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**David Foster Wallace Special Issue**

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**DAVID FOSTER WALLACE SPECIAL ISSUE**

# Review of *The End of the Tour*

*The End of the Tour* [Film], Directed by James Ponsoldt, USA: A24, 2015

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Review of *The End of the Tour*, 2015. [Film] Directed by James Ponsoldt. USA: A24.

Like many academics whose primary interest in David Foster Wallace stems from an appreciation of his work as well as a professional responsibility to understand and interpret its place within contemporary American literature, I experienced mixed feelings when I first heard news about the release of a Wallace biopic, James Ponsoldt's *The End of the Tour*. To me, the idea of seeing Wallace on the big screen was simultaneously intriguing and unsettling—something that my interest in Wallace's life and work would make it hard for me to ignore but, at the same time, something that, out of respect for a writer who seems to have placed a high value on his privacy, I would feel somehow guilty going to watch. My ambivalence became more pronounced when I learned that the film would present Donald Margulies' adaptation of David Lipsky's 2010 book *Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself*, itself a text that, it could be argued, cashed in on the growing interest in Wallace's life and work and allowed Lipsky to be illuminated in the posthumous glow of one of America's most important recent writers. Setting aside some of these doubts, I decided to watch the film in order to write a review of it and, in the process, discovered something that might interest other scholars working within Wallace Studies.

The film itself, which stars Jason Segel as Wallace and Jesse Eisenberg as Lipsky, opened in theaters in the United States in July 2015 and won widespread (but not universal) critical acclaim in the following weeks. I share much of the professional critics' enthusiasm for several aspects of the film. The dialogue is smart and often enough reproduces the exact conversation Lipsky transcribes in the published version of his interview with Wallace, so the film seems to provide a sense (if only a sense) of what Wallace was 'really' like; the acting is good mostly because it is subtle in a way that allows for the foregrounding of ideas—about ambition, fame, literature, and genius, to name a few subjects that arise in the conversation between the two men—that I associate with Wallace's work; and, finally, the on-screen dynamic of Segel and Eisenberg comes off as good theater. Indeed, if I only 'liked'—and not 'loved'—the movie, it is mostly because, while watching it, I felt that I did not get the two things I most wanted from the film: new information about (or insight into) Wallace's work and the aspects of his life that influenced his work. In this review, then, I want to try

to answer a question that has stayed with me since I left the theater, a question that might be asked by other scholars whose job is to understand Wallace, his writing, and the context in which we encounter both: What, if anything, about this movie would be of interest to this journal's readers, who are (presumably) working within the field of contemporary American literature or, more specifically, within Wallace Studies?

To answer this question, we might need to place brackets around the film itself and to focus instead on its critical reception; for although *The End of the Tour* offers very little insight into Wallace's life or work, the divergent responses to the movie by film critics (professional and amateur) can be read as a commentary on the state of Wallace Studies as it was in the summer of 2015 and, perhaps, as it is today. A survey of the initial reviews of the film will show that critics fit into one of three groups. The first group consists of Wallace 'insiders', a cadre that includes members of his family (who, even before the film was made, refused to endorse it) and reviewers like The *Guardian*'s Glenn Kenny, whose personal acquaintance with the 'real' Wallace is, presumably, the primary cause for his terse dismissal of the film as a blatant misrepresentation (a 'betray[al]', he suggests) of the events that took place and an unfair oversimplification of Wallace as a writer and thinker (2015: para. 11). A second group includes people who, like *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott, never met Wallace but developed, during a decade or two of reading him, a strong enough 'relationship' with Wallace's work to find much to love about the film even though—or maybe *because*—'David Foster Wallace is not really its subject at all' (2015: para. 3). The final—and seemingly the fastest-growing—group is made up largely of people who, like *The Wrap* film reviewer Alonso Duralde (2015), haven't read Wallace's work (or at least not much of it, and not while Wallace was alive) but who have learned to appreciate a different version of Wallace, one that is (for better or for worse) best represented by the Kenyon commencement address (later published under the cloying title *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*), websites highlighting 'inspirational' quotations taken from his essays and fiction, and, now, by his portrayal in this film.

What exactly does this varied response to the film suggest about the state of Wallace Studies? For one thing, it indicates the degree to which Wallace has moved out of the (relatively) narrow world of academia and into the wide world of the internet, a move that might affect Wallace's place in the canon of contemporary American literature and could threaten the prestige of Wallace scholarship. For while it is true that the last decade has witnessed the remarkable growth of Wallace Studies, which now includes dozens of essay collections, academic conferences, book-length studies, a journal dedicated to his work, special issues of other journals, and the recently-formed International David Foster Wallace Society—all of which explore the significance of his work—it is also true that scholars are no longer in full control of what Wallace 'means' in contemporary American cultural life. Academia's diminished influence over how Wallace is interpreted is best seen in the fact that, *contra* the work being done by professional academics, a popular-culture version of Wallace has begun to emerge, and this other version has already altered the general population's understanding of Wallace and his work. Largely as a result of the popularity of the Kenyon graduation address, this 'new' Wallace is being pulled out of academic journals and into the (mostly) on-line world of mass-produced pop-philosophy. No wonder, then, that there are writers and readers (Bret Easton Ellis and Jonathan Franzen come to mind here) who feel compelled to demythologize a reputation that was originally built on serious literary achievement but has lately been 'enhanced' by what Laura Miller (2015) has called, in a *New Yorker* piece, 'Litchat' or, perhaps worse, by work that many Wallace scholars consider to be his weakest. To the extent that Wallace's literary reputation depends on readers who prefer *This Is Water* to *Infinite Jest*, this reputation is likely to diminish—and with this diminishment might come a decrease in the prestige of Wallace Studies.

As might be expected, academics have started to reclaim (or attempt to reclaim) for Wallace Studies the version of Wallace that runs the most risk of becoming too commodified to remain the subject of serious critical attention. For example, whereas *New York* magazine book critic Christian Lorentzen describes the Kenyon speech as 'the sort of chain e-mail your dotty uncle forwards you' and laments the fact that it has turned Wallace into 'an idol of quasi-moral veneration, the bard of ironic

self-loathing transformed into a beacon of earnest self-help' (2015: para. 6), Pieter Vermeulen offers a compelling reading of *This Is Water* as Wallace's first attempt to address 'the more mundane kind of insufferability' that characterizes biopolitical discourse in the late-capitalist era (2013: 64). The differences between these two analyses of the Kenyon speech are important, I think, because they indicate at least two of the possible paths that Wallace Studies might take in the near future: the first would make Wallace more 'accessible' to more people, while the other will 'preserve' him as a serious thinker and writer worthy of academic interest.

Keeping in mind these divergent versions of Wallace, and returning at last to a final analysis of *The End of the Tour*, it may be best to come back to the question, which I posed at the outset, about why the film might interest those of us working in literary studies and/or Wallace Studies. In the end, I think the film *is* important because, even if at times it presents a bit too much of the sage-like Wallace who addresses devotees through the aphoristic language of *This Is Water*, the film also shows viewers the deep-thinking Wallace who authored books and essays that have helped define contemporary American literature. In this way, *The End of the Tour* temporarily bridges the gap between two seemingly antithetical versions of Wallace and, in the process, focuses our attention on what—and *how*—Wallace 'means' in America today. It was, for me, worth the trip to the theater.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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