Depth of Frame: "Capture" in the Works of David Foster Wallace

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Abstract

Television and language are two imperfect forms of communication that are recursively explored in the works of David Foster Wallace. Many critics have analyzed these two motifs as they function in the author's works, however a decisive link between these two devices has yet to be fully established critically.

Critic David A. Kessler suggests that television's dominance over its audience's consciousness has created a disconnection with reality, as it did in Wallace's own life. Kessler coins this disconnection, "capture", and theorizes that it led to Wallace's own disillusionment and eventual withdrawal from life.

In the thesis, I take this idea further by arguing that the capture television caused in Wallace's own life can be meta-reflexively identified in the characters Neal ("Good Old Neon"), Julie ("Little Expressionless Animals"), and Chris Fogle (*The Pale King*). By close reading these short and long fictions paired with Wallace's own criticism, treatises, and interviews, I investigate how television and language are used as imperfect forms of mediation, then assess the capture that supervenes as a result. Citing popular Wallace critics, I explore the evolution of these concepts over Wallace's career as he strives to create a "New Sincerity".

Wallace ultimately demonstrates that language and television create a capture in the lives of his characters that distorts their perception of reality, and thus an understanding and expression of the self. It is only by becoming aware of this capture – that is hidden in plain sight – that one can learn to transcend it.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Given the enormously eclectic nature of David Foster Wallace's writing, it should not be surprising that the growing field of David Foster Wallace Studies shares an equally diverse set of critical approaches to the writer's work. Even the categorization of the author's oeuvre has proven difficult to codify. As a result, a common approach to Wallace criticism has been the creation of discourse about Wallace's role as a vanguard for a third wave of modernism in literature and the situating of the author within that spectrum. This placement varies, with some critics labeling Wallace as a postmodernist, others a postpostmodernist, and another school of thought branding him as a leader in the "New Sincerity" (Kelly 131). Perhaps this is due to the uncategorizable nature of Wallace himself. The author has been termed a satirist, a philosopher, a journalist, an ironist, a meta-ironist, an essayist, a short story writer, a novelist, and an educator, just to name a few of his roles. For this thesis, I intend to examine Wallace's fiction, both short and long, with the aid of Wallace's own criticism, treatises, and interviews as they shed light on the subjects of language and television. Many critics have analyzed these two motifs as they function in the works of Wallace, however a decisive link between these two devices has yet to be fully established critically. I propose that one link between these two subjects is mediation. Both language and television are utilized as imperfect means of expressing the self in Wallace's short stories "Little Expressionless Animals"

and “Good Old Neon”, as well as in the author’s final novel *The Pale King*. While mediation by definition suggests a conflict in arbitration, for the purposes of this thesis "imperfect" forms of communication shall allude to mediation that exhibits a distorting influence or capture. The principal questions I intend to investigate are as follows: First, what is the link between the mediation of language and television in Wallace’s fiction? Second, how do television and language create a disconnection in the lives of Wallace’s characters? Third, if the mediation of language and television creates a disconnection in the lives of Wallace’s characters, does Wallace offer solutions to escape this despotic influence? For my thesis, I propose to investigate how mediation operates to express the human experience in Wallace’s fiction.

I theorize that Wallace employs frames, over multiple works, as a metaphor for mediation (such as language and television) and its limitations. It is these limitations that create a disconnection in the lives of Wallace’s characters by inhibiting their ability to fully understand themselves or others. In the essay “Mind of Captives”, critic David A. Kessler suggests that television’s dominance over the modern audience’s consciousness has created a disconnection with reality, as it did in Wallace’s own life. I would like to take this idea further, arguing that the disconnection that television caused in Wallace’s own life can be meta-reflexively identified in the characters Neal (“Good Old Neon”), Julie (“Little Expressionless Animals”), and Chris Fogle (*The Pale King*). Kessler suggests that there is a common mechanism underlying our emotional struggles and mental illnesses, a “stimulus—a place, a thought, a memory, a person— [that] takes hold of our attention and shifts our perception” (82). Kessler defines this stimulated shift in perception as “capture” and argues that it led to Wallace’s disillusionment and eventual

withdrawal from life. Kessler states that Wallace once scribbled in a book, "'Grandiosity-the constant need to be, and be seen as, a superstar.' Something about this notion stuck and became a reflexive thought—one that made him feel very bad" (82). For the purposes of my argument, I find Wallace's use of the term "superstar" curious, as it suggests the lexicon of television and film. Viewing television as a perception-altering stimulus, or "capture", would correlate with the experiences of the characters Neal, Julie, and Fogle. As it did in Wallace's own life, the distorting mediation of the television frame causes disconnection or capture in the lives of these characters. For each one, capture is demonstrated through the television frame or through language. What is there connection? They are both forms of mediation that articulate "the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" (Schlegel 55). For my thesis, I hope to bridge this unique link and add to the academic discussion of Wallace and his works.

