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DELILLO SPECIAL ISSUE

A Deep Insider's Elegiac Tribute: The Work of Don DeLillo in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

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This article explores the influence the work of Don DeLillo has on David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), scrutinising the way Wallace built some of his most important themes on a foundation of literary allusion, particularly to the DeLillo novels *End Zone* (1972) and *Americana* (1971). This article also incorporates the use of archival material that shows both authors corresponding about literature and writing, which is also illuminating when investigating the origins of *Infinite Jest's* sub-textual meaning. In order to thoroughly describe the theoretical import of this relationship, this article also considers Wallace's engagement with the critical theories of influence, specifically his overt and creative use of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) in the novel.

David Foster Wallace, both overtly in interviews and non-fiction, as well as more covertly in his fiction, engages with the writing of his predecessors in complex and meaningful ways. Throughout his career, critics have been quick to notice the influence of Thomas Pynchon, whether it is in the names of his characters, the blending of humour with deeper philosophical themes, or the complicated plot structures on which all of this is hung. *The Broom of the System* (1987) is most clearly Pynchonian in its construction and reveals a young Wallace seduced by the early work of the old master. Wallace's second novel, *Infinite Jest* (1996) has not escaped these comparisons either. Dale Peck, in the *London Review of Books*, emphasises this: "Wallace out-Pynchons Pynchon, and his third book, *Infinite Jest*, may well be the first novel to out-Gravity's Rainbow Gravity's Rainbow" (14).¹ Yet, Wallace's relationship with Pynchon, while formative, became a reluctant one. In later interviews, he distances himself from the comparisons. For example, speaking to Laura Miller of *Salon* in 1996, he says that he finds Pynchon's work inspiring "about 25 percent of the time" and goes on to list myriad other writers who have "rung [his] cherries" (62). However, there was a larger influence on his writing and on how he developed his critical thinking about literature: Don DeLillo.

All of Wallace's fiction is anchored by his knowledge of literary theory and philosophy, and his ideas about allusion and influence have a rigorous foundation in that knowledge. In *Infinite Jest*, his use and abuse of Harold Bloom's theories, in particular, shows Wallace engaging overtly with his influences and the role they play in his creative process. Specifically, Wallace's engagement with Don DeLillo's novel *End Zone* (1972) has both structural and thematic affects on *Infinite Jest*, creating intertextual links between the two novels. *Infinite Jest* is a thematically rich novel in its own right, but the allusions to DeLillo's work help uncover often overlooked interpretations, especially in Wallace's use of language, sport, and violence. These allusions place *Infinite Jest* in the tradition of the "systems novel," revealing Wallace's attention to his own position in the American literary canon.

¹ Peck's review of *Infinite Jest* is extremely negative, and also shows disdain for Pynchon's work. This is perhaps the root of the comparison quoted above.

Wallace, Influence, and Allusion

Infinite Jest can be seen as a novel that is constructed on a foundation of allusions to various literary (and other cultural) works, and it is important to understand the technical process of allusion in order to determine why Wallace has approached writing his novel in this way. According to Christopher Ricks, to use allusion is

necessarily to do something about what might otherwise be the crippling burden of the past; for to allude to a predecessor is both to acknowledge, in piety, a previous achievement and also is a form of benign appropriation – what was so well said has now become a part of my way of saying, and in advancing the claims of a predecessor (and rotating them so they catch a new light) the poet is advancing his own claims, his own poetry, and even poetry. (33)

While Ricks's is specifically writing about the poet as heir to a poetic tradition, the same can be applied to the novelist who is operating in the same environment of literary cross-pollination. While in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way" (1989), Wallace alludes to the work of his postmodern forefathers, specifically John Barth, he does so in order to critique their work and challenge their ideas. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace alludes to his literary predecessors for reasons other than critique. Wallace is "advancing [their] claims," in Ricks' words, adopting their themes and devices in order to further them--and mutate them--with his own creative process. Wallace's self-awareness of his own literary influences enables him to interrogate his own idea of literary influence in a playful way, specifically by alluding to Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*.

