of nuclear holocaust becomes the actual holocaust of the American family and the individual. DeLillo's post-postmodern techniques such as defamiliarization have already been discussed, but perhaps his best efforts in describing the holocaust through language, finding Boyer's "appropriate aesthetic," are witnessed in *White Noise* and in *Underworld*. Both *White Noise* and

Underworld are heavily informed by prototypically American perceptions of and reactions to the Cold War. The Gladney family in *White Noise* and the Shay family in *Underworld* seem entirely normal in their fears of some ambiguous apocalypse, whether it be fallout and radioactivity from a nuclear blast test site in New Mexico or the amorphous toxic cloud that invades the small college town of Blacksmith. The marriage of Jack and Babette Gladney (the fourth marriage for both partners) is being destroyed by harboured fears, distrust and infidelity. Nick and Marion Shay are experiencing similar difficulties. Where Babette Gladney needs the mysterious drug Dylar, which she procures through sexual favours to the reclusive pharmaceutical researcher who created the drug, to help her survive her paralyzing fear of death, Marion Shay turns to heroin as a means to forgetting the consequences of her infidelity and to add an erotic element of risk to her sexual liaisons with her husband's good friend, Brian Glassic. All of this seems so quintessentially American that it becomes surreal and strange to the reader although it is DeLillo's brand of *realism* -- a realism that involves the quotidian lives of everyday folk.

White Noise in particular explores the effects of catastrophe coverage and televisual culture on small town U.S.A. and on the American family. The Gladney family is plagued, both literally and figuratively, by a persistent, dark, looming cloud of paranoia and death. In *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism*, Tobin Siebers writes:

> We are afraid that the cold war will never end, and so the history of the cold war is the story of our skepticism about endings, intentions, interpretations, and calculations concerning numbers, troop movements, weapons, negotiations, and claims to truth and falsehood. . . . Our fear contributes an essential past to the cold war mentality. It determines the distrust, suspicion, paranoia, and skepticism that have always characterized the cold war era. (Siebers 29)

In his review of *Underworld* for the *London Review of Books* in February of 1998 Michael Wood expresses some views similar to those of Tobin Siebers and because of the looping relationship between *Underworld* and *White Noise*, Wood's comments hold true for *White Noise* as well. He writes:

> DeLillo explores conspiracy's legacy or, more precisely, a world bereft of conspiracy, in mourning for the scary, constricting sense the old secrets used to make. . . . There's a paradox here, because the seeping secrets are still invisible, although out in the open. What they have lost is their prestige, their power as secrets. (Wood 2)

I disagree with Wood on one point. Wood claims that DeLillo has created a "world bereft of conspiracy", a world "in mourning" for the paranoia of the Cold War. But, as already stated, DeLillo is not shrouding the Cold War behind his fiction. Instead he is *revealing* the Cold War through his fiction. The Americas of *Underworld* and *White Noise* are in no way "bereft" of conspiracy just as the Americans that populate these Americas (the two representations being so similar that they might as well be the part of the same narrative) are in no way "mourning" a lost sense of paranoia. Through the hyper-saturation of the Cold War in the electronic media (and in a typographic media vying for a larger share of the audience/market), the average American's awareness of these two Cold War symptoms (conspiracy and paranoia) is so acute that they have become desensitized to it. This Cold War world, teetering on the brink of annihilation has become a standard and acceptable fact of existence. There is nothing strange about it. It is beyond critique. Again, DeLillo, through his novels, is attempting to reverse or annihilate this sense of complacency. Unlike Michael Wood, Tobin Siebers' interest lies in suggesting that the "interest in turning toward the world is greater than ignoring it, although this action is risky and frightening" (Siebers x). Here, Siebers echoes the sentiments of Philip Roth who was unsure which direction American fiction should take in reaction to the ever growing violence of the real world.

Contemplating the rather depressing finales of much of the popular fiction of the 1950's and 1960's, in particular the works of Saul Bellow and J.D. Salinger, Roth writes:

> If the world is as crooked and unreal as it feels to me it is becoming, day by day; if one feels less and less power in the face of this unreality; if the inevitable end is destruction, if not of all life, then much that is valuable and civilized in life -- then why in God's name is the writer so pleased?

> Why don't all our fictional heroes wind up in institutions, like Holden Caulfield, or suicides, like Seymour Glass? (Roth 131-2)

Characters such as Jack Gladney and his wife Babette in *White Noise* seem to walk a fine line between life and suicide and both are good candidates for institutionalization. Their lives are ruled by their fear of death, their paranoia, their suspicions of marital infidelity, and their suspicions that their children know more about the world, are more in tune to pop culture than they are. Like Murray Suskind, who teaches in the American Environments, or Pop Culture department at the College-on-the-Hill, the Gladneys "want to immerse [themselves] in American magic and dread" (DeLillo *WN* 19). The mediator of this "magic and dread" for the American family is the television. Inundated with household electronics, Gladney parents and children alike are fascinated with televised footage of natural and manmade disasters. When footage of an airplane crash is shown on television, the dominant role that television plays in the Gladney home is demonstrated.

> By the time I got to the room at the end of the hall, there was only a puff of black smoke at the edge of the screen. But the crash was shown two more times, once in stop-action replay, and an analyst attempted to explain the reason for the plunge. (DeLillo *WN* 64)

In the above excerpt, we see a fine example of the intermingling of catastrophe coverage and the obsessive compulsive televisual behavior discussed by Patricia Mellencamp. Rather than showing the footage once, the television station opts to show it two more times -- no doubt the decision of a programming genius, angling to maintain the viewer rather than having them, after witnessing the footage for the first time, immediately switch to a rival channel with the hopes of viewing the footage again.

A further instance of narratological looping surrounds the plane crash footage. At a later point in the novel while Jack Gladney and one of his ex-wives wait at an airport for the arrival of their daughter, they are spectators to a 'real life' airplane drama and near tragedy.

> the passengers from another flight began filing through a drafty tunnel into the arrivals area. They were gray and stricken, they were stooped over in

> weariness and shock. . . . The plane had lost power in all three engines, dropped from thirty-four thousand feet to twelve thousand feet. Something like four miles. When the steep glide began, people rose, fell, collided, swam in their seats. Then the serious screaming and moaning began. Almost immediately a voice from the flight deck was heard on the intercom: "We're falling out of the sky! We're going down! We're a silver gleaming death machine!" . . . . Suddenly the engines restarted. Just like that. Power, stability, control. The passengers, prepared for impact, were slow to adjust to the new wave of information. . . . The smoking sign went on, an international hand with a cigarette. Stewardesses appeared with scented towelettes for cleaning blood and vomit. . . . Four miles of prime-time terror. No one knew what to say. . . . The first officer walked down the aisle, smiling and chatting in an empty pleasant corporate way. His face had the rosy and confident polish that is familiar in handlers of large passenger aircraft. They looked at him and wondered why they'd been afraid. (DeLillo *WN* 91-2)

When Gladney's daughter Bee arrives on the scene, having safely landed on a different plane, she is curious as to why there is no media present to cover this near disaster. "There's no media in Iron City," her father informs her. She replies: "Then they went through all that for nothing?" (DeLillo *WN* 92). Images and references to television and the news media echo through out this scene, which reads like an outtake from one of the *Airplane* movies, where the disaster movie genre is parodied in the extreme. The scene on board the plummeting jet goes from calm to Breugel-esque mayhem and back to a bewildered calm in the time it takes the plane to fall four miles. In the end, it appears as if the passengers have been the victims of a cruel farce. The voice that comes from the cockpit intercom speaks words that would be more appropriate in a poorly written, made for TV melodramatic disaster movie ("We're a silver gleaming death machine!"). Is it possible that the pilot, desensitized to death and fear by television, his job and the mediated culture that surrounds him was simply having himself a very dangerous lark at the expense of his passengers? In hindsight, the passengers see their own fear as being unreal when they see the stoic first officer moving through the cabin, seemingly oblivious to the chaos that transpired only moments before. The only way they can relate to it is as some kind of "prime-time" televised drama.

Further evidence of DeLillo's fixation with the effects of the mass media and the blurring of the boundaries between news-fact and entertainment is found in the television viewing practices of the Gladney family.

> That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese. There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Heinrich was not sullen, I was not bored. Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death. Babette tried to switch to a comedy series about a group of racially mixed kids who build their own communications satellite. She was startled by the force of our objection. We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping. (DeLillo *WN* 64)

Typical products of a death fixated culture, the Gladney's and many others like them do not realize that on an unconscious level, violence and mass destruction is what they truly crave. They are contributing to America's apocalyptic fascinations on a psychic level. The teleological end of this cultural trend would have to be a global sense of nihilism. Perplexed by this problem, Jack Gladney turns to another one of his colleagues in the department of American Environments. With words that would make Philip Roth proud, Jack Gladney asks: "Why is it. . . that decent, well-meaning and responsible people find themselves intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television?" (DeLillo *WN* 65). His colleague, Alfonse Stompanato, explains:

> "Because we're suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information. . . .
> "The flow is constant. . . Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, motes. Only catastrophe gets our attention. We want them, we need them, we depend on them. As long as they happen somewhere else. This is where California comes in. Mud slides, brush fires, coastal erosion, earthquakes, mass killings, et cetera. We can relax and enjoy these disasters because in our hearts we feel that California deserves whatever it gets. Californians invented the concept of life-style. This alone warrants their doom." (DeLillo *WN* 66)

Mao II contains similar televised catastrophe footage:

> She was watching the world news of the day. On any given day it was mainly the film footage she wanted to see and she didn't mind watching without sound. It was interesting how you could make up the news as you went along by sticking to picture only. (DeLillo *M2* 32)

When footage of a crowd stampede at a soccer game is shown in this montage of tragedy, DeLillo writes that "it is like a fresco in a church, a crowded twisted vision of a rush to death as only a master of the age could paint it" (DeLillo *M2* 34). This allusion to altar-piece artwork is a foreshadowing of things to come in future DeLillo novels. Six years later a painting by the Flemish master Pieter Breugel plays an integral role in *Underworld*. This will be examined in greater detail below. Yet another example of televised catastrophe coverage can be found in *Underworld* where the reader encounters references to and snippets of videotaped footage known as the Texas Highway Killer video. The video, shot by a young girl through the back window of her family's car as they drive down a Texas highway, shows a man in the vehicle directly behind the car that the young girl is in, being shot in the head by the driver of a car that pulls up next to the victim's car. The footage becomes the focus of the international media and is played repeatedly, at all hours, around the globe.

> And there is something about videotape, isn't there, and this particular kind of serial crime? This is a crime designed for random taping and immediate playing. You sit there and wonder if this kind of crime became more possible when the means of taping an event and playing it immediately, without a neutral interval, a balancing space and time, became widely available. Taping-and-playing intensifies and compresses the event. It dangles a need to do it again. You sit there thinking that the serial murder has found a medium, or vice versa – an act of shadow technology, of compressed time and repeated images, stark and glary and unremarkable. . . . It is a famous murder because it is on tape . . . and because the crime was recorded by a child. . . . Seeing someone at the moment he dies, dying unexpectedly. This is reason alone to stay fixed to the screen. . . . There's a joke locked away here, a note of cruel slapstick that you are willing to appreciate even if it makes you feel a little guilty. Maybe the victim's a chump, a sort of silent-movie dupe, classically unlucky. He had it coming in a sense, for letting himself be caught on camera. Because once the tape starts rolling it can only end one way. This is what the context requires. You don't want Janet to give you any crap about it's on all the time, they show it a thousand times a day. They show

> it because it exists, because they have to show it, because this is why they're out there, to provide our entertainment. The more you watch the tape, the deader and colder and more relentless it becomes. The tape sucks the air right out of your chest but you watch it every time. (DeLillo *U* 159-60)

In *White Noise* the calm and tranquillity of the small town of Blacksmith is interrupted by a toxic gas leak. Despite their appetite for disaster, the Gladney's must flee their home. The defamiliarization caused by the watching of calamity on television results in Jack Gladney saying:

> "These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornadoes. I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith." (DeLillo *WN* 114)

Despite Jack's objections and disbelief, the town of Blacksmith is invaded by the mysterious, poisonous cloud euphemistically referred to as an "airborne toxic event" (DeLillo *WN* 117) which carries with it a cargo of free floating and vague symptoms of overexposure, including the slapsticky, sitcom-ish symptoms such as *déjà vu* and itchy palms. This gaseous adventure comprises the entire second book of *White Noise,* which is appropriately titled "The Airborne Toxic Event." As the Gladney's retreat from Blacksmith and the "black billowing cloud" (DeLillo *WN* 115), they come across hordes of people crossing a highway overpass on foot:

> They carried boxes and suitcases, objects in blankets, a long line of people leaning into the blowing snow. People cradling pets and small children, an old man wearing a blanket over his pajamas, two women shouldering a rolled-up rug. There were people on bicycles, children being pulled on sleds and in wagons. . . . they seemed to be part of some ancient destiny, connected in doom and ruin to a whole history of people trekking across wasted landscapes. There was an epic quality about them that made me [Jack Gladney] wonder for the first time at the scope of our predicament. (DeLillo *WN* 121-22)

The role that the media plays in the airborne toxic event and in any serious catastrophe whether it be natural or of human design is clearly a central concern for Don DeLillo. On the subject of the media in *White Noise*, Tom LeClair writes:

> Gladney, his family, and the town of Blacksmith look just as they did before this new kind of technological disaster, because its effects are invisible to the naked eye. Their response is to information -- quantified measures of exposure, possible long-range consequences -- rather than to entities, the scattered corpses or destroyed buildings of conventional disaster fiction. The disaster of *White Noise* is ultimately, the new knowledge that seeps into the future from the imploded toxic event. (LeClair 209)

But what knowledge have the Gladney's and the citizens of Blacksmith gained? Other than witnessing the flurry of activity as all manner of public authorities converge on the scene of the toxic spill along the highway; the amorphous toxic cloud itself; the chaos of the large scale evacuation and the frustration of the cramped gymnasium where they retreat to for shelter, there is no "new knowledge" seeping into their collective consciousness as LeClair suggests. Jack Gladney learns that he has been exposed to a positively deadly dose of the unknown toxin, but he does not know when he will die or what the symptoms of his illness may be. Surprisingly, his paranoia regarding death is not increased. In fact, he has been beyond the paranoid stage since prior to the beginning of the novel. He exists in a world of acceptance. The knowledge that his death is now "guaranteed" seems to soothe him.

Ultimately, all that is garnered from the airborne toxic event, despite all of the government personnel present in Blacksmith and all of the attention the "airborne toxic event" receives from the media, is more secrecy. In *Underworld*, J. Edgar Hoover (who appears as a character in the novel), standing in the aisle at the Polo Grounds, thinks to himself: "The genius of the bomb is printed not only in its physics of particles and rays but in the occasion it creates for new secrets" (DeLillo *U* 51). Taking into account further examples of DeLillo's looping system of fiction writing, ideas very similar to those

expressed by J. Edgar Hoover in *Underworld* appear in *Libra*. In *Libra* DeLillo describes the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chain of command:

> Knowledge was a danger, ignorance a cherished asset. In many cases. . . the Director of Central Intelligence, was not to know important things. The less he knew, the more decisively he could function. It would impair his ability to tell the truth at an inquiry or a hearing, or in an Oval Office chat with the President, if he knew what [his operatives] were talking about, or muttering in their sleep. The Joint Chiefs were not to know. The operational horrors were not for their ears. Details were a form of contamination. The Secretaries were to be insulated from knowing. They were happier not knowing, or knowing too late. The Deputy Secretaries were interested in drifts and tendencies. They expected to be misled. They counted on it. The Attorney General wasn't to know the queasy details. Just get results. Each level of the committee was designed to protect a higher level. (DeLillo *L* 21)

This profusion of conspiracy and intrigue, this breeding of ever increasing levels of secrecy leads CIA operative Win Everett to ponder the deceitful nature of his job and his immediate task at hand-- to plot and stage the assassination of the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy.

> Plots carry their own logic. There is a tendency of plots to move towards death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot no less than a conspiracy of armed men. The tighter the plot of the story, the more likely it will come to death. A plot in fiction, he believed, is the way we localize the force of death outside the book, play it off, contain it. . . . He worried about the deathward logic of his plot. He'd already made it clear that he wanted the shooters to hit a Secret Service man, wound him superficially. But it wasn't a misdirected round, an accidental killing, that made him afraid. There was something more insidious. He had a foreboding that the plot would move to a limit, develop a logical end. (DeLillo *L* 221)

In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, head of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill, echoing almost verbatim Win Everett's thoughts in *Libra*, speaks to his students about the nature of plots:

> "All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot." (DeLillo *WN* 26)

Clearly, Don DeLillo puts a lot of stock in this single idea as it provides a common narratological thread throughout all of his novels. Despite DeLillo's post-postmodern agenda, which includes writing fiction that is more readerly, relying on pop-culture and televisual references rather than a more writerly, postmodern/metafictional style of fiction which relies on self-referentiality, the metafictional elements inherent to this double entendre on the concept of plots cannot be denied. However, this metafictional element of DeLillo's fiction serves to reinforce the eschatological concerns of his works, the words of Win Everett and Jack Gladney echoing throughout. As the novels move towards their teleological destinations, the sense, the suggestion, the actuality of doom, represented typographically, is ultimately post-postmodern in effect -- which is to say, here, the metafiction defamiliarizes. In Don DeLillo's fictional universe, the media and the government, rather than being proactive sources of information and protection, are portrayed as malignant disseminators of misinformation, purveyors of reckless policies and inducers of general cultural decay. It is quite different from the benign facade that people are supposed to see, but increasingly, it seems to be a very accurate portrayal. In DeLillo's post-postmodern hands catastrophe coverage, cultural entropy and impending doom are transformed into vehicles of defamiliarization.

Underworld begins with a prologue entitled "The Triumph of Death", the setting of which is the October 3rd, 1951 pennant race game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers at the Polo Grounds in New York City. Any fan of Major League Baseball or any American pop culture or trivia buff will recognize this as the dramatic game in which Bobby Thompson hit a homerun late in the game, clinching the pennant for the Giants over the heavily favoured Dodgers. The reason this moment endures in the collective American memory is due to radio announcer Russ Hodges' jubilant play by play call of the infamous Thompson homerun. Here again, we see echoes of David Foster Wallace's comment that the post-postmodern fiction incorporates "the transient and received myths of popular culture" and D.T. Max's remarks that DeLillo harnesses "on

behalf of his fiction the enormous energy of those few moment of history we all share" (see page 40 of this thesis). The prologue reads as an excellent piece of "historiographic metafiction" (see Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*), incorporating actual people and historical events into the narrative: radio play by play commentator Russ Hodges is working the game, his "'*The Giants win the pennant*'" cries carrying across the airwaves (DeLillo *U* 42-3); a young Harry Caray sits in the broadcast booth adjoining Hodges'; Toots Shor, Jackie Gleason, Frank Sinatra and J. Edgar Hoover all appear in the prologue as spectators at the game.

Throughout this long prologue, which originally appeared in *Harper's* in October of 1992 as the novella *Pafko at the Wall*, metafictional comments are made by the third person omniscient narrator. Through the narrator DeLillo calls attention to the artifice of his account of the ball game. We learn that in his early career Russ Hodges "spent years in a studio doing re-creations of big league games. The telegraph bug clacking in the background and blabbermouth Hodges inventing ninety-nine percent of the action" (DeLillo *U* 25). Hodges would fictionalize accounts of young boys fetching souvenir baseballs that had been hit into the stands: "a priceless thing somehow, a thing that seems to recapitulate the whole history of the game every time it is thrown or hit or touched" (DeLillo *U* 26). Later, in his career as a live broadcaster, Hodges uses his ability to fictionalize the action on the field and in the stands to his advantage, colouring his commentary with his imagination, in effect, embellishing the game as it plays itself out before his eyes. The physical aspects and dynamics of the game and its players are described as "the narrative that lives in the spaces of the official play-by-play" (DeLillo *U* 27), the rhythm and quality of Russ Hodges' broadcast being described as "the game as rumour, conjectures and inner history" (DeLillo *U* 32). One would suspect that this would add a thick veneer of typical postmodern secrecy and complexity to the narrative, but as stated throughout this chapter what DeLillo is demonstrating to the reader is that official narratives, like those purveyed by governments and corporations are

often just as fabricated and based on a single persons imaginings as is the narrative of a live radio broadcast of a baseball game or a novel. Again, the reader encounters the metafictional double entendre on the concepts of plots.

As innocuous as this baseball game may seem, Don DeLillo is able to infuse his recreation of this historic event with a lingering sense of malevolence and dread, the prologue's grim title being the first sign of this apocalyptic, eschatological subtext. There are numerous similarities between DeLillo's rendering of this game and the terminology of nuclear holocaust that has become part of the language of pop culture in the Cold War era; because nuclear war continues to haunt our culture, we are able to pick up on many of the puns, references and wordplay in "The Triumph of Death." For instance, there is the juxtaposing of the pennant race that has consumed the attention of New York sports fans and the arms race that was the concern of the government, secret intelligence services and the military-industrial complex. Just as in the baseball game, where both teams are fighting for superiority and a chance to continue on to the World Series, the United States and the Soviet Union are struggling to amass the largest nuclear arsenals in order to ensure that one nation does not have an unfair advantage over the other when it comes to international political influence and world domination. The names of the teams involved can even be read as puns: the Giants and the Dodgers. Depending on which side of the political spectrum you adhere to, the team names can be applied to either world power. Dodger pitcher Don Newcombe's name is used as a very sly pun on the term "Nuke'em", which has become a common slang term for the use of nuclear weapons on an enemy, and in a lighter sense, it means to beat an opposing party thoroughly. The arc that Bobby Thompson's homerun ball takes on its journey into the Polo Grounds' stands is reminiscent of the path of a warhead as it travels from its launch site to ground zero. An intertextual nod towards *Gravity's Rainbow* and the influence Thomas Pynchon's writing has had on DeLillo's is very obvious here. The narrator of the epilogue tells us that "Thompson swings and *tomahawks* the ball and everybody, everybody watches,"

reiterating only a few lines later: "[a] topspin line drive. He *tomahawked* the pitch and the ball had topspin and dipped into the lower deck" (DeLillo *U* 42 [*emphasis added*]): "Tomahawk" is the American military nickname for a very powerful ballistic missile. The layered constitution of a baseball bears a more than uncanny resemblance to the core of a nuclear warhead. This fact is revealed to readers who may not be aware of this resemblance later in the book by baseball enthusiast and full time paranoid Marvin Lundy, the man who followed the trail of the legendary Thompson homerun ball until it eventually fell into his hands. Marvin informs us that: "the whole thing is interesting because when they make an atomic bomb, listen to this, they make the radioactive core the exact same size as a baseball. . . . [a] regulation major league baseball no less than nine inches in circumference, going by the rule book" (DeLillo *U* 172).

Throughout *Underworld*, the Bobby Thompson homerun ball is fetishized. Again, the familiar becomes strange. An ordinary, mass produced baseball "the thing they rub up and scuff and sweat on" (DeLillo *U* 45) is transformed into an extraordinary cultural artifact, an important piece of historical information, complete with the sexualized mystique of a religious relic much sought after by collectors and the sports memorabilia industry. When the baseball, transformed by Bobby Thompson's bat, becomes part of American pop-culture, like a literary text or a painting its authenticity becomes a paramount concern. Its familiarity as a standard, everyday object, a piece of sports equipment, has disappeared. The transformation is instantaneous. Suddenly, the ability to distinguish that particular baseball from the millions just like it, represents the difference between a baseball worth a few dollars and a baseball worth a small fortune. Only how can it possibly be distinguished? The specifications of how a baseball is constructed -- how much it weighs, its diameter, how many stitches it has, what grade of leather it is made out of -- are tightly observed standardizations. A central concern of designing and manufacturing baseballs is to ensure that each one is identical to those which have gone

before and those that will be manufactured in the future. There is no original model, each individual baseball in existence can be used as the model. The baseball becomes an example of Jean Baudrillard's theory of the precession of the simulacra: "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. . . it is the map that precedes the territory" (Baudrillard 2). Walter Benjamin writes: "[t]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (Benjamin 220).

> The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissable from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. (Benjamin 221)

In Chapter One, we see how Benjamin's theories of mechanical reproduction apply to the advent of typographic culture over more primitive, oral cultures. Where hand written manuscripts maintained their aura, maintained a mystical, religious element, mechanical reproduction "emancipate[d] the work or art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" (Benjamin 223). What DeLillo has done with the Thompson homerun ball is reverse the effects of mechanical reproduction on the object reproduced. Rather than having no aura at all, being a mass produced, relatively insignificant object, the ball's aura increases astronomically. The significance it has taken on renders the object virtually unrecognizable as far as the objects significance is concerned, although it remains totally recognizable with regards to its physical appearance. Indeed, it is as if we are no longer even talking about a baseball. And, essentially, we're not. The aura the ball has taken on is obviously post-production. The aura gained has nothing to do with the ball's origins or production history and has everything to do with the ball's teleology, its final destination -- its existence as an artifact of American pop-culture.

From its original owner, Cotter Martin, the young black boy who wrestles the ball away from a frenzied crowd only seconds after it is hit into the outfield bleachers, the ball changes hands multiple times. Not only is it a cherished by characters within *Underworld*, it also becomes a source of continuity to the reader who from time to time, catches up to this holy grail of Spaldings on its reclusive and fabled travels. Interestingly, the ball is especially coveted by Dodgers fans as a tangible symbol of loss. Nick Shay is one such Dodgers fan, who many years after the incredible Giants upset, continues to be fascinated by the mysterious baseball and the legendary game itself. Strangely, it is Brian Glassic, the man who is having the affair with Nick's wife who eventually tracks the ball to the New Jersey home of Marvin Lundy whose basement has been converted into a shrine to baseball. One wall of the basement is a to scale model of the outfield scoreboard and clubhouse facade of the Polo Grounds:

> It covered an area about twenty-two feet long and twelve feet high, floor to ceiling, and included the Chesterfield sign and slogan, the Longines clock, a semblance of the clubhouse windows and a parapet and finally a hand-slotted line score, the inning by inning tally of the famous play-off game of 1951. (DeLillo *U* 169)

In characters like Marvin Lundy we witness the American saturation in pop culture and its icons. For those living under the umbrella of the Cold War, even in the 1990's, nostalgia and memorabilia are great distractions. But for Marvin Lundy, who spent thousands of hours examining the pixels in filmed footage of the much sought after baseball disappearing into the outfield bleachers, baseball and the bomb are one in the same because he knows what drives people to spend their lives questing after seemingly trivial articles that are attached to historical sporting events, often spending multiple times more in the search for the object than the object itself is actually worth. The motive behind the quest is deeply rooted fear; the need to possess an article of nostalgia that represents a simpler, less violent time. Speaking with Brian Glassic, Marvin says:

> "People who have these bats and balls and preserve the old stories through the spoken word and know the nicknames of a thousand players, we're

> here in our basements with tremendous history on our walls. And I'll tell you something, you'll see I'm right. There's men in the coming years they'll pay fortunes for these objects. They'll pay unbelievable. Because this is desperation speaking." (DeLillo *U* 182)

Underworld's prologue, "The Triumph of Death," takes that nostalgia and infuses it with the desperation that Marv Lundy speaks of. Throughout "The Triumph of Death," the fans at the Polo Grounds shower the playing field with shredded paper. The narrator explains:

> Paper is falling again, crushed traffic tickets and field-stripped cigarettes and work from the office and scorecards in the shape of airplanes, windblown and mostly white, and Pafko [*a Dodgers outfielder*] walks back to his position and alters stride to kick a soda cup lightly and the gesture functions as a form of recognition, a hint of some concordant force between players and fans. . . a sign of respect for the sly contrivances of the game, the patterns that are undivinable. (DeLillo *U* 37)

> It is coming down from all points, laundry tickets, envelopes swiped from the office, there are crushed cigarette packs and sticky wrap from the icecream sandwiches, pages from memo pads and pocket calendars, they are throwing faded dollar bills, snapshots torn to pieces, ruffled paper swaddles for cupcakes, they are tearing up letters they've been carrying around for years pressed into their wallets, the residue of love affairs and college friendships, it is happy garbage now, the fans' intimate wish to be connected to the event, unendably, in the form of pocket litter, personal waste, a thing that carries a shadow identity -- rolls of toilet tissue unbolting lyrically in streamers. (DeLillo *U* 44-5)

Not only does this steady downpour of paper bring to mind the fallout particles of a nuclear winter, it also adds a deeper sense of foreboding to the scene being played out before us. Despite the gravity of that afternoon's game, there is an unusual number of empty seats. It is as if a collective sense of doom kept a large number of the fans away from the Polo Grounds. DeLillo's intertwining of the great American pastime of baseball and the threat of nuclear war is at the heart of this ominous atmosphere. October 3rd, 1951 also marks the date that Russia detonated an atomic device. The coincidence of this detonation and Bobby Thompson's heroic blast bringing new meaning to the phrase "the shot heard around the world". The information regarding the developments in Russia is

filtered through the person of J. Edgar Hoover who confers with a secret service agent in the aisle near his seats at the Polo grounds.