Late in *Infinite Jest*, Hal is reviewing some of his father's films, and he comes to a scene in *Good-Looking Men in Small Clever Rooms That Utilize Every Centimeter of Available Space with Mind-Boggling Efficiency*. As the screen "bloomed," Hal sees a teacher, Paul Anthony Heaven, reading a lecture. He describes the reading as "stupefying turgid-sounding shit," as Heaven goes on

For while *clinamen* and *tessera* strive to revive or revise the dead ancestor, and while *kenosis* and *daemonization* act to repress consciousness and

memory of the dead ancestor, it is, finally, artistic *askesis* which represents the contest proper, the battle-to-the-death with the loved dead. (911)

Heaven's lecture clearly adopts Bloom's terminology from his "Six Revisionary Ratios."² Leaving no doubt to the allusion, Wallace inserts an endnote to the text that reads: "Sounding rather suspiciously like Professor H. Bloom's turgid studies of artistic *influenza*" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 1077, n. 366). While Heaven's Bloom-evoking lecture is derogatory toward Bloom's theories, the "Six Revisionary Ratios" impact the thematic foundation of Wallace's novel and necessarily point in the direction of the paternal-filial relationships in *Infinite Jest*, something that can be seen as Wallace's dramatization of his own interpretation of Bloom's theories of poetic influence.

The relationships between the father and sons of the Incandenza family are complex in their allusions to Bloom, and what they reveal about Wallace's relationships with his own literary forebears is notable. When we first see the relationship between Jim and Hal, ten year-old Hal is sent to see the "professional conversationalist," who is Jim in disguise (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 28). In the scene, Jim attempts to converse with his son, but is incapable of hearing Hal's side of the conversation. The two isolated monologues continue side-by-side until the end of the scene. In a reversal of Bloom's theory of influence, it is the father that is anxious about his influence on the son, or the lack thereof: Jim is portrayed as desperately trying to see signs that he has influenced Hal. Bloom's analysis declares that the essential making of the artist and poet lies in an ability to submit to other pieces of artwork. He writes that poets and artists create their work through a combination of "perfect solipsism" and "an awareness of *other selves*,"

² Bloom's "Six Revisionary Ratios" (quoted in an abbreviated form) are:

1. *Clinamen*, which is poetic misreading or misprision proper [. . .]
2. *Tessera*, which is completion and antithesis [. . .]
3. *Kenosis*, which is a breaking-device similar to the defence mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions; *kenosis* then is a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor [. . .]
4. *Daemonization*, or a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in a reaction to the precursor's Sublime [. . .]
5. *Askesis*, or a movement of self-purgation which intends attainment of a state of solitude [. . .]
6. *Apophrades*, or the return of the dead (Bloom 14–5)

saying of the poet, “[t]he poem is *within* him, yet he experiences the shame and splendour of *being found by* poems – great poems – *outside* him” (Bloom 25–26). So Jim, the father, is trying to stimulate “an awareness of *other selves*” in Hal, the son, when he articulates his desire that Hal “recognize the occasional vista beyond your own generous Mondragonoid nose’s fleshy tip” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 31). This is the vital beginning of what Bloom calls a “strong poet,” who will go on to move through the “Six Revolutionary Ratios,” eventually overshadowing the precursor/father so it seems “as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work” (Bloom 26, 16). Of course, Wallace uses Bloom’s framework to describe a literal inheritance and not an artistic one, and the father being anxious about the process is an ironic reversal of Bloom’s theory of influence.

This scene evokes Bloom in another way: the original title of the chapter according to the draft manuscripts available at the Harry Ransom Center is revealed as “It Was a Great Marvel That They Were in the Father Without Knowing Him” (Wallace, “First Two Sections”). This idea also lives on in the published novel as the title of the fictional film version of the scene, as seen in the Incandenza Filmography (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 992). While this title is a quotation from “The Gospel of Truth,” Bloom uses it as the header for his prologue to *The Anxiety of Influence*.³