> It seems the Soviet Union has conducted an atomic test at a secret location somewhere inside its own borders. They have exploded a bomb in plain unpretending language. And our detection devices indicate this is clearly what it is -- it is a bomb, a weapon, it is an instrument of conflict, it produces heat and blast and shock. It is not some peaceful use of atomic energy with home-heating applications. It is a red bomb that sprouts a great white cloud like some thunder god of ancient Eurasia.
> (DeLillo *U* 23)

Clearly, the atomic blast in Russia is of much greater consequence than the baseball game. But, just as the annihilation of Hiroshima receives a single line of attention in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, whereas a scene that details the extinction of dodo birds on the west coast of Africa receives an unnecessarily extensive account (yet another example of Pynchon's overarching influence), the baseball game, the news and excitement it generates and its importance to the novel as a whole dwarfs any aspect of the bomb. The importance of sports culture to American pop culture in general is an obvious point being made here. Other than those who inexplicably stayed away from the Polo Grounds that afternoon, DeLillo's downplaying of the Russian atomic experiment and foregrounding of the ball game matches the sentiments of those in the crowd. Or, is it possible that those who attended the ball game are more in tune to the collective sense of dread that permeates the prologue. Maybe those not in attendance did not attend due to a combination of factors: the fact that the Giants were very much the underdogs and the inclement weather that threatened on that day. Maybe those who were at the game needed to find some distraction from the fears of the much publicized Cold War, needed to find some sense of security in the anonymity of a large crowd. Douglas Keesey writes: "[t]he battle for nuclear superiority is the dark side of baseball, the kind of competition that the rules cannot contain and in which all the players must die" (Keesey 201). During the prologue, at separate times and in different contexts, both Russ Hodges and J. Edgar Hoover make statements that continue to galvanize in the readers mind the connection

between America's pastime and America's nightmare. Referring to the Russian atomic explosion, J. Edgar Hoover thinks: "The sun's own heat that swallows cities" (DeLillo *U* 24). Russ Hodges on the other hand, ruminating on the subject of "'real baseball'" refers to it as "'The thing that happens in the sun'" (DeLillo *U* 25).

Is the triumph of death the deeply ingrained fear and floating paranoia that grips the American populous? Preoccupation with an atomic or nuclear holocaust on a conscious level is no longer necessary because the fear is so excruciatingly real that it must be accepted and interiorized in order to be endured? This is the subtext that DeLillo intends the reader to glean from "The Triumph of Death," and it is very much in keeping with DeLillo's post-postmodernism. The prologue's melancholy title comes about through some very cunning eckphrasis (the prose description or incorporation of a painting into literature) on Don DeLillo's part.

> In the box seats J. Edgar Hoover plucks a magazine page off his shoulder, where the thing has lighted and stuck. At first, he's annoyed that the object has come in contact with his body. Then his eyes fall upon the page. It is a color reproduction of a painting crowded with medieval figures who are dying or dead -- a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin. Edgar has never seen a painting quite like this. It covers the page completely and must surely dominate the magazine. Across the red-brown earth, skeleton armies on the march. Men impaled on lances, hung from gibbets, drawn on spoked wheels fixed to the tops of bare trees, bodies open to the crows. Legions of the dead forming up behind shields made of coffin lids. Death himself astride a slat-ribbed hack, he is peaked for blood, his scythe held ready as he presses people in haunted swarms towards the entrance of some helltrap, and oddly modern construction that could be a subway tunnel or office corridor. A background of ash skies and burning ships. It is clear to Edgar that the page is from Life and he tries to work up an anger, he asks himself why a magazine called Life would want to reproduce a painting of such lurid and dreadful dimensions. But he can't take his eyes off the page. (DeLillo *U* 41)[9]

[9] This issue of Life magazine does exist. It was on the newsstands on October 1st, 1951, two days before the baseball game. In a personal aside, I attempted to purchase a copy of this issue from a rare book seller in Detroit, Michigan in February of 1998. Upon requesting the magazine at the front desk, I was lead down a labyrinthine series of hallways to a room which I was not permitted to enter. The employee accompanying me said there was fairly good chance that they had a copy, but felt it only fair to warn me that

The painting reproduced is *The Triumph of Death*, by the 16th century Flemish painter Pieter Breugel, The Elder. Painted circa 1562, *The Triumph of Death* lights upon J. Edgar Hoover's shoulder only moments before Bobby Thompson slugs his way into the history books and trivia contests, just when the tension in the crowd reaches its peak and the paper throwing craze intensifies. Measuring 117 x 162cm, rendered in oil on panel, the painting undoubtedly served its purpose as an altarpiece well -- the moral message (i.e. it does not matter whether you are a saint or a sinner, we are all doomed) being very clearly realized by Breugel. When Hoover gazes out across the field during the riotous celebration being staged by the fans, it is obvious that there is a connection between the apocalyptic painting and the carnevalesque party scene at the Polo Grounds.

> He looks up for a moment. he takes the pages from his face -- it is a wrenching effort -- and looks at the people on the field. Those who are happy and dazed. Those who run about the bases calling out the score. The ones who are so excited they wont sleep tonight. Those whose team has lost. The ones that taunt the losers. . . . The fans pressed together at the clubhouse steps chanting the players' names. The fans having fistfights on the subway going home. The screamers and berserkers. The old friends who meet by accident out near second base. Those who will light the city with their bliss. (DeLillo *U* 51)

Hoover refers to the images in Breugel's *The Triumph of Death* as a "census-taking of awful ways to die" (DeLillo *U* 50) and oddly enough, the horror of the painting brings to mind "a lonely tower standing on the Kazakh Test Site, the tower armed with the bomb, and he can almost here the wind blowing across the Central Asian steppes" (DeLillo *U* 50). This image proves to be a premonition on Hoover's part as later in the novel, the reader travels with Nick Shay and Brian Glassic to that very same Kazakh test

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it may cost as much as $15.00, American. After several minutes of waiting in the hallway, the employee exited the secret room with a pristine copy in hand. I was allowed to glance through it briefly and found the very large reproduction of *The Triumph of Death* and even came across some of the advertisements that DeLillo mentions as being in the magazine. DeLillo's research is indeed thorough, and expensive. The cover price of this issue of Life magazine on October 1st, 1951 was 20 cents. The asking price for this pristine copy in February of 1998 was $60.00, American. Needless to say, I learned an important lesson about literary research and scholarship and realized that just as the Bobby Thompson homerun ball, cultural artifacts appreciate in value exponentially.

site to witness an underground nuclear detonation. Here, Nick and Brain are given a tour of a museum where the horror and human atrocity of the Cold War is preserved under glass:

> [Viktor Maltsev] takes us to a place called the Museum of Misshappens. It is part of the Medical Institute. . . a long low room of display cases filled with fetuses. . . . some of them, are preserved in Heinz pickle jars. There is the two-headed specimen. There is the single head that is twice the size of the body. There is the normal head that is located in the wrong place, perched on the right shoulder. . . . Five hundred nuclear explosions at the test site, which is southwest of the city, and even when they stopped testing in the atmosphere, the mine shafts they dug for underground detonations were not deep enough to preclude the venting of dangerous levels of radiation. (DeLillo *U* 799)

The Kazakh test site also precludes DeLillo's inclusion of a fictional film by fictional director Michael Eisenstein in the novel. It is from this film, "*Unterwelt*", that *Underworld* garners its title. A scene form the film is described in the following excerpt:

> It seems you are watching a movie about a mad scientist. He sweeps through the frame, dressed in well-defined black and white, in layered robes, wielding an atomic ray gun. Figures move through crude rooms in some underground space. They are victims or prisoners, perhaps experimental subjects. A glimpse of a prisoner's face shows he is badly deformed and it is less shocking than funny. He has the sloped head, shallow jaw and protuberant lips of an earthworm -- but a worm with a human pathos about him. (DeLillo *U* 429)

The fusing of the equally surreal images of the pennant win celebration, Bruegel's horrific painting, the fictional film *Unterwelt*, and the exodus before the "airborne toxic event" in *White Noise* proves to be a powerful method of defamiliarizing the reader with what they have come to expect from the drama and passion of sporting events, art masterpieces, film (both real and fictional), and catastrophe coverage. Although the scene at the Polo Grounds appears to be incredibly benign in comparison to the legions of skeletons and corpses in the painting, below the surface there exists an overpowering sense of apocalypse. If, as Neil Postman says, human experience is gradually being portrayed as a mediated experience, specifically designed for representation through electronic, televisual mediums, then Don DeLillo sees all of electronically mediated

human experience -- the reality of the latter twentieth century -- as being demonstratively eschatological in nature. DeLillo scholar Hal Crowther writes:

> Don DeLillo may be recorded, and profit by being recorded, as the last serious novelist denounced by the American media establishment while it acknowledged the existence of literature, or indeed of anything that wasn't created by, for, or in conjunction with television. (Crowther 321)

Herein *may* lie the reason why Don DeLillo's fiction, as Hal Crowther suggests, has come up against so much harsh criticism (warned against taking too harsh of a moralistic stance, I proceed with this line of thought as I feel, like Postman, that there is merit in a morally-based argument even if it is founded on everyday observation). It goes without saying that people, whether they be literary scholars, chemists, fishmongers or masons, do not like to be made fools of. Nor do they appreciate having their sources of entertainment and amusement exposed as the very means through which they are being made fools. Could it be that, unwilling to accept anything that is delivered through the written word, especially anything that contradicts and criticizes television and the televisual world, readers and even some critics would rather berate DeLillo's novels for suffering from a very studied, clearly intentional similarity to one another than admit that the larger, defamiliarizing project of DeLillo's post-postmodern fiction succeeds in subsuming televisuality and entertainment's power to create and shape culture and reverses the familiarizing trend of television in order to return those things that once seemed alien and malignant back to their original, ineluctable state of strangeness? Given the state of televisual culture, this seems as plausible a hypothesis as any. One wonders what would result from those same critics and avid telephiles viewing a televised program about the deceptive nature of electronically mediated information. . . . But what are the chances of that?

Chapter Three.
The Macabre in the Mundane: Post-Postmodern Expressionism in the Fiction of David Foster Wallace and the Films of David Lynch.

David Foster Wallace's fiction takes a decidedly different approach to the defamiliarization of televisual culture than the one taken by Don DeLillo. As seen in the preceding chapter, with the exception of the television executives and documentary film crew of *Americana* -- a novel that despite its seemingly perfect subject matter for this project does not factor heavily into my argument due to its overall failure as a work of fiction (my opinion, but a considered and honest one that also happens to be widely held amongst other DeLillo scholars and readers) -- DeLillo's characters encounter defamiliarizing forms of catastrophe, entertainment and televisual culture the same way that the majority of people encounter it: through everyday contact with the various forms of electronic media (i.e. television, radio, film), and even through various typographic media (as in the case of J. Edgar Hoover in *Underworld* and Gary Harkness in *End Zone*). In Wallace's fiction, however, the characters encounter the defamiliarization of televisual culture through their intimate involvement with the mediums themselves. Five of David Foster Wallace's works will be discussed in this chapter: the novel *The Broom of the System* (1987); the short stories "Girl With Curious Hair," and "Here and There," as they appear in the collection *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989); *Infinite Jest* (1996); and in addition to the already heavily cited "E Unibus Pluram," I will also cite the essay "David Lynch Keeps His Head," as it appears in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997).[10]

Upon first reading *Infinite Jest* in the summer of 1997, I was struck by a number of similarities between Wallace's 1,079 page novel and the films of David Lynch, the

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[10] From this point on, the following abbreviations will be used when Wallace's works are cited parenthetically: *The Broom of the System* (*TBS*); "Girl With Curious Hair" ("GCH"); "Here and There" ("H&T"); *Infinite Jest* (*IJ*); "David Lynch Keeps His Head ("DLKH").

expressionist film-maker whose work in celluloid is arguably the closest thing to post-postmodern cinema and has had an obvious influence on David Foster Wallace's work in post-postmodern fiction. The similarities are not so much related to subject matter or individual episodes or specific scenarios, although there is that element to my argument, but are more so related to the moods, tensions, and baroque plot structures that inform Wallace's novel and virtually define Lynch's films. I was curious to discover what kind of relationship existed between the two men and their works; whether it be a personal relationship, or merely one of shared interests and styles of expression. Upon completing Wallace's collection of "essays and arguments" *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, I had confirmation that I was not wrong in inferring some kind of relationship between the two artists' work as Wallace's deep admiration of David Lynch is writ large in the essay "David Lynch Keeps His Head," possibly the most cogent analysis of Lynch's films and directorial style written to date. And with that I realized that it wasn't merely a shared style or mode of expression that connects Wallace and Lynch, but that that shared mode of expression or communication is *expressionism*. Both Wallace and Lynch infuse their respective projects with intense personal moods to such a great extent that they cross the line into the obsessional. The resulting images and language express subjective feeling and imagination rather than representing an external reality. In the televisual age of impersonal electronic communication and passive watching, what could be more defamiliarizing than fiction and film that return to and dwell wholly within intensely personal, subjective, interior space?

Contemporary cinematic and literary expressionism is heavily influenced by the cinematic masterpieces of 1920's German expressionism: prime examples being F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926).

> Along with their much-imitated visual patterns of sinister shadows, these films reveal a shared obsession with automatized, trance-like states, which appears in expressionist literature too: a common concern of expressionism is with the eruption of irrational and chaotic forces from beneath the surface of a mechanized modern world. (Baldick 78)

Chris Baldick's explanation of literary and cinematic expressionism helps demonstrate the connection between Wallace and Lynch as "trance-like states" and "irrational and chaotic forces" lurking just out of sight beneath the electronic veneer of televisual and entertainment culture are clearly topics that both Wallace and Lynch are profoundly interested in exploring. Baldick, cites the "nightmarish labyrinths" of Franz Kafka's fiction as the foremost example of expressionist prose, an assertion that Wallace himself eagerly supports, stating that Lynch's best works are the films that approach the Kafkaian standard of expressionism. Wallace holds that there are two particularly fatal stumbling blocks that contemporary expressionist art must avoid in order to be successful. "The first," he writes "is a self-consciousness of form where everything gets very mannered and refers cutely to itself" (Wallace "DLKH" 199). In a footnote, Wallace goes on to explain how Lynch avoids this pitfall:

> [This is] one reason why Lynch's characters have this weird *opacity* about them, a narcotized over-earnestness that's reminiscent of lead-poisoned kids in Midwestern trailer parks. The truth is that Lynch needs his characters stolid to the point of retardation; otherwise they'd be doing all this ironic eyebrow-raising and finger-steepling about the overt symbolism of what's going on, which is the very last thing he wants his characters doing.
> (Wallace "DLKH" 199)

"The second pitfall," Wallace writes "more complicated, might be called 'terminal idiosyncrasy' or 'antiempathetic solipsism' or something:"

> here the artist's own perceptions and moods and impressions and obsessions come off as just too particular to him alone. Art, after all, is supposed to be a kind of communication, and "personal expression" is cinematically interesting only to the extent that what's expressed finds and strikes chords within the viewer. The difference between experiencing art that succeeds as communication and art that doesn't is rather like the difference between being sexually intimate with a person and watching that person masturbate. In terms of literature, richly communicative Expressionism is epitomized by Kafka, bad and onanistic Expressionism by the average Graduate Writing Program avant-garde story.
>
> It's the second pitfall that's especially bottomless and dreadful and Lynch's best movie, *Blue Velvet*, avoided it so spectacularly that seeing the movie when it first came out was a kind of revelation for me. . . . *Blue*

> *Velvet* captured something about the way the U.S. present acted on our nerve endings, something crucial that couldn't be analyzed or reduced to a system of codes or aesthetic principles or workshop techniques. (Wallace "DLKH" 199-201)

Not one to publicly pat himself on the back, Wallace refrains from mentioning that his own fiction, particularly *Infinite Jest*, has also attained the Kafkaian plateau of "richly communicative Expressionism." However, as absurd and Kafkaesque as Wallace's fiction can at times be, he is more closely aligned with a more *Lynchian*-style expressionism. Wallace defines "the *Lynchian*" as "'a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such as way as to reveal the former's perpetual containment within the latter'" (Wallace "DLKH" 161). Kenneth C. Kaleta, author of the study *David Lynch* (1992), agrees with Wallace on this point, stating that one aspect of Lynch's genius lies in his 'co-mingling' (Kaleta ix) of good and evil and the seeming duality of every image, symbol, character and piece of dialogue. However, Kaleta disagrees with Wallace regarding the point that certain forms of expressionism come across on film as being too directorially self-indulgent or introspective for the audience to be able to identify with. Kaleta writes: "Lynch's masterstroke, regardless of the medium, is always a compelling invitation into Lynch's world" (Kaleta ix). For Kaleta then, the key to Lynch's successful rendering of expressionism on film, the key to the macabre in the mundane -- the co-mingling of good and evil and the duality/multiplicity of all that happens on screen -- is the fact that the work is completely subjective, totally within Lynch's head.

Regardless of whether or not David Lynch's films suffer from too heavy a dose of idiosyncratic self-indulgence or whether they reside right on the border between total subjectivity and communicative expressionism, I feel that there is a very tangible link between Wallace's definition of the *Lynchian* and our working definition of the post-postmodern -- fiction in which the familiar is rendered strange -- and I submit that Wallace's definition of what comprises the *Lynchian* in film can also be applied to

Wallace's own fiction; fiction which exposes a reality within which the familiar is *always* invested with the capacity for the macabre, the surreal. And, I will go so far as to say that what we have in artists such as David Foster Wallace and David Lynch are post-postmodern expressionists, whereas an artist such as Don DeLillo can be described as a post-postmodern hyperrealist.

Examples of the *Lynchian*, according to Wallace, are "definable only ostensively;" they are hard to describe through words, but when an example presents itself to us, there is no mistaking it. Wallace writes:

> I've determined that a sudden grotesque facial expression won't qualify as a really *Lynchian* facial expression unless the expression is held for several moments longer than the circumstances could even possibly warrant, is just held there, fixed and grotesque, until it starts to signify about seventeen different things at once. (Wallace "DLKH" 162-3)

But Wallace later finds a much more succinct and telling handle for defining the *Lynchian* that revolves around a comparison between David Lynch and director Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *From Dusk to Dawn*, *Jackie Brown*). He writes: "Quentin Tarantino is interested in watching somebody's ear getting cut off; David Lynch is interested in the ear" (Wallace "DLKH" 166). With this comparative reference to Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and to Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), Wallace drives at the very core element of Lynch's filmmaking -- defamiliarizing the audience to the violence they witness on the screen by making that violence totally inexplicable through the fact that it attempts to communicate something far beyond the violence itself. This in turn defamiliarizes the audience with their televisually institutionalized conceptions of what constitutes violence, film, and entertainment in general.

> For, unlike [Quentin] Tarantino, [David] Lynch knows that an act of violence in an American film has, through repetition and desensitization, lost the ability to refer to anything but itself. This is why violence in Lynch's films, grotesque and coldly stylized and symbolically heavy as it may be, is qualitatively different from Hollywood's or even anti-Hollywood's hip cartoon-violence. Lynch's violence always tries to *mean* something.(Wallace "DLKH" 165)

Wallace's own fiction is made all the more powerful by the presence throughout of physical and psychological violence that adheres to the most potent elements of *Lynchian* expressionism -- the macabre in the mundane -- while dwelling within the ever expanding sphere of entertainment and its ascendant cultures and technologies. In the short story "Here and There," we encounter Bruce, a burgeoning electronics wizard, who is going through a rough patch in his relationship with a girlfriend who scoffs at his theory that "'art as literature will get progressively more mathematical and technical as time goes by'" and feels nothing but contempt for his hopes of becoming "'the first really great poet of technology'" (Wallace "H&T" 155). Bruce is a young man raised completely within the televisual age of entertainment culture and the ever increasing powers of electronics and the electronic media. So moved is Bruce by these electronic wonders that he is compelled to write poetry not only *about* them, but in a mode of expression based on their inner workings. It is not hard to see why his relationship has short circuited. Imagine trying to establish a serious, intimate relationship with someone whose conceptual hope for art includes the eradication of words and their replacement with "'the icy beauty of the perfect signification of fabricated nonverbal symbols and their relation through agreed-on rules'" (Wallace "H&T" 167). Bruce is clearly the ultimate end product of too much electronically mediated culture. Entertainment ceases to have anything to do with celebrities and catastrophes. For Bruce, entertainment consists solely of the impossibly complex system of "'nonverbal systems,'" the inner workings of the technologies that deliver the celebrity and catastrophe related nonsense to the rest of us. For the reader, this is total defamiliarization. As we read Wallace's prose (Bruce's narrative) we cannot even hope to relate to Bruce who lives completely within the subjective world of his conceptual techno-poetry and electro-tainment, the ideas and theories of which, as long as they remain subjective and interior, figments of wholly personal expression, will be completely contrary to Bruce's theories of universal and

nonverbal communication: "'perfect signification. . . through agreed-on rules.'" The mundanities of electronics have revealed their most hideous capacities.

The culminating moment of "Here and There" comes while Bruce, who has sought refuge from his relationship peccadilloes at his aunt and uncle's house in Prosopopeia, Maine, is behind his aunt's old stove, trying to repair some faulty wiring. Initially, Bruce proceeds with great confidence, the reader privy to his methodical, electronically well-versed thoughts. But then, his repair job takes a turn for the worst. The technology of the Eisenhower administration-era stove betrays him; his hard earned knowledge fails him:

> 'all the wires reveal themselves to be the same dull, silverfish-gray, their conduction elements so old and frayed that the wires begin to unravel and stick out in different directions, and become disordered, and now I couldn't get them back in the distributor circuit even if I could tell where they went, not to mention the increased hazard inherent in crossing current in bare wires. I begin to sweat. . . . I begin to have trouble breathing. . . .
> The work that interests me is done with a pencil and a sheet of paper. Rarely even a calculator. At the cutting edge of electronic engineering, almost everything interesting is resolvable via the manipulation of variables. I've never once been stumped on an exam. Ever. And I appear to have broken this miserable piece-of-shit stove. I am unsure what to do. . . . There is *no way to know* without data on the resistance ratios in the metal composition of the burners. . . . I begin almost to cry.'
> (Wallace "H&T" 170-1)

To make matters worse, Bruce's well-meaning aunt chimes up: "'You're unable to fix an electric stove?'" This sends the hapless Bruce over the edge. "'Suddenly the inside of this stove is the very last place on earth I want to be. I begin to be frightened of the stove. . . . I believe, behind the stove, with my aunt kneeling down to lay her hand on my shoulder, that I'm afraid of absolutely everything there is.'" (Wallace "H&T" 171). There is nothing particularly *Lynchian* about a man coming unglued. There is, however, something overtly and allusively *Lynchian* about a man having a major league crack up behind the stove in his aunt's kitchen, the smell of chili wafting down from the counter.

The idea that I want to develop is that David Foster Wallace has taken the most distinguishing features of David Lynch's trademark "macabre in the mundane," and brought them to his subtle and hilarious critique of American pop and entertainment culture. As mentioned above, Don DeLillo's use of television and entertainment is hyperreal: i.e. if DeLillo is aware of the absurdity and dark humour that is present in everything from the most vapid entertainments to the most graphic of catastrophe coverage, he does not indulge his awareness. DeLillo's fiction allows for only the basic brutalities, the surface images, to leap off of the page in DeLillo's terse, muscular prose. Consequently, his critique of American televisual and entertainment culture is deadpan, totally void of humour. David Foster Wallace, possibly getting a bit tired of being surrounded by humourless critiques and wary of writing post-postmodern fiction that resembles in its stoic delivery the defamiliarizing tactics used by DeLillo, strives to defamiliarize his readers with the absurdities and irony inherent to American televisual and entertainment culture. By countering with his own prose rendered absurdities, Wallace is able to expose the ironic situation that informs and perpetuates the televisual agenda: that the macabre realities and social repercussions of televisual and entertainment culture have become unrecognizable because as a culture we have become desensitized to the electronic media, which is so omnipresent that it is considered commonplace and mundane, and therefore, above criticism and reproach.

Wallace's first novel *The Broom of the System* features episodes of the *Lynchian* macabre in the mundane complete with Wallace's absurd, pop/television/film/entertainment culture-oriented twist. The characters in the novel, which is set in Cleveland, Ohio and its suburban environs, hang out in a restaurant/bar called Gilligan's Isle.

> The inside of the place was round, the walls were painted to look like the filmy blue horizon of the ocean, and the floors were painted and textured to resemble beach. There were palm trees all over, fronds hanging down ticklishly over the patrons. Sprouting from the floor of the bar were huge statued likenesses of the whole cast: the Skipper, the Howells, Ginger, and

> the rest, painted in bright castaway colors and all with uncannily characteristic facial expressions. The huge castaways were sunk into the floor at about chest level; their heads, arms, shoulders, and outstretched upturned hands were all tables for patrons. . . . Mr. Howell's arm was wrapped part way around Mrs. Howell's waist, Mary-Ann's long hair brushed the plastic top Mr. Howell's forearm, the Professor's thumb hovered achingly close to Ginger's decolletage. . . . Behind the bar at all times was one of a number of bartenders, all of whom resembled, to a greater or lesser degree, Gilligan. Once an hour, the bartender would be required to do something blatantly cloddish and stupid -- a standard favorite had the bartender slipping on a bit of spilled banana daiquiri and falling and acting as if he had driven his thumb into his eye -- and the patrons would, if they were hip and in the know, say with one voice, "Aww, Gilligan," and laugh and clap. (Wallace *TBS* 138-9)

There is a lot going on in this single excerpt. Wallace demonstrates his own proficient knowledge of kitschy, pop-culture television and the ultra-hip industry that spawned in the mid-to-late 1980's in which bars and restaurants began to base their decor, menu, service and overall atmosphere on specific, classic TV shows or on classical television and movies in general. With the reference to the patrons in Gilligan's Isle who are hip enough to groan "Aww, Gilligan," when the bartender performs his slapsticky shtick, Wallace also demonstrates that his tongue is quite firmly in his cheek and that he has nothing but healthy, humour-aided contempt for such televisually vapid establishments.