Marshall Boswell describes the relationship between Hal and Jim in terms of Wallace’s consciousness of his own literary influence: “Hal’s suicidal father also acts as Wallace’s own postmodern father. Incandenza is Pynchon, Barth, and Nabokov all rolled into one” (164). Don DeLillo, and even Bloom himself, can also be added to this list, but these authors’ influence on Wallace’s work is complicated precisely because of his engagement with Bloom’s theories, particularly that of misprision. In David Lipsky’s interview, Wallace admits, “I believe in Harold Bloom’s theory of *misprision*,” which states that poetic influence only vitalises an artistic work through a misreading of the predecessor’s work (Lipsky 127). Consequently, Wallace’s allusions must necessarily be misreadings in the Bloomian sense. This seemingly paradoxical

³ “The Gospel of Truth” is part of *The Gnostic Gospels*, and putatively written by Valentinian Gnostics or by Valentinus himself around 140–180 AD. It depicts the influence of The Father, so far as to say The Son and the Father are one in the same.

situation can be explained by examining Bloom further. He writes that, since the Enlightenment, poetic influence has been “more of a blight than a blessing,” but continues to say, “[w]here it has vitalized, it has operated as misprision, as deliberate, even perverse revisionism” (Bloom 50). This is the *clinamen* stage of Bloom's theory, the deliberate adopting of misreadings of previous works in order to create something new. Wallace has used Bloom's theories to dramatize the relationships within the Incandenza family, but that does not mean he has taken, wholesale, Bloom's ideas. He has deliberately misread them, revised them, and mutated them (or to paraphrase Ricks, rotated them so that they catch a new light) in order to present his work of fiction, or “strong poem.”

Wallace's allusion to Bloom can be seen as an in-joke, but it is not pointless. One of the most common aspects of all of Wallace's writing is how he wrestles with his own influences in an overt way, attempting to engage with the North American canon and determine his own place within it. *The Broom of the System* shows a young Wallace process the primarily stylistic influence of Thomas Pynchon and the post-modern, self-referential influence of John Barth. Wallace shows himself as anxious about the power of these influences and his ability to step out from under their shadow, particularly as he writes his novella “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,” which stands as an attempted corrective to his previous novel. It is not until *Infinite Jest* that Wallace begins to process his influence in a different, more confident, way.

Wallace and Don DeLillo's *End Zone*:

If Wallace's allusions to Pynchon and Barth show him trying to negotiate their influence on his writing and move past it, particularly in the case of “Westward,” then *Infinite Jest's* allusion to DeLillo shows him comfortably interacting with his predecessor in order to both advance his claims and create a firm thematic foundation to the novel. This connection is often cited as fact in critical works, but the debt that *Infinite Jest* owes to DeLillo's fiction has not been widely or thoroughly explored. The existing discussion of DeLillo's influence on Wallace is primarily superficial, an acknowledgement

of the debt Wallace owes to his influence. The *Kirkus Reviews*, for example, critiques Wallace as “a puerile Pynchon, a discount Don DeLillo” (quoted in Max 81). In a more academic context, Stephen J. Burn notices that *Infinite Jest* “has a strong intertextual relation to DeLillo’s 1972 novel of football and nuclear terror, *End Zone*, which several characters in *Infinite Jest* seem to have read” (70). While Burn notes some examples of this, he stops short of examining the full influence DeLillo’s novel has on Wallace’s text. It is not sufficient to merely acknowledge DeLillo’s immediate influence on Wallace when there are such strong thematic and structural connections between the two writers’ work. In particular, Wallace’s use of structural systems echoes DeLillo’s interest in the cost of human exposure to a surplus of information, whether recursive systems of language, communication or, in the case of *End Zone*, violence.

Throughout the Wallace Papers at the Harry Ransom Center, DeLillo haunts Wallace’s work. In Wallace’s copy of *Americana* (1971), there are specific notes for the composition of *Infinite Jest* that relate directly to the text of DeLillo’s debut novel. The storyline of Orin Incandenza being a serial seducer is plotted out on the margins, next to DeLillo’s description of his protagonist’s seduction technique (*Americana* 35). There are letters between DeLillo and Wallace, as well as the latter’s close annotation on the typescript of DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), showing he is particularly impressed by DeLillo’s use of language. Wallace underlines the phrase “the crumbled husks of glassy green beetles” and notes, “Allit. & Asson. Gives them a chant-like weight in your mind, a counterweight to flat tone” (DeLillo, “Underworld Typescript, Part Two”). Wallace, ever a close reader, is shown engaging carefully with much of DeLillo’s work, but it is the novel *End Zone* that impacts *Infinite Jest* most.