Yet, despite the seemingly light-hearted and cheery atmosphere, furnishings and pratfalling bartender of Gilligan's Isle, there is something unmistakably eerie about the setting and I am compelled to say that it stems from the statues of the *Gilligan's Island* characters that have the "uncannily characteristic facial expressions," and serve the bizarre purpose of being not just merely theme-appropriate decor, but also being the furniture. Two things strike me as uncanny about Wallace's inclusion and manipulation of these statues. The first is that in "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace refers to the television set as a piece of furniture with mesmerizing powers. Here, in *The Broom of the System*, the furniture has come to resemble classic TV characters, posed in vaguely sexual positions. Positions that essentially ensure that Wallace in making a joke about the fact that *Gilligan's Island* is one of the most strangely sexless shows in television history despite

the fact that it is about seven castaways, two of them young, buxom women, stranded on a South Pacific island for several years. The second instance of uncanniness that I pick up on in the Gilligan's Isle bar revolves around what I believe to be an allusion to David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*. In one of the film's climactic scenes, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) enters Dorothy Vallens's (Isabella Rossellini) apartment and discovers a man in a bright yellow suit, shot through the forehead, standing in the middle of the room, still holding his gun at his side. In "David Lynch Keeps His Head," Wallace comments on Lynch's genius for the disturbing, uncanny, defamiliarizing image: "the couple of things just slightly but marvelously off in every shot -- the Yellow Man literally dead on his feet"
(Wallace "DLKH" 200). An image of a man with a bullet hole is his head within the context of current television and film, is quite mundane. But if the dead man is still standing there in the middle of a room, like a statue with a faintly bewildered expression on his face, and aside from the bloody entry wound between his eyes looking every bit alive, it is thoroughly macabre. I cannot separate this image from *Blue Velvet* from the image of the huge statues in Gilligan's Isle, wearing character-appropriate facial expressions, buried unsettlingly "up to chest level" in the bar's floor.[11]

The Broom of the System also contains an imbedded short story by one of its characters, Rick Vigorous. Vigorous is an aspiring writer and editor of the Cleveland-based "*The Frequent Review*." His story, entitled "'Love,'" features Vigorous's reoccurring character, Monroe Fieldbinder. In this story, Fieldbinder, an estate lawyer, must tell his friends' Donald and Evelyn Slotnick that their kindly and recently deceased neighbour, Mr. Costigan, had an unhealthy obsession with the Slotnick's oldest son, Steve. When Fieldbinder is put on the case of the deceased Mr. Costigan's estate, he finds

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[11]A third thing strikes me as strange and allusive about these statues: How many scenes can you remember in which one or several of the Castaways are buried, however comically, up to their waist(s) in quicksand?

"literally hundreds of pictures of Steve" being used as wallpaper in one room of the house. Fieldbinder gives an extensive inventory of the other Steve-related items found in Mr. Costigan's house:

> "Also in this room were. . . who knows how many sketches, in charcoal and pencil, and some oils, really quite good, of someone who looks like . . . no, quite obviously *is* Steve. Some equally quite good pieces of sculpture, in varied media. . . again with just Steve as the subject. . . . Also some kind of video recorder set-up that's rigged rather ingeniously to play a continuing loop of a certain tape, a tape of some games of football in your yard, in Costigan's yard, of Steve raking some leaves, of Steve mowing the lawn, of Steve and Scott making a snowman, using what looked to me like a frozen sock for the thing's nose. Sound familiar?" (Wallace *TBS* 318)

Obviously, there is a lot that is overtly macabre about this short story within a novel, including Monroe Fieldbinder's insisting on complimenting old Costigan's technical ingenuity with regards to the rigging of the video equipment and the compliments he bestows on Costigan's likenesses of Steve Slotnick. Costigan's collection of all-things-Steve also includes some strands of light hair "glued to and index card," and unclean underclothes "tagged with a date" (Wallace *TBS* 318-9) from the August of the previous year, apparently a period when the vacationing Slotnick's trusted Mr. Costigan to water the plants and take in their mail. And although all of this is to some degree *Lynchian*, it lacks the chilling, emotional expressionism that typifies Lynch's films and other aspects of Wallace's work. But it is not for its expressionist content, or lack thereof, that I have included this short story by Wallace's character Rick Vigorous in this study. Rather, it is included because of something noticed by Evelyn Slotnick that she mentions to Monroe Fieldbinder as the only instance she can ever recall in which she found Mr. Costigan's behavior towards Steve a little bit strange. Evelyn recounts an occasion when she was leaving the house with her son and they encountered Mr. Costigan removing dandelions from his front lawn.

> "What happened was that right in the middle of the talking, for no reason, he [Costigan] just reached out with a finger, very slowly and touched

> Steve. With just one finger. He touched the front of Steve's shirt. On his chest. Very carefully."
>
> . . . . . .
>
> "It was like, sometimes when you're standing in front of a clean window, looking out, and the window is so clean it looks like it's not there. You know? And to make sure it's there, even though you know it's there, really, you'll reach out and just. . . touch the window, ever so slightly." (Wallace *TBS* 320-1)

An argument can be made for explaining Costigan's reaching out and touching Steve's chest as merely his perverse and misguided desire to make physical contact with the young man. Or, one could also say that he was uncertain whether the beauty of the young man was something otherworldly or something corporeal and decided to perform a little test. Both plausible arguments, but given David Foster Wallace's interests in entertainment culture, I will posit that the reasons behind Mr. Costigan's strange behavior are related as much to his own perverse tendencies as they are to the theories of Jean Baudrillard and Walter Benjamin that have been discussed in the preceding chapters. Just as Evelyn Slotnick says, Mr. Costigan reaches out to touch Steve as if he is not quite convinced that Steve is present there before him, real. Mr. Costigan has surrounded himself with a collection of morally bankrupt entertainments: sketches, sculptures, personal items, photographs, video loops. It is possible that Mr. Costigan, obsessed to the point of distraction by the images and representations of Steve, has forgotten or become unsure of Steve's actual existence. Baudrillard would say that what has happened is that the "sovereign difference between [in this case Steve Slotnick and representations-of-Steve- Slotnick] that was the abstraction's charm" (Baudrillard 2) has disappeared. Surrounded by simulacra, Costigan has inadvertently defamiliarized himself with the real object of his desires. The simulacra began to *precede* Steve in Costigan's obsessions. This is rather like an incident in Wallace's short story "Girl With Curious Hair" in which a wealthy prep school yuppie changes his name to Sick Puppy so that he can hang around with a group of LSD-ingesting, jazz appreciating, punk rockers. Sick Puppy relates to us his own perverse, obsessional behavior:

> I wear English Leather Cologne which keeps me smelling very attractive at all times. English Leather is the men's cologne with the television commercial in which a very beautiful woman who can play billiards better than a professional makes the assertion that all her men wear English Leather or they wear nothing at all. I find this woman very alluring and sexually exciting. I have the English Leather Cologne commercial taped on my new Toshiba VCR and I enjoy reclining in my horsehair recliner and masturbating while the commercial plays repeatedly on my VCR. (Wallace "GCH" 55)

In the cases of both Mr. Costigan and Sick Puppy, their obsessions, based in some form of electronic media or visual representation, have taken over their perceptions. Walter Benjamin would say that through their total immersion in mass produced representations and the technological mediums that make the representations possible, the true objects of Costigan and Sick Puppy's desires (obsessions) have lost their aura. Benjamin writes: "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (Benjamin 220), hence Costigan's attempt to physically verify the authenticity of Steve Slotnick. Sick Puppy's attempt to verify or justify his own existence through a television commercial is something else all together: an individual's overwhelming obsessions with electronic representations of sex and sensuality and the subsequent sensualize- and fetishization of televisual technologies and electronic media. As Wallace wrote in "E Unibus Pluram": "[t]elevision, from the surface on down, is about desire. And fiction-wise, desire is the sugar in human food" (Wallace "EUP" 22). Hence the overwhelming presence of obsession and addiction in Wallace's fiction as well as in Lynch's films. Their expressionistic tendencies reacting to the "eruption of irrational and chaotic forces from beneath the surface of a mechanized modern world."

Infinite Jest, by far the most ambitious and stunning work of Wallace's young, literary career contains a sub-context that may very well be based entirely on Wallace's appreciation of David Lynch's films. One of the foremost instances of Wallace's *Lynchian* tendencies is witnessed in a scene in which Orin Incandenza, the pro football playing oldest son of the fictional "*apres garde*," "anticonfluential," or "nondramatic" filmmaker

James O. Incandenza, comes across an "old late-millenial CBC public-interest Canadian news documentary" (Wallace *IJ* 47) while watching late night television. The documentary concerns the case of a paranoid schizophrenic named Fenton.

> a brisk Albertan voiceover explained that Fenton here was a dyed-in-the-wool paranoid schizophrenic who believed that radioactive fluids were invading his skull and that hugely complex high-tech-type machines had been specially designed and programmed to pursue him without cease until they caught him and made brutal sport of him and buried him alive. (Wallace *IJ* 47)

This darkly hilarious digression quickly turns into a nightmare for unfortunate Fenton as the doctors in charge of his well being decide that the only viable method of treatment is to administer a series of tests which, in a brutal twist of irony, mirror exactly the intense fears and delusions that Fenton suffers from. Wallace writes:

> and in a terse old Public-TV cut they now showed subject Fenton in five-point canvas restraints whipping his copper-haired head from side to side as guys in mint green surgical masks and caps inject him with radioactive fluids through a turkey-baster-sized syringe, then good old Fenton's eyes bugging out in total foreseen horror as he's rolled toward the huge gray P.E.T. device and slid like an unrisen loaf into the things open maw until only the decay-colored sneakers are in view, and the body-sized receptacle rotates the test-subject counterclockwise with brutal speed. . . the machine's blurps and tweets not even coming close to covering Fenton's entombed howls as his worst delusional fears came true in digital stereo. . . .(Wallace *IJ* 48)

Fenton's predicament, his intense horror, his "entombed howls. . . in digital stereo" are the *Lynchian* facial expression held several seconds longer than necessary, beginning to signify umpteen different things at once. When one takes into consideration the fact that this documentary footage depicts scenes of extreme psychological trauma it seems incongruous that this episode comes across as being extremely humorous. Like David Lynch, Wallace strives to create depictions of violence that point to something beyond the violence itself.

Surely, part of Fenton's horror must derive from the presence of television cameras and a film crew within the clinical, mental institution setting. The presence of the

film crew, the creation of a documentary about the treatment of paranoid schizophrenics, is seemingly ominously responsible for Fenton's most paranoid delusions being enacted upon him by his doctors. Cameras, having an integral and defining role as the most inconspicuous yet most invasive tools and symbols of televisuality, present themselves as an issue that must be dealt with by post-postmodernists like Wallace and Lynch. In cameras we witness a piece of technology that despite its fundamental intrusiveness and chillingly unbiased gaze, has insinuated itself so well into American/Western culture that it goes virtually unnoticed. Its prevalence has made it mundane. A camera's ability to make those that view the camera's product (whether it be cinematic film, televised catastrophe coverage, commercial advertising, photo-journalism, photographic art, portraiture, snapshots, or late night variety programming) forget about the nature of the technology at work is an instance of what Neil Postman would call an "invisible epistemology" (see page 18 of this thesis) and it is one of the characteristics of post-postmodern fiction and film that they attempt to defamiliarize people with the macabre, insidious nature of these invisible epistemologies.[12]

There are two prevalent examples of distrust or suspicion directed towards video and filmmaking equipment in David Lynch's films. The first instance occurs in *Twin Peaks*: *Fire Walk With Me*. In this scene, Kyle MacLachlan, reprising his television role as Special Agent Dale Cooper, is watching a bank of video security monitors. On one of the monitors, a tall, thin, wildly-dressed man (portrayed by David Bowie) can be seen walking purposefully down an otherwise deserted corridor. Wearing his characteristic and unwaveringly unflappable, tight-lipped expression (indeed, to his credit Kyle MacLachlan was able to maintain this single facial expression of Special Agent Dale

[12] Note the similarities between the post-postmodern rendering of the familiar into the strange; the theory of expressionism being an artistic reaction to the irrationality of technological culture; Postman's concept of the invisible controlling the visible; and Wallace's definition of the *Lynchian*: the macabre's perpetual containment within the mundane.

Cooper through two television seasons and one feature length film) Agent Cooper moves to the doorway of the room and peers out into the corridor. A quick flash over to the bank of video security monitors reveals that the corridor on the monitor is the same corridor as the one Agent Cooper is looking out into as we can see him standing in the doorway in the bottom left-hand corner of the screen. On the monitor, we see David Bowie approaching Agent Cooper, though still some distance down this long, eerily sterile corridor. However, when we switch back to Agent Cooper's point of view, we learn that he sees *nothing* in the corridor. Agent Cooper reenters the surveillance room and sure enough, on the monitor, David Bowie continues to stride down the hall. Once again, Cooper returns to the doorway to peer out. Once again, no David Bowie. This sequence of actions -- Agent Cooper's ardent checking of monitor and corridor and David Bowie's being and not-being there -- is repeated an inordinate number of times, a series of actions and prolonged, stoic facial expressions that are akin to Wallace's assertion that one of the hallmarks of the *Lynchian* is when facial expressions and actions are "held [or continued/repeated] for several moments longer than the circumstances could even possibly warrant" (Wallace "DLKH" 162-3). What this demonstrates is that despite all of his seeming pragmatism, rationalism and professionalism (remember, this is the same Special Agent Dale Cooper who after being shot in the abdomen during one of the opening episodes of the *Twin Peaks* television series, refused to take any time off duty and went about his business while suffering through pain so debilitating that he was walking around robotically and grimacing, however faintly, with every motion) Agent Cooper cannot reconcile the image of David Bowie walking down the corridor as it appears on the surveillance monitor with an action that is taking place in the corridor just a few feet away. The fact that he has to go check in the first place, immediately after seeing David Bowie appear on the monitor is testament to Cooper's distrust of what he sees on the monitor. And in a truly *Lynchian*, expressionist twist, Cooper's suspicions regarding the images on the monitor prove to be correct -- David Bowie is *not visible* in

the corridor. But in an even more surreal twist, Bowie *arrives* in Agent Cooper's superior's office where he delivers a cryptic message and then vanishes right before the stunned federal agents' eyes in a cloud of what appears to be the snowy static of a television interference pattern.