End Zone tells the story of Gary Harkness, a college football player who is undergoing an existential crisis, a crisis that has made him drop out of several prestigious colleges and forced him to take a scholarship at the tiny Logos College in West Texas. There are several allusions to *End Zone* in *Infinite Jest*, some small fragments, others more developed. Wallace’s tennis academy is analogous to Logos College in several ways, from the enclosed training grounds with the coach’s observation tower to the

student bodies of the two institutions. Many of the characters in *End Zone* seem to leap over the invisible boundary into Wallace's novel, the most obvious example being that of Raymond Toon, the student preparing himself for a career in sports commentary. He spends his spare time "camped in front of his portable TV set. He'd switch it on, turn down the sound to nothing, and describe the action" (DeLillo, *End Zone* 23). In *Infinite Jest*, the character of Jim Troeltsch is a mediocre tennis player, but is preparing himself for a career in sports broadcasting in similar ways to Toon. Troeltsch is first seen succumbing to illness while a "cartridge of a round-of-16 match from September's U.S. Open had been on the small room viewer with the sound all the way down as usual and Troeltsch'd been straightening the straps of his jock, idly calling the match's action into his fist" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 60). Also, Taft Robinson in *End Zone*, the outsider football prodigy of few words, is retooled as John "No Relation" Wayne, the outsider tennis prodigy of few words, while Hal's philosophizing recalls *End Zone's* narrator, Harkness. These allusions act as road signs for the reader, pointing back to the thematic relevance of DeLillo's novel and giving *Infinite Jest* a firmer foundation in what Tom LeClair describes as the postmodern tradition of "systems novels," an aspect of both Wallace and DeLillo's work that this article will explore in more detail later.

Throughout *End Zone*, the protagonist, Gary Harkness, meditates on his obsession with nuclear holocaust until eventually the violent images blend with his discussions of football and its various rules of engagement. Wallace's most overt allusion to DeLillo's novel is the game of "Eschaton," which reflects *End Zone* in several ways, particularly in the conflation of sport and war. DeLillo's novel involves Harkness playing a war game with the Air Force ROTC commander, Major Staley. While the relevant chapter is short—much shorter than Wallace's war game section—it provides a basis for not only the latter, but also other aspects of *Infinite Jest's* narrative. This is intentional on Wallace's part, and he references *End Zone's* influence in several unpublished documents. For example, the original coversheet that accompanied the first draft of *Infinite Jest* that Wallace sent to his publisher (titled, "PRIVATE DOCUMENT: INTENDED ONLY FOR RETINAS OF PEOPLE TO WHOM IT'S EXPLICITLY SENT") contains a detailed bibliography for the Eschaton scene:

(3) Mss. pp. 146–167, 'Eschaton,' makes use of the following sources:

Howard Anton's Calculus With Analytical Geometry (Wiley & Sons, 1980)

R. B. Braithwaite's Theory of Games as a Tool for the Moral Philosopher (Cambridge University Press, 1969)

Don DeLillo's End Zone (Houghton Mifflin, 1972)

General Sir John Hackett's The Third World War: August 1985 (Macmillan, 1979)

John Nash's 'Two Person Cooperative Games' in Econometrica, vol. 21, 1953

Howard Raiffa's 'Calculus of Collaboration' in Contributions to the Theory of Games, vol. 2, eds. H. W. Kuhn and A. W. Tucker ('Annals of Mathematics Studies,' No. 28, Princeton University Press, 1958) ("First Two Sections")

Additionally, Wallace acknowledges the importance of *End Zone's* influence in a letter to DeLillo written during the composition of *Infinite Jest*:

it seems rather that a lot of your voices and constructions, as with [Manuel] Puig's and [Octavio] Paz's, hang around in my head and get mixed up with other experiences and ideas and voices, etc. [...] E.g., part of a long thing I'm in the middle of has a section that I've gone back and seen owes a rather uncomfortable debt to certain exchanges between Gary Harkness and Major Staley in *End Zone* (Letter to DeLillo, 11 June 1992).

In a subsequent letter, he clarifies that "[t]he relevant Harkness-Staley exchange in End Zone is in Chapter 29, which in my old Pocket paperback is pp. 180–185" (Letter to DeLillo, 15 July 1992).

The Major's rules for the game and the jargon he uses prefigure *Infinite Jest's* scenes. For example, each game commences with an imagined situation that in both cases uses the same language. DeLillo's version of the war game sets the template:

It begins in the Sea of Japan. An AMAC destroyer of the Seventh Fleet, on maneuvers, is strafed by two NORKOR MIGs. Damage is light; there are no casualties. Two days later a Polaris submarine in the East Siberian Sea is reported missing. In Germany three high-ranking agents defect to the West; unmarked planes drop leaflets over East Berlin, over Prague, over Budapest.

There are a dozen explosions of suspicious origin at military bases throughout Spain and Turkey. An unmanned AMAC intelligence plane is downed by COMCHIN missiles in the Formosa Strait (*End Zone* 211).

This carries on in the same vein for another page before the game proper starts. Wallace's imaginary pre-game situation report is as follows:

A Russo-Chinese border dispute goes tactical over Sinkiang. An AMNAT computer tracker in the Aleutians misreads a flight of geese as three SOVWAR SS 10s on reentry. Israel moves armored divisions north and east through Jordan after an El Al airbus is bombed in midflight by a cell linked to both H'sseins. Black Albertan wackos infiltrate an isolated silo at Ft. Chimo and get two MIRVs through SOUTHAF's defense net. North Korea invades South Korea. Vice versa. AMNAT is within 72 hours of putting an impregnable string of antimissile satellites on line, and the remorseless logic of game theory compels SOVWAR to go SACPOP while it still has the chance. (*Infinite Jest* 325)

From here, both Wallace's and DeLillo's war games continue, but Wallace's version, incorporating many of the aspects from DeLillo, expands and twists the themes for his own use. While Wallace worries that the allusion to *End Zone* may be "potentially piratical" and writes to DeLillo in order to show "the Sicilian-type Respect of the pre-nominate gesture," he avoids any accusations of plagiarism (Letter to DeLillo, 15 July 1992). Ricks clarifies this difference between plagiarism and allusion, stating "the alluder hopes that the reader will recognize something, the plagiarist that the reader will not" (1). Wallace intends the allusions to *End Zone* to be seen by the reader in order to provide interpretative clues to the thematic meaning of at least one aspect of the novel.

End Zone, DeLillo says, is not "about football. It's a fairly elusive novel. It seems to me to be about extreme places and extreme states of mind, more than anything else" (DeCurtis 57). The football players are prone to behaviour that evokes a violent extremism. For example, Harkness describes a time when the players of the football team "started playing a game called Bang You're Dead," where someone would mimic

a gun with their fingers and make the appropriate sound, then “[t]he other person clutches a vital area of his body and then falls, simulating death. (Never mere injury; always death)” (DeLillo, *End Zone* 30). This is the first instance of violence and war being associated with a game, but the examples become more extreme throughout the novel, eventually culminating in the aforementioned war game Harkness plays with the Major.

Football itself becomes warlike and violent in the novel, even as a friendly game of touch football in the snow has its rules redefined again and again so its low-contact nature becomes merely “primal impact” (DeLillo, *End Zone* 186). Despite the cold, the players carry on with an increasingly violent game:

We kept playing, we kept hitting, and we were comforted by the noise and brunt of our bodies in contact, by the simple physical warmth generated through violent action, by the sight of each other, the torn clothing, the bruises and scratches, the wildness of all fourteen, numb, purple, coughing, white heads solemn in the healing snow (187).

But these brutish athletes do not represent the anti-intellectualism often associated with sport, rather, as David Cowart claims in *Don DeLillo and the Physics of Language* (2002), they “seem to spend all their waking hours in one kind of cerebration or another,” not least Harkness himself (19). Here, *Infinite Jest* can be seen to allude to, and play out from, many aspects of DeLillo’s novel, namely the academic athleticism and the cerebral nature of the players, but also the violence of the associated sports: the brute force of DeLillo’s football and the attrition-war of Wallace’s tennis.