For an audience member, one of the easiest ways to interpret this episode is to rationalize it and say that the surveillance camera must be recording images from a different corridor somewhere in the same building. But Lynch does not allow for this interpretation. Remember, when Agent Cooper goes to the door to check the corridor, he is visible on the monitor along with David Bowie. In the end, Cooper's suspicions regarding the reliability of the surveillance camera and David Bowie's presence in the building are proven to be totally disparate factors. The entire nature of corporeality, illusion, existence, and the technology of filmmaking itself is thrown into question. Does Agent Cooper trust the technologically complex surveillance system or his own eyesight? The implications with regards to the audience are obvious and unquantifiable. The entire film, of course, if the audience member cares to allow it to happen, can begin to represent for the individual a similar but infinitely more complex visual conundrum than the one Special Agent Cooper is experiencing. To explain this whole scene and its implications to any degree that approaches satisfaction for myself and most likely for my readers as well is difficult to say the least. Suffice to say, David Lynch, in a cinematic episode that lasts no more than two minutes in total, has provided a expressionist moment *par excellence* that affects not only his characters and his audience, but effectively casts suspicion and distrust upon the technological medium in which his works are rendered. The familiar and mundane are indeed strange and macabre.

Lost Highway picks up where *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* left off as far as making sense of seemingly incomprehensible and inaccessible plot lines goes. According to the title page of a circulating copy of the script *Lost Highway* is:

> *A 21st Century Noir Horror Film*
> *A graphic investigation into parallel identity crises*
> *A world where time is dangerously out of control*
> *A terrifying ride down the lost highway* (Wallace "DLKH" 150)

The movie was savaged by critics and audiences alike, but has managed to generate a sub-cultural status (amongst Lynch's other cult status films) as possibly Lynch's best film next to *Blue Velvet*. The following excerpt from a review of *Lost Highway* is just one example among scores of negative reviews.

> The legend of Luis Bunuel's collaboration with Salvador Dali is that if either included an image or incident open to rational explanation or interpretation, it would be dropped. Yet *Un chien andalou* and *L'age d'or* afford many meaningful readings. It may well be that with *Lost Highway*, director David Lynch and co-screenwriter Barry Gifford. . . have succeeded where Bunuel and Dali failed, creating an almost entirely meaningless, or perhaps senseless film. (Newman 48)

Ever the Lynch supporter, Wallace writes that *Lost Highway*'s plot can be interpreted in approximately thirty-seven different ways and points to Lynch's own assertion that the film is an in depth analysis of parallel identity crises as being the "big interpretive fork" in how one views the film. Or, he adds, *Lost Highway*'s narrative could

> simply be incoherent and make no rational sense and not be conventionally interpretable at all. This won't necessarily make it a bad David Lynch movie. *Eraserhead*'s dream-logic makes it a "narrative" only in a very loose, nonlinear way, and large parts of *Twin Peaks* and *Fire Walk With Me* make no sense and yet are compelling and meaningful and just plain cool. Lynch seems to run into trouble only when his movies seem to *want* to have a point -- i.e. when they set the viewer up to expect some kind of coherent connection between plot elements -- and then fail to deliver any such point. (Wallace "DLKH" 160-1)[13]

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[13] This reminds me of Neil Postman's theory that television is at its worst, its most dangerous, when it attempts to be serious or strives to convey a meaningful point. Where Wallace writes that Lynch's films begin to break down when they overtly attempt to reach out and communicate a point to the audience, we see an instance of film behaving/being created in a mode that, according to Postman, is more akin to television. As novelists approach fiction in a more TV/film oriented way (Wallace, DeLillo, Mark Leyner), directors like David Lynch are making movies that resemble TV in their results (bad when trying to be serious) and in their production values (*Twin Peaks*), and resemble fiction in their complexity, psychological depth and overall artistry and allusiveness.

The second instance of Lynch's characters exhibiting suspicion and distrust in the face of video technology occurs in *Lost Highway*'s very powerful opening act. Fred Madison (Bill Pullman), a jazz fusion saxophone player, and his wife Renee (Patricia Arquette) are receiving a series of mysterious video tapes. The tapes arrive each morning in a plain manila envelope. Both tape and envelope are unmarked. The footage on the tapes is clearly footage of the inside of Fred and Renee's ultra-hip, art deco, Los Angeles home. With each successive video tape, the footage intrudes deeper and deeper into their home. Not ones to overreact, Fred and Renee refrain from contacting the police until one of the tapes shows them asleep in their bed, unaware of the intrusive camera. The police arrive and search the home for any signs of forced entry (which they do not find) and then they question Fred and Renee. One of the plainclothesmen asks Fred if he has any video cameras in the home. Renee, interjecting on Fred's behalf, informs the officer that Fred doesn't allow video equipment or cameras of any kind into the house. The two officers are completely flabbergasted. They exchange glances and their facial expressions, although they never fully evolve into anything completely recognizable, communicate everything from disgust and contemptible amusement to horror and outrage. When asked why he does not allow any video equipment or cameras into the house, Fred replies: "I like to remember things the way I remember them, not necessarily the way they happened." This single line of dialogue, delivered with narcotized seriousness by Fred Madison/Bill Pullman, is of integral importance to the entire film. As it turns out, Fred has good reason to be suspicious of video equipment because, as we learn later on, he also has good reason to be suspicious of his wife Renee who is also known as Alice Wakefield -- an actress in pornographic movies. As well, the final video tape that they receive is viewed by Fred alone and shows Fred, looking up at the camera from where he kneels on the bedroom floor, screaming in terror covered with the gore from Renee's mutilated corpse which lies on the bed next to him. The Fred Madison watching the horrifying video has no recollection of killing his wife. But, before Fred is incarcerated and mysteriously

switches identities with a younger man by the name of Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty), this single line reveals that like Lynch, Fred Madison lives, or desires to live, in a completely subjective world. In order to preserve this subjectivity, Fred avoids video and photographic technology as the images created and viewed/watched would force a narrative framework onto his perceptions, his psyche, and limit the ways in which he is able to interpret the events of his life, which is essentially what television and most Hollywood films do to the average viewer.

David Lynch is one of the very few directors who is not afraid of creating a film in which the very technologies that make the film possible, that make David Lynch a successful and moderately wealthy man, the very implications that those technologies have on humanity and the way the individual or the culture at large interacts and interprets the world around them, are subjected to a defamiliarizing, post-postmodern analysis. As a result, Fred Madison can be viewed as a quintessentially expressionist figure not only because of his deeply rooted fears regarding technological culture but also through the way in which Lynch uses "'objects and characters not as representations but as transmitters for the director's own internal impressions and moods'" (Wallace "DLKH" 197). Wallace also adds that

> Lynch's movies, for all their unsubtle archetypes and symbols and intertextual references and c., have about them the remarkable unself-consciousness that's kind of the hallmark of Expressionist art -- nobody in Lynch's movies analyzes or metacriticizes or hermeneuticizes or anything, including Lynch himself. This set of restrictions makes Lynch's movies fundamentally unironic, and I submit that Lynch's lack of irony is the real reason some cineastes -- in this age when ironic self-consciousness is the one and only universally recognized badge of sophistication -- see him as a naif or a buffoon. (Wallace "DLKH" 198-9)

The issue of parallel identity crises in *Lost Highway* is (of course) a complex and interesting one that unfortunately cannot be delved into too deeply within the constraints of this project. But I do wish to touch on it however briefly as it provides a very interesting segue into *Infinite Jest*, which is where this long, albeit fruitful, digression into

the tie in between videographic and filmic technologies in Lynch's films and Wallace's fiction, began. In *Lost Highway*, there are a lot of characters/relationships that parallel each other and overlap so severely that the people involved are only vaguely conscious of being someone else at some other time. I will list the major instances of these parallel identity crises without going into heavy detail.

As mentioned above, while he is imprisoned for the brutal slaying of his wife Freddy Madison (Bill Pullman) literally turns into Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty). This transpires on screen as we see Fred Madison's skull open up as he sits there in his prison cell. The point of view provided by the camera allows the audience to descend into the ragged maw of Madison's skull along with this new animating spirit. When a guard checks on Madison shortly thereafter, he finds Pete Dayton sitting there looking confused and holding his head, which features an ugly looking haematoma. Dayton has no idea how he wound up in prison and since he is clearly *not* Fred Madison, he is released.

The case of Renee Madison/Alice Wakefield, both played by Patricia Arquette, is equally strange. Where Renee was a sultry brunette with suspicious friends and a suspicious husband, Fred Madison, Alice is an equally sultry blonde who works for and is intimately involved with the porn film making gangster Mr. Eddy, but becomes involved with the continually dazed Pete Dayton, who seems to recognize her, but can't quite put his finger on where he might know her from. Other than the colour and style differences of their hair, Renee and Alice look identical and are involved with the same dodgy crowd, but at no point does either woman let on that she is leading a double life.

Mr. Eddy, menacingly portrayed by Robert Loggia, is also known as Dick Laurent. The first line of dialogue spoken in the movie is "Dick Laurent is dead." It is spoken into the intercom on the front door of Fred and Renee Madison's Los Angeles pad by an unseen person. However, Mr. Eddy/Dick Laurent does not die on screen until he is killed in the final stages of the movie although the news of his death is spoken of long before his actual demise.

The Mystery Man is *Lost Highway*'s most intriguing character. Portrayed by a brilliantly cast Robert Blake, The Mystery Man is never called by any name on screen and it is only in the credits that any name is given to him. The Mystery Man's identity never changes, but he has the chilling ability to seemingly be in two places at once. Encountering Fred Madison at a party, the Mystery Man insists that he and Fred have met before. Fred denies ever having met the oddly made up, unsettlingly vampiric man and says that the man must be mistaken. The Mystery Man insists that they have met at Fred's house and then claims that he is actually *in* Fred's house at this very moment. Handing Fred a cellular phone, the Mystery Man invites Fred to call his own home and see. Sure enough, the Mystery Man, who stands right in front of Fred at the party, answers the phone back at Fred and Renee's house, conceivably on the other side of Los Angeles. The thing that all of these parallel identity crises have in common is that they revolve around or are indirectly caused by persistent presence throughout the movie of film and video technology and other electronic products.

Infinite Jest also features its fair share of uncanny resemblances amongst characters. Eccentric filmmaker James O. Incandenza, described throughout the novel as an extremely tall man resembles in this way recovering drug addict Don Gately, a veritable giant. While Gately is floating in and out of consciousness in a hospital bed, recovering from a gunshot wound, Incandenza appears before him. It is unclear as to whether or not it is a dream, an hallucination, or an actual apparition. One of Incandenza's films even explores a large scale instance of pop culture-influenced identity crisis. The film is entitled "*Homo Duplex*" and it is described as a parody of "'poststructural antidocumentaries,'" and it consists of "interviews with fourteen Americans who are named John Wayne but are not the legendary 20th-century film actor John Wayne" (Wallace *IJ* 988).[14] In *Infinite Jest* as well, identity crisis coincides with the intrusion of

[14] The truly funny thing about the subject matter of Incandenza's "*Homo Duplex*" is that John Wayne, the legendary 20th-century film actor is not even really named "John Wayne." Wallace relies on the reader knowing this fairly widely known tidbit of pop

electronic media and more specifically, the intrusion or overlapping of entertainment culture, into real life.

The plot of *Infinite Jest*, like the plots of such David Lynch projects as *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* and *Lost Highway*, is a very convoluted affair. Despite all conventional wisdom against plot discussion/dissection in academic literary studies I feel that an accurate discussion of defamiliarization and entertainment culture as it appears in *Infinite Jest* cannot be executed without providing at the very least a rudimentary synopsis of the novel's basic plot structure. Unlike other great works of twentieth century literature that are famously difficult and convoluted in their structure and plotting, such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955) -- two novels that *Infinite Jest* is incessantly and in my opinion incorrectly compared to -- *Infinite Jest* remains accessible to the attentive and patient reader.[15] Throughout, there are clues that Wallace has carefully meted out so as to make his novel as difficult as possible to figure out without crossing over into total inaccessibility.

The majority of the clues are found in James O. Incandenza's filmography which is thoughtfully included by Wallace as entry 24. in the extensive "Notes and Errata"

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cultural trivia. If the reader does not know that John Wayne's real name is actually Marion Cooper, the joke isn't nearly as humorous. Or, maybe it is made all the more humorous?

[15] This is not to say that *Infinite Jest* is an overtly accessible novel; it is not. In the first chapter, I mentioned that I believe that one of the tenets of post-postmodern fiction is that it is a much more readerly style of fiction (see pgs. 9 & 23) as opposed to the more writerly style of fiction exemplified by postmodern novels such as those mentioned above written by Pynchon and Gaddis. With *Infinite Jest* David Foster Wallace has been able to write a novel in which the prose style, although at times very long-winded, is generally easy to read and full of contemporary idiom and in which the characters and their personal situations are familiar to anyone who is in any way in touch with contemporary North American culture. Another way of saying this is that Wallace's cast of characters, from the recovering drug addicts of the Ennett Halfway House; the hyper-competitive young tennis prodigies of the Enfield Tennis Academy; the drug addled drag queens of inner-city Boston; and the stereotypically French Canadian Wheelchair Assassins, are all caricatures of people we all may have seen on any number of televised news magazines, public broadcasting documentaries or second rate sitcoms.

section of the novel under the guise of being an excerpt from an academic study entitled "'The Laughing Pathologies: Exemplary Works of the Anticonfluential *Apres Garde*: Some Analyses of the Movement Toward Stasis in North American Conceptual Film (w/ Beth B., Vivienne Dick, James O. Incandenza, Vigdis Simpson, E. and K. Snow),' Comstock, Posner, and Duquette, editors" (Wallace *IJ* 985). All seventy-seven of James O. Incandenza's films are listed in this comprehensive filmography, complete with brief synopses, production information, cast credits, and running time. The filmography includes everything from Incandenza's early documentary/propaganda efforts for the U.S.T.A (United States Tennis Association), with such titles as "*Tennis, Everyone?*", "*'There Are No Losers Here,*'" and "*Flux in a Box*" (Wallace *IJ* 986); to the series of eleven films entitled "*Found Drama,*" the filmography entries of which all read "conceptual, conceptually unfilmable, UNRELEASED" (Wallace *IJ* 989-90). In their introduction to the Incandenza filmography, the editors point out that these "high-conceptual projects' agendas required that they be titled and subjected to critique but never filmed, making their status as film subject to controversy" (Wallace *IJ* 985). Also included in the filmography are the five *known* versions of the much sought after "*Infinite Jest,*" the synopsis of the fifth and final version of the film (the final film of Incandenza's death-shortened career) revealing that the editors of the fictional study and other Incandenza scholars believe that this fifth version is "'far and away [James O. Incandenza's] most entertaining and compelling work,'" and that the film's "distinctive feature" is that it alludes to itself as being a "'a radical experiment in viewers' optical perspective and context'" (Wallace *IJ* 993).