The analogy between sport/games and violence is clear to see in both novels. Even with Wallace’s use of the more stately non-contact sport of tennis, the players use violent language when talking about the game. Jim Troeltsch’s commentary shows the lurid use of this language:

LaMont Chu disembowelled Charles Pospisilova 6-3, 6-2; Jeff Penn was on Nate Millis-Johnson like a duck on a Junebug 6-4, 6-7, 6-0; [...] Idris Arslanian ground his heel into the neck of David Wiere 6-1, 6-4 and PW’s 5-man

R. Greg Chubb had to be just about carried off over somebody's shoulder after Todd Possalthwaite moonballed him into a narcoleptic coma 4-6, 6-4, 7-5. (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 309)

As Troeltsch's commentary continues, he begins to use warlike imagery, stating "Felicity Zweig went absolutely SACPOP on P.W.'s Kiki Pfefferblit" (310). In both novels, the violent imagery of the sport eventually leads to analogy between the game and war, in both cases literalised by the depictions of war games being played by the characters.

Yet, the violent language used becomes arbitrary, ceasing to refer to the action it describes. In Troeltsch's commentary Todd Possalthwaite is said to have "moonballed" his opponent. Although in tennis terminology "moonball" refers to a very high lob shot, it is clearly given a violent context in the commentary, as there is talk of R. Greg Chubb being "carried off over somebody's shoulder" after being rendered comatose. Yet, the score tells a different story. It's a very close game, with Chubb actually winning a set. Harkness is similarly seduced by the language of violence, particularly that of nuclear war: "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. Pleasure in these words" (DeLillo, *End Zone* 20-1). Harkness has already admitted that the meaning of certain words has faded for him, declaring, "[i]t was a sinister thing to discover at such an age, that words can escape their meanings" (17). The language of violence has seduced Harkness, but the meaning of the words is arbitrary, just as the violent imagery in Troeltsch's commentary does not refer to the action on the court.

There is an implication that violence is inherent in masculine American society in both the novels, and the language of that violence has a dehumanising effect. James R. Giles explains that "[l]anguage is, after all, the essential route to consciousness, and in the male, violence has appropriated language itself, thus blocking any meaningful introspection about the origins and consequences of violence" (95). In terms more specific to *End Zone*, Kenneth Millard writes that the novel "scrutinizes sport as if it were simply a mode of technical discourse" (222).

These ideas help reveal both DeLillo's and Wallace's attempts to interrogate the systems of language that surround more chaotic and primal human activities (such as war and sport).

In this attempt to rationalise violence, both Harkness and the tennis cadets (lead by Pemulis) try to impose a system of rules on the chaos of war, yet the language used creates a simulation and blocks any understanding of the consequences of the violence to which it refers. Charles Molesworth sees this as indicative of the "systems novel," explaining that it is

a genre in which a surplus of information becomes the chief threat of modern life and the perfectly expressive simulacrum of it. The welter of languages, the collage of scenic juxtapositions, the affectlessness of characters, and the constant use of lists are all stylistic markers of this genre. (151)

Wallace's allusion to *End Zone* deliberately positions *Infinite Jest* within this sub-genre of postmodern fiction, but Wallace's writing shows an attempt to play with (and extend) the established definition of the "systems novel."

Tom LeClair pioneered the theory of the "systems novel" in his books *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (1987) and *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Literature* (1989). LeClair's work uses Ludwig von Bertalanffy's scientific theory that open systems, or abstract mathematical models, rather than mechanistic thinking was more efficacious in analysing the "problems of order, organization, wholeness, [and] teleology" (*Art of Excess* 7).⁴ LeClair applies this theory to literature:

It is as systems of information that the [systems] novels master – comprehend, represent, and critique – the world, for the world, as systems theorists recognize, is largely composed of huge systems of information, both ideological and institutional, that exert power over individuals and their groups. (14)

⁴ LeClair is quoting Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *General Systems Theory* (1968) here.

He goes on to say that systems novels attack “patriarchal mastery, monotheism, instrumental mechanism, statist imperialism and totalitarianism, monopolistic capitalism, consensus politics, industrial growth, and an alienated consumerism of objects, entertainment, and information – a cultural system of waste” (16). Both novelists depict characters who are entrapped by these systems, but who also try to impose their own systems on the chaos of the world around them. The war games in *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest* are good examples of this.

As I have previously said, Wallace's Eschaton is an allusion to the war game played by Harkness and Major Staley, but Wallace's version of the game leads to a different conclusion, altering DeLillo's original theme. In *End Zone*, the war game leads to contemplation and a quiet celebration of serious tactics. Harkness revels in the formality of the game: “There were insights, moves, minor revelations that we savored together. Silences between moves were extremely grave. Talk was brief and pointed. Small personal victories (of tactics, of imagination) were genuinely satisfying. Mythic images raged in my mind” (DeLillo, *End Zone* 213). Away from the violence of the gridiron, the images of war become stately and theoretical. Earlier in the novel, Staley claims that real nuclear war would be similarly restrained: “[y]ou'd practically have a referee and a timekeeper. Then it would be over and you'd make your damage assessment” (77). But DeLillo is using the notion of games to emphasise the destruction of war. Cowart explains this comparison:

one *is* played by rules and seldom results in death, the other only deceives itself with rules – and always results in death [. . .] the conceit of refereed violence misleads: the real thing does not allow for the resumption of “play” on the morrow, the first day of plague and nuclear winter. (23)

Infinite Jest's war game begins with similar control. The rules are extremely complex and Otis P. Lord (whose name indicates his position as being the controller of the simulated world) referees the action. In a further strengthening of the perceived link between sport and war, the global battlefield is imagined onto actual tennis courts, and tennis equipment plays the part of launchers, warheads, and targets. Eschaton

transcends its definition as a game, as all of the players relinquish the guiding rules and begin to submit to uncontrolled, language-less violence. Wallace's game, as Cowart says, "only deceives itself with rules" and comes to more closely represent actual conflict than the war game in DeLillo's book. In a culmination of the violence, the referee, Lord, is symbolically and spectacularly disposed of as he plummets head-first into the computer screen that contains the rules to the game.

Both *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest* seek to illustrate the duality between the systemic, rational person and the violent human being. In Cowart's reading of the *End Zone*, DeLillo "denies that human beings are rational creatures who sometimes descend into violence. Rather, he suggests, human beings are violent creatures for whom only exhaustion brings peace" (20). It is heavily implied that part of Harkness' method for escaping his violent nature is an attempted suicide, complete erasure, in the final paragraph of the novel. In Wallace's allusion to *End Zone*, the systemic, academic pursuits of the E.T.A. students cannot shield them from the violence that is innate. For Harkness, the war game leads to rational thought and "mythic images" through an adherence to the complex rules, whereas for the students at E.T.A. the war game unleashes their violent selves despite the rigorous structure of play. DeLillo explains his use of games in his fiction in similar terms:

Most games are carefully structured. They satisfy a sense of order and they even have an element of dignity about them [. . .] Games provide a frame in which we can try to be perfect. Within sixty-minute limits or one-hundred-yard limits or the limits of the game board, we can look for perfect moments or perfect structures. In my fiction I think this search sometimes turns out to be a cruel delusion. (LeClair, "Interview with Don DeLillo" 5-6)

Harkness achieves this type of perfection in the war game he plays with Staley, yet he does not seem to be comforted by this. Once the game is over, he descends into a hunger strike (against what is uncertain). Wallace takes this idea of the transcendence of games and plays with it in a different way. The rules of Eschaton, similar to Staley's rules, are complex, almost farcically so, and it takes a long footnote for

Pemulis to describe them. They are cerebral rules using equations that are “fucking *elegant*,” but this only serves to emphasise Wallace's mutation of DeLillo's theme and LeClair's idea that such systems help “master” the world (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 1024, n. 123). Whereas DeLillo shows that the adherence to the rules leads to an epiphany of sorts for Harkness, Wallace shows that the rules, cerebral and complex though they are, are merely an illusion that cannot prevent humans' violent nature from revealing itself.