The key to the entire plot structure lies in the relationship between James O. Incandenza's youngest son Hal, the tennis prodigy and chronic marijuana smoker, and the recovering drug addict and expert B&E man, Don Gately. Although they never appear in the same scene within the novel, their knowing each other is alluded to through some very subtle but telling clues. The fact that the novel is best explained through the

unravelling of clues dropped within the plot is adequate testimony in support of my theory that post-postmodern fiction is more plot driven, more readerly; geared towards a televisually oriented culture, yet aimed at criticizing that culture through defamiliarization. Already discussed above are the striking, physical similarities between Don Gately and James O. Incandenza and the possibility that Incandenza's ghost appears before the convalescing Gately or inhabits some level of Gately's unconscious, either as parallel identity or as a remembered friend or acquaintance. The major clue to the implied relationship between Hal Incandenza and Don Gately is found in the filmography entry for James O. Incandenza's final film, "*Infinite Jest (V?)*." The filmography archivists write:

> Though Canadian archivist Tete-Beche lists the film ["*Infinite Jest*"] as completed and privately distributed by P.Y.E.U. through posthumous provisions in the filmmaker's will, all other comprehensive filmographies have the film either unfinished or UNRELEASED, its Master cartridge either destroyed or vaulted *sui testator*. (Wallace *IJ* 993)

The acronym "P.Y.E.U." stands for "Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited," one of James O. Incandenza's production company's ever-evolving monikers. The name, of course, is derived from Act V, scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* In this scene Hamlet and Horatio encounter a gravedigger. From the ground in which he digs, the gravedigger produces a skull and tells Hamlet that the skull is that of Yorick, a deceased jester who was the young Hamlet's favourite entertainer. There are two important connections to be made here. The first is that the production company's bizarre moniker alludes to a memory that is briefly recounted by Hal Incandenza in the early stages of *Infinite Jest*. In this fragment of memory, Hal refers to both Don Gately, whom we never actually read of Hal meeting or even knowing within the action of the novel, and to John N. R. ["No Relation"] Wayne, a fellow tennis prodigy of Hal's at the Enfield Tennis Academy and obviously one of the people interviewed in James O. Incandenza's antidocumentary parody "*Homo Duplex*." Hal's memory: I think of John N. R. Wayne. . ., standing in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (Wallace *IJ* 17). The allusion to the

gravedigging scene in *Hamlet* also serves as a reference back to the speculation surrounding the whereabouts of the fifth version of the elusive "*Infinite Jest*," which is thought to have either been "destroyed or vaulted *sui testator*."

The second important connection stems from a line of dialogue spoken by Hamlet while he contemplates the skull of his dear friend Yorick. Holding the skull Hamlet says: "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy" (*Hamlet* 5.1.184-85). If the reader cares to take Wallace's allusion to Yorick full circle, it would seem to suggest that like Yorick, James O. Incandenza was a man who was incessantly creating jokes. Indeed, many of his films revolve around parodying and ridiculing popular film styles and making ironic statements about "the cinema" and film as "art." On another level, David Foster Wallace himself becomes the one who is continuously generating jests, the entire world of *Infinite Jest* being his creation. In the above excerpt from the filmography entry for the final version of "*Infinite Jest*," Wallace uses the name "Tete-Beche" for the French-Canadian film archivist who posits that that particular version of "*Infinite Jest*" is actually available through P.Y.E.U. productions as per posthumous conditions in Incandenza's will, in effect denying the more common assumption that the film has either been destroyed or buried with the deceased James O. Incandenza. As we will see in the following paragraphs, French-Canadian terrorists play an important role in the novel, but this particular name, "Tete-Beche", when translated, means "head-digger" with a possible secondary, loose translation to "head-burner." The "head-digger" translation is obvious -- it is in keeping with the *Hamlet* intertext and Hal's memory of John Wayne, Don Gately and himself exhuming his father's remains. The loosely translated "head-burner" translation, however, may well be a very cunning example of Wallace perpetuating his agenda of infinite jesting.

James O. Incandenza's death was not a natural one. Readers are lead to believe that he died a suicide. However, his supposed (?) suicide could not even be considered a normal taking of one's own life. Truly *Lynchian* in his depiction of the event, Wallace has

Hal recount what he believes to be his father's suicidal method. According to Hal, James O. Incandenza stuck his head through a hole he carved in the family's microwave door and cooked his head until it exploded. Hence the "Tete-Beche"/"head-burner" translation. What makes this gruesome scene even more *Lynchian* is that the young Hal, returning home from his schooling and training at the tennis academy that his father established, finds the smell of his father's exploded head to be deliciously aromatic in comparison to his mother, Avril's, continuously sub-par cooking efforts. Entering the kitchen with great anticipation as to what culinary delicacies await him, Hal makes the grisly discovery of his father's suicide. And what disturbs Hal most of all about his discovery is that despite walking into the house only moments after his father has committed suicide and discovering the decapitated corpse, he cannot disassociate the smell of his father's cooked head with the smell of wonderful cuisine. Aside from these *Lynchian* elements, Wallace's use of Tete-Beche as the name of a noted James O. Incandenza scholar casts a shadow of doubt across the entire filmography, especially when, through the course of the novel, we learn that James O. Incandenza's body was interred in Quebec, on metropolitan Montreal's South Shore. It all seems too uncanny. A French-Canadian film aficionado whose name just happens to reflect the way in which the late apres garde auteur killed himself and also describes the way in which the elusive videotape of "*Infinite Jest*" was retrieved from the director's Quebecois resting place? Another thing: knowing the Quebecois terrorist group -- the Wheelchair Assassins' -- penchant for dispatching of their enemies through brutally violent means, Incandenza's microwave suicide begins to look like a murder with the theft of "*Infinite Jest*" as the motive, especially when copies of "*Infinite Jest*" begin cropping up in various locales. Although Hal and company exhume Incandenza's remains, we never find out if they retrieve the film. And, if Incandenza's head exploded in the microwave, how is it possible that Hal, Gately and the mysteriously masked John Wayne dig up his skull? Is it possible that Incandenza is alive, masquerading under the name Tete-Beche? The person in the microwave a stand-in? The

person who is exhumed someone else, still? There is just too much coincidence and interconnection here for this *not* to be a blatant and highly wrought joke on Wallace's part. The entire novel is a showcase for the absurdist aspects of Wallace's post-postmodern expressionist fiction.

One of David Lynch's premises for *Lost Highway* was that the narrative unfold in a "world where time is dangerously out of control." The disruption and restructuring of time can be read as a quintessentially expressionistic response to a mechanized, modern world. With time "dangerously out of control" in *Lost Highway*, the parallel identity crises that drove the narrative were able to occur. Whether or not the identity crises made sense chronologically was not an issue as the concept of time is totally fragmented (*but* if a person watches *Lost Highway* enough times and makes copious notes on the intricacies of the narrative, that person will discover that time *is* of major consequence to an audience's complete understanding of the film as well as discovering that everything does work out chronologically if one believes that Fred Madison, freshly retransmogrified from his Pete Dayton identity, can race off in his car at the *end* of the movie for the purpose of speaking the words "Dick Laurent is dead" into the intercom that is next to the front door outside of his own home at the *beginning* of the movie, in effect delivering the message to himself as he simultaneously sits on the couch listening to this cryptic message about the supposed death of someone he is not sure he knows). A world operating under a chaotic reorganization of time is something that Wallace has rendered with a great deal of success in *Infinite Jest*.[16]

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[16] In what is hopefully a helpful aside as far as helping any readers unfamiliar with *Infinite Jest* understand the chronological intricacies and seeming anomalies, I want to point out that "time" in the novel has been quite literally reorganized in accordance with the new Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.) subsidized time calendar. Instead of the years being numbered in relation to the death of Christ as they still are today, the years are known by their corporate sponsor names, each year being named after the company who bids the highest dollar to have their products associated with a particular year for evermore. Wallace has created a dating system that demonstrates televisual cultures' diabolically overt overtures to entertainment oriented consumerism. A list of the years under O.N.A.N.'s "REVENUE ENHANCING" subsidized time system is

Above, the suspicion and deep rooted psychological fear and distrust of video and photographic equipment is discussed in relation to characters in David Lynch's films. Despite all of the camera related technology, video dissemination systems, video cassettes, and apres garde films and deceased apres garde directors in *Infinite Jest*, none of the characters seem the least bit afraid or suspicious of these technologies and entertainments despite the fact that many of James O. Incandenza's films seemingly parallel or outright narrate the events of their lives. Particularly after Incandenza switches the name of his film production company from "Latrodectus Mactans Productions" to "Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited," do the films begin to parallel more and more the lives of his sons Orin and Hal (in particular), as well as seemingly mock the dysfunctions of Incandenza family life. Not surprisingly, the switch from "Latrodectus Mactans" to "Poor Yorick" coincides with Incandenza's final, headlong plunge into the alcoholism and depression that have plagued him his entire adult life. Maybe of no coincidence either is the fact that the first movie produced under the Poor Yorick moniker is a film entitled "*Let There Be Lite*," which is described in the filmography as: "[u]nfinished documentary on genesis of reduced-calorie bourbon industry" (Wallace *IJ* 990).

The following is a list of some of James O. Incandenza's films that parallel the events of his life and the lives of his family members. The titles and brief explanations of the films themselves are taken directly from the filmography in the "Notes and Errata"

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provided and I have included next to the subsidized year, in square brackets, the dates as we still living in a non-unified North America would know them: (1) Year of the Whopper [1998]; (2) Year of the Tucks Medicated Pad [1999]; (3) Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar [2000 -- the year J.O. Incandenza dies]; (4) Year of the Perdue Wonderchicken [2001]; (5) Year of the Whisper-Quiet Maytag Dishwasher [2002]; (6) Year of the Yushityu 2007 Mimetic-Resolution-Cartridge-View-Motherboard-Easy-To- Install-Upgrade For Infernatron/InterLaceTP Systems For Home, Office, Or Mobile (*sic*) [2003]; (7) Year of the Dairy Products from the American Heartland [2004]; (8) Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment [2005]; (9) Year of Glad [2006 -- the year in which the first scene of the novel takes place, in which Hal Incandenza remembers the exhumation of his father's body]" (Wallace *IJ* 223).

section of the novel. Incandenza's film renderings of the real life events that make up the content of his films are completely unironic and unembellished, although at times they do seem to make blatant mockeries of the people who are portrayed, especially Incandenza himself. Put simply, what you read in these excerpts from the filmography are exact recreations of events that transpire at various points throughout the novel (note that although the people portrayed in the films are clearly Incandenza, his sons and occasionally his wife, they are always portrayed by actors who are recognized as actors by the filmography archivists. As a result, there is no confusion about these films being merely home-video-esque recordings of the events as they originally transpired, at least as far as one believes the veracity of the compilers of the filmography).

> *Valuable Coupon Has Been Removed*. . . . Possible Scandinavian-psychodrama parody, a boy [Hal] helps his alcoholic-delusional father and disassociated mother dismantle their bed to search for rodents, and later he [Hal] intuits the future feasibility of D.T.-cycle lithiumized annular fusion. (Wallace *IJ* 990-1)

> *Baby Pictures of Famous Dictators*. . . . Children and adolescents play a nearly incomprehensible nuclear strategy game with tennis equipment against the real or holographic (?) backdrop of sabotaged ATHSCME 1900 atmospheric displacement towers exploding and toppling during the New New England Chemical Emergency of Y.W. [Year of the Whopper]." (Wallace *IJ* 991)[17]

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[17] Like Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace also has an interest in the correlation of televisuality and apocalyptic paranoia. The game that is being played is called Eschaton. It is a game invented by the students at the Enfield Tennis Academy and it is played once a year in an atmosphere of high anticipation and imminent seriousness. Note 53. of the "Notes and Errata" section describes Eschaton as "a real-participant and tennis-court-modified version of the EndStat ROM-run nuclear-conflagration game" (Wallace *IJ* 996). Wallace devotes several pages of the novel to a highly detailed description of a particularly disastrous Eschaton in which the computer equipment that is needed on-court -- in order to calculate tennis ball inflicted "damage" and the other endless equations, variables, etc. that are integral to the playing of the game -- ends up destroyed and participants end up with actual physical injuries (black eyes, sprained ankles, bloody noses). The Eschaton episode (pgs. 321-42) is one of the most hilarious in the novel and I believe that Wallace is poking a bit of good-natures fun at one of his literary heroes, Don DeLillo, by portraying the lighter side (?) of nuclear catastrophe: children playing a tennis-based game that is apparently more complex and hotly contested than an actual nuclear war could ever possibly be.

> *As of Yore*. . . . A middle-aged tennis instructor [Incandenza], preparing to instruct his son [Hal] in tennis, becomes intoxicated in the family's garage and subjects his son to a rambling monologue while the son weeps and perspires. (Wallace *IJ* 991)
>
> *It Was A Great Marvel That He Was in the Father Without Knowing Him* . . . . A father [Incandenza] . . ., suffering from the delusion that his etymologically precocious son [Hal]. . . is pretending to be mute, poses as a 'professional conversationalist' in order to draw the boy out. (Wallace IJ 992)

The following three films are particularly indicative of Incandenza's continuing alcoholism and deteriorating mental condition. The three films are listed one after the other:

> *Too Much Fun*. Unfinished. UNRELEASED.
>
> *The Unfortunate Case of Me*. Unfinished. UNRELEASED.
>
> *Sorry All Over the Place*. Unfinished. UNRELEASED. (Wallace *IJ* 993)

The reason that the entire novel revolves around the obscure and mysterious film "*Infinite Jest*," and the reason why this film is so heavily sought after by the Quebecois Wheelchair Assassins ("Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents or A.F.R.s") is because the film is *so* compelling that its entertainment value is, quite simply put, *lethal*. Involved in a very confusing treble-crossing political intrigue, the Wheelchair Assassins are using copies of "*Infinite Jest*," known covertly as "The Entertainment," as an insidious, film-based method of assassination, sending copies of The Entertainment to high-ranking O.N.A.N. officials. Copies of The Entertainment arrive at the various officials' homes, in a way that is strangely reminiscent and most likely totally coincidental to almost identical videotape deliveries in *Lost Highway*. Once the unwary officials have viewed the tape, they are incapable of doing anything, have no volition to do anything, other than watch "*Infinite Jest*" repeatedly. Through this lethal entertainment, the Wheelchair Assassins hope to create an independent Quebec, not only free from the rest of Canada, but free from the strictures of the reconfigured Organization of North American Nations. The

Wheelchair Assassins have run into a serious hindrance, however. They, like the readers, want to know what it is about The Entertainment that is so wildly compelling and drug-like, but to view The Entertainment is to become so obsessed and dependent upon it that there is no one who has watched the entire, or even a few minutes, of the film that is able to report back on its entertaining qualities let alone speak coherently or feed themselves or perform their regular ablutions in a hygienic and socially acceptable fashion. The technology of "*Infinite Jest*" remains inaccessible. The search is on for the four other versions of the film and a person who can view The Entertainment and not be transformed into a vegetable.

The first person to fall victim to The Entertainment within the context of the novel is a young, Arab-Canadian medical attache, working as the "special ear-nose-throat consultant to the personal physician of Prince Q_____, the Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment" (Wallace *IJ* 33) for the northeastern United States. Dismissed early from his nightly duties of attending to the facial fungi that plague Saudi Prince Q_____, who eats nothing except Toblerone chocolate, the medical attache, once he arrives at his apartment, is in the mood for some televised (or in the world of *Infinite Jest*, InterLace disseminated) entertainment. Opening the days mail, he comes across a

> plain brown and irritatingly untitled cartridge-case in a featureless white three-day standard U.S.A. First Class padded cartridge-mailer. . . . The medical attache is puzzled by the cryptic mailer. . . and unlabelled entertainment. . . . The sole reason he does not throw the unlabelled cartridge in the wastecan or put aside for his wife to preview for relevance is because there are such woefully slim entertainment-pickings on his wife's irritating Americanized tennis-league evening away from her place at home. The attache will pop the cartridge in and scan just enough of its contents to determine whether it is irritating or of an irrelevant nature and not entertaining or engaging in any way. (Wallace *IJ* 36).

When the medical attache's wife arrives home from her tennis league several hours later

> the medical attache, at their apartment, is still viewing the unlabelled cartridge, which he has rewound to the beginning several times and then configured for a recursive loop. He sits there, attached to a congealed

> supper, watching, at 0020h., having now wet both his pants and the special recliner. (Wallace *IJ* 54)

Although it would seem impossible that we the readers know *anything* about "*Infinite Jest*" given its lethally entertaining properties, we know this much: that the sole performer in the film is one Joelle Van Dyne, also known as Madame Psychosis, a late night college radio personality. But to Orin and James O. Incandenza, both of whom she has had relationships with, she is also known as the P.G.O.A.T., or, the Prettiest Girl of All Time. However, Joelle/Madame Psychosis/P.G.O.A.T., is veiled throughout the novel. Despite her very flattering, acronymic nickname, she is a member of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed. Joelle's physical beauty is so radiant, everything that makes her attractive is so perfect, that she considers herself to be intolerably ugly. What we know of the actual material that can be viewed on the cartridge of "*Infinite Jest*" is that the footage is purposely distorted through James O. Incandenza's incomparable knowledge of lenses and visual technologies and that it appears as if a veiled woman is looking down at the camera and speaking in a motherly, apologetic tone. The reasons behind *why* this footage is lethally entertaining are, like just about everything else in *Infinite Jest*, beyond the scope of the limitations of this project as they are almost beyond the scope of reason and rationality itself. The basic concept of *lethal entertainment* is, however, worth examining in greater detail and obviously of relevance to this project.

The concept of lethal entertainment harkens back to the title of Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. One of the basic premises of Postman's study as well as of Wallace's own critical analysis of television and entertainment culture is that televisuality has robbed viewers of their ability to effectively criticize what they are watching. As seen in the first chapter, one of televisuality's greatest advances was the subsumation of irony, in effect making irony useless as a means to criticizing television and turning "ironic self-consciousness" into "the one and only universally recognized badge of sophistication"

(Wallace "DLKH" 199). What Wallace has had James O. Incandenza create in "*Infinite Jest*" is a piece of entertainment that transcends all possible forms of criticism not because it revells in irony, but because it is absolutely *void* of irony. For all those people in the entertainment dominated world of *Infinite Jest* the novel, "*Infinite Jest*" the entertainment -- so thoroughly entertaining that it is known simply as The Entertainment -- must be thoroughly, devastatingly defamiliarizing. Who knew entertainment could be so. . . entertaining!

It is important to remember that unlike the characters in Lynch's films, Wallace's characters are for the most part oblivious to the fact that they are inundated by video, photographic, and filmmaking equipment and that the entertaining products of these technologies parallel/narrate their lives. Wallace has been meticulous in his creation of characters who exist in an Organization of North American Nations that has been reconfigured around the dissemination of entertainments, where the televisual agenda has attained power so dominating that the years have corporate sponsors. With entertainment not merely reflecting culture but defining it, just as out of control as the concept of time within the novel, it is not difficult to understand why these characters are wholly absorbed with entertainment culture, the invisible epistemology. When they see their own lives being used as means of entertainment, they are not shocked, they are not even merely *accepting* of what they see. They are oblivious. Wallace has created a North America that is dominated by American culture. O.N.A.N., an entertainment-based dictatorship, cannot even be described as the logical extension of the current state of affairs with regards to culture and entertainment because aside from corporate subsidized years and some geographic and cartographic alterations, we are essentially living in North America as Wallace describes it. In *Infinite Jest*, the world as we are familiar with it is made to seem strange, completely absurd and outrageous, because it is portrayed in such a way that, like the characters in *Infinite Jest*, we do not recognize our own lives when we see them; we are too absorbed in the entertainment to realize that we *are* the

entertainment.[18] *That* is the infinite jest. And based on the title of the novel *that* is the point that Wallace has, in his own defamiliarizing, post-postmodern way, communicated to his readers.

Of David Lynch's films, David Foster Wallace has written that they only seem to run into problems with their audiences when the audience begins to feel that Lynch is trying to communicate with them directly, when Lynch's films "set the viewer up to expect some kind of coherent connection between plot elements -- and then fail to deliver any such point" (Wallace "DLKH" 161). I feel that through his groundbreaking use of expressionism, through his adherence to a very audience/reader-friendly form of authorial subjectivity, David Foster Wallace has been able to transcend the audience expectation problems that have marred periods of David Lynch's directorial career. In this way, Wallace is also like James O. Incandenza, who was forced to confound the popular audience and even some of the critical pundits that despised his films by creating a single work that transcended all of their expectations and left them with nothing to criticize. Not because of the films overarching irony, but because the film was so unironic and sincere,

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[18] One of James O. Incandenza's earlier films is entitled "*The Joke.*" Using the "audience as reflexive cast," Incandenza created a filmic experiment described by the filmography archivists as a "[p]arody of Hollis Frampton's 'audience-specific events,' two Ikegami EC-35 video cameras in theater record the 'film' 's audience and project the resultant raster onto the screen -- the theater audience watching itself watch itself get the obvious 'joke' and become increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile supposedly comprises the film's involuted 'antinarrative' flow. Incandenza's first truly controversial project, *Film & Kartridge Kultcher's* Sperber credited it with 'unwittingly sounding the death-knell of post-postructuralist film in terms of sheer annoyance.' NONRECORDED MAGNETIC VIDEO SCREENABLE ONLY IN THEATER VENUE, NOW UNRELEASED"(Wallace *IJ* 988-9). In an even earlier film, Incandenza experimented with a partially animated precursor to "*The Joke.*" The earlier film is entitled "*Cage III -- Free Show*": "The figure of Death. . . presides over the front entrance of a carnival sideshow whose spectators watch performers undergo unspeakable degredations so grotesquely compelling that the spectators' eyes become larger and larger until 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" (Wallace *IJ* 988). The idea of providing entertainment that is irresistibly compelling in its horrors bears many, obvious similarities to "*Infinite Jest.*"

so subjective and personal, that to view it was to view the ultimate end of entertainment and to go mad with joy and despair.

The narrative of *Infinite Jest* does not have any definitive resolution, at least not in any conventional sense. To resolve the intricacies of the plot, one must delve into the imbedded films, the theme of entertainment, the characters relationships/identities (parallel identity crises), and the intricacies of the chronology. Those who were not scared off by *Infinite Jest*'s immense volume and density of information learned that the hardest thing about reading it was hefting it in your hands and lugging it around with you (also part of the joke?). Those who have enjoyed the rest of Wallace's fiction and his essays have learned that it is possible for fiction and contemporary prose at the end of the Twentieth Century to be just as entertaining, if not *more* entertaining, than television and other forms of electronic media. And it seems that David Foster Wallace has learned that the most direct way to communicate a point to the individual, regardless of their expectations, is to write with a passion that is derived from the writer's most subjective thoughts and obsessions. *That* is how contemporary fiction is going to survive in the face of electronic media and culture. Never mind the news and entertainments of the day! As Philip Roth wrote: "My own feeling is that times are tough for a fiction writer when he takes to writing letters to his newspaper rather than those complicated, disguised letters to himself, which are stories" (Roth 124). David Foster Wallace has followed that lead.

Epilogue

Throughout this project, television, film, entertainment and their ascendant technologies and associated culture have come under a lot of fire. I do not want to come across as a hypocrite, one of the anti-TV hystericals that I warn against in the opening chapter. My intentions within these pages is not to lobby for the abolition of our much cherished forms of entertainment -- television, film, etc. -- but to raise the point that typographic forms of entertainment are being left by the wayside during this half-century's worth of fascination with all things electronic. And also to show that the art of fiction and the art of film, which for all intents and purposes is simply the telling of fictions through technologically advanced means, have both adapted to the prevailing televisual age and found a viable path for survival. I don't have any book sales figures to quote from, so I do not know if there has been increased fiction sales since the recent emergence of post-postmodern fiction, but I think it is most likely too early *yet* for this emergent form to have made a noticeable impact. The competition is pretty stiff.

As a writer of fiction myself, I would like to think that the market trend is changing. Increased sales and revenues in contemporary fiction would only mean a growing market and publishing houses looking for young, new writers with increased interest. But even if the market remains stubbornly turned off fiction and completely absorbed by electronic entertainments, the point is that the art form is advancing, and regardless of whether or not profits increase or stay the same or eventually decrease, the survival of the art of fiction has for the time being, been ensured. And there is a whole other side to this argument that deserves a mention in parting. At the opposite end of the critical spectrum from the likes of Neil Postman, Philip Roth, Patricia Mellencamp, John Thornton Caldwell, etc., are the likes of Douglas Davis and George Gilder -- two men who, while they do *not* champion televisuality and entertainment culture, let it off the

hook and level the burden of blame for all of this anti-entertainment culture hysteria squarely on the shoulders of *the entertained.*

In *The Five Myths of Television Power, or Why the Medium is Not the Message* (1993), Douglas Davis writes:

> We have been told so often that television dominates our minds, lifestyle choices, and political behavior that we believe the telling without conscious choice, without critical attention. This is simply one of the several proofs that this assertion operates on a level analogous to myth itself. (Davis 17)

In these few words, Davis has revealed something quite extraordinary. Citing Roland Barthes, Neil Postman wrote that "television has achieved the status of 'myth'. . . . a way of thinking so deeply imbedded in our consciousness that it is invisible" (Postman 79). What Douglas Davis is saying is that all of the criticisms that television's critics direct at television in effect operate at the same, insidious level as the things that those same critics find insidious and culturally destructive about television. It is a point well taken. Davis admits that there are countless TV-addicts, but points out that in the 1990's (and here it becomes obvious that he is writing a decade after Postman -- a decade of heightened health consciousness, maybe a decade weaned on Neil Postman, et al.?)

> adult Americans are jogging, travelling and flocking both to football games and to museums. . .in record bunches. One might logically argue that TV has driven us *out* of the house . . . . And when we do tune in TV now. . . we are more selective, in terms of what in fact we watch. . . . This evolution into a state of free, impatient choice is in part a function of the technological abundance of channels not available in the 1950's. (Davis 155)

George Gilder writes that "[l]ike any domineering ruler, television made mistakes" (Gilder 37). Like everything else based on electronic technology, television was bound to become outmoded, its technological downfall "already assured at the moment of its initial triumph" (Gilder 37-8). The way Gilder formulates it, television too, despite the fairly recent upgrade to the televisual watershed of the late 1980's -1990's, is also in need of some new way in which to deal with the culture, the world, it exists in.

> No longer is there any justification for allowing television to hog the spectrum. No longer is there any reason for video to use vulnerable, complex, inefficient, and unmanipulable signal. No longer is there any logic in leaving the brains of the system at the station. The age of television, for all intents and purposes, is over. Like all technologies superseded by more powerful inventions, television will not readily disappear. The corpse will linger in American living rooms [Wallace's concept of television as furniture, again] for many more years. But its fate is foreordained. (Gilder 44-5)

In a similar vein, Davis writes: "TV-as-we-have-known-it is the aging Emperor Unclothed, ready to succumb to leaner, looser, more invigorating competition" (Davis 19). With the omnipresence of the World Wide Web and internet technologies, now making up one of televisions largest corporate advertisers, can there be any doubt that that "leaner, looser, more invigorating competition" is not already on top of us?

So, it appears that like fiction and the typographic arts, television too, has to keep pace with the reality of everyday events and progressions. Philip Roth didn't foresee this development, but obviously fiction (the printed word in general) is getting a double shot in the arm. It has to compete with everyday reality just as television does, but it also has to compete with television's method of competing with the realities of technological advances and its own technological limitations. That method: making *everything* entertainment, and that is something that television, undeniably, does very efficiently and very convincingly.

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