In “The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*” (2008), Mark Bresnan notes that the simulated game begins to bleed into the real world despite Pemulis' desire to keep the two separate: “all sorts of ‘nonstrategic emotions’ are aroused, and ironically, the melee that results is a much more accurate ‘simulation’ of war than the game itself” (Bresnan 62). The real sense of play that satisfies Harkness in the war game is the play of language, imagination, and simulation which the complex rules help to facilitate. In this respect, Pemulis feels the same as Harkness: that the boundaries between real and imagined must be constant in order for the sense of play to flourish. When the boundaries break down, as they do in the snowbound football game or on the Eschaton map, play is smothered by the seriousness of real violence. This is emphasised by Coach Creed in *End Zone*, following the snowbound game:

People stress the violence. That's the smallest part of it. Football is brutal only from a distance. In the middle of it there's a calm, a tranquillity [. . .] There's a sense of order even at the end of a running play with bodies strewn everywhere. When the systems interlock, there's a satisfaction to the game that can't be duplicated. There's a harmony (DeLillo 190).

Conversely, the “systems” in both novels are subject to emotional and violent human beings, for whom the structure of play cannot save them from their primal instincts. The systems of language that attempt to apply elegant order to violence in *End Zone* and *Infinite Jest* can also be viewed as a quest for meaning in a chaotic world, but both Wallace and DeLillo describe this quest as impossible. Both war game scenes end “in a recognition that the quest for significance is futile,” which Molesworth

observes of *Ratner's Star*, but that is a common trope in many of DeLillo's novels, and one that Wallace has expanded with his own fiction (156).

Conclusion

Much of the criticism of *Infinite Jest* at least mentions the perceived difficulty of reading the novel, which, like the work of Pynchon, comes from the denseness of the novel's information, the multitude of characters and voices, and the fragmentation of the story. Frank Cioffi describes Wallace's novel as a "performance: its narrative comprises so many story lines that it reinvents the idea of narrative, and the story lines intersect in such unexpected, often adventitious ways that even 'hypertext' fails to describe the work" (161). Yet among the layers of information, the encyclopaedic descriptions and endnotes, Wallace has carefully designed a structure in order to lead readers to greater understanding of the novel's thematic core. This structure relies on Wallace's intertextuality with other writers and his engagement with literary techniques of the earlier twentieth century. However, Wallace does not leave the reader to determine this alone, instead placing further signposts pointing to this intertextuality. These signposts take the form of allusions to literary theory, particularly Harold Bloom's ideas on influence. These allusions to Bloom, coupled with Wallace's writing about inheritance from Jim Incandenza to his sons, draw attention to the other, more covert and literary inheritances in the novel, whether that is the influence of DeLillo, the Manuel Puig of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1976), or the Dostoevsky of *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).⁵ Ultimately, Wallace shows a self-conscious adherence to the traditional literary theories of intertextuality and influence, even as he creates a work that pushes at the boundaries of the traditional American canon.

Wallace's allusions to *End Zone* in *Infinite Jest* demonstrate how his relationship with his literary predecessors has changed throughout his career. No longer is he challenging the work of his forebears as he does with John Barth in "Westward."

⁵ Manuel Puig's influence can be seen in the dialogue sections of *Infinite Jest*, which have the same structure and use of ellipses as *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. For more on Dostoevsky's influence, see Timothy Jacobs, "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 49.3 (2007). 265–92.

Instead, *Infinite Jest* shows him embracing DeLillo's work, engaging with its themes, and using it as inspiration to create something new. It is perhaps because Wallace's work is so original, so ambitious and complex, that his engagement with his influences, particularly DeLillo are not examined deeply in existing criticism. His dissatisfaction with postmodernism (visible not only in his fiction but in non-fiction and interviews, as well) has become the subject of much of the critical writing about Wallace, but what his engagement with other postmodern American writers shows is that he is not attempting a literary ground-clearing or to start from scratch. Instead, this engagement suggests there is more opportunity to scrutinise Wallace's relationships with his predecessors in a deeper and more sustained way, particularly when following Wallace's own textual signposts. It is rare to have an author who is so articulate about his own relationship with literature, and the interaction between Wallace and his immediate influences not only helps interpret his novels, but also assists in positioning both Wallace and his influences in the twentieth century American canon.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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