While many of Wallace's writings explore the role of television in American culture or the limitations of language to express the self, I intend to focus specifically on the fiction in which television and/or language create a disconnection in the lives of Wallace's characters. In "Little Expressionless Animals", Wallace examines the impossibility of a full connection between two people, set (appropriately) against the backdrop of the JEOPARDY! television studio. In the story, game show champ Julie Smith, "sits staring at herself in a harsh makeup mirror framed with glowing bulbs, her face loose and expressionless" (76). As she examines herself in the light of the television studio, Julie becomes disillusioned, "She has trouble reacting to stimuli" (76), she is unable to process a correlation between herself and the television persona that contemplates her through the reflective frame. The contrast between Julie's television

facsimile and her true self creates capture in her life. As a result, she is unable to fully understand or express herself, creating a break in her communications with others. This capture is brought on by the mediation of "reality" through the television frame, as well as the imperfect mediation of language as it is presented in the story (often through the lexicon of television).

Mediation through language and the television frame are also linked via capture in Wallace's "Good Old Neon". In this story, the character Neal has a mental breakdown after watching a re-run of the television show *Cheers*. In preparing his suicide note, Neal utilizes the vocabulary of television, describing, "I'd somehow chosen to cast my lot with my life's drama's supposed audience instead of with the drama itself, and that I even now was watching and gauging my supposed performance's quality and probable effects" (447). In both narratives, the inability of the television frame to objectively present depth can be tied to the inability of the characters to fully connect with others or understand themselves.

Wallace takes this notion further in his final work, *The Pale King,* in which the character Chris Fogle has three life-changing experiences in front of screens. One of the most significant shifts occurs while Fogle is watching the soap opera *As The World Turns*. Due to television's capture, Fogle believes that the eponymous repetition of show's title is a commentary on his own life, prepared just for him. Ironically, it is these screen-induced religious experiences that allow Fogle to deconstruct the capture that has taken over his life. The self-declared nihilistic "wastoid" (*The Pale King* 213) makes the bold decision to live a life of purpose as reality's hero, the accountant. In contrast to his earlier works, Wallace proposes methods for escaping television's capture through *The*

Pale King. Perhaps this speaks to the writer's change in perception over time and his progression as a writer. In Fogle's case, an intervention is necessary to break him free of television's autocratic grasp. The novel also presents a scene – outside of itself – in which a previously unintroduced character, T. Hovatter, devises a complex scheme to overcome television's capture by "watching every last second of television broadcast in the month of May 1986" ("Reading Group Guide" 14). In the cases of both Hovatter and Fogle, a disconnection is required for the characters to understand the power that capture holds on their psyches. In discussing the perception altering experience of watching *As the World Turns*, Fogle says, "I had somehow chosen to have nothing matter. It all felt much less abstract than it sounds to try to explain it" (*The Pale King* 213). Fogle's inability to fully articulate his feelings and his experience are – as in "Good Old Neon" and "Little Expressionless Animals" – reflective of television's inability to healthily mediate. What's intriguing about this relation is that the characters in each of these stories are hindered by the insufficiencies of language to express themselves, as well as describe their experiences in which television has been an influence. Conversely, television affects the language of each of these characters to express themselves, viz., television alters their ability to describe reality as they understand it.

A common critical approach to Wallace's work in the past has been the application of Wittgenstein's philosophies of language to Wallace's fiction. Critics such as Patrick O'Donnell have used this method to argue that Wallace presents an "often abrasive relationship between language and reality" (15). Similarly, in his discussion of *The Pale King*, critic Andrew Warren argues that a full investigation into the day-to-day minutia of human life within the novel is difficult because reality "is simply too large and

complex to fit within any given representational form" (391). These arguments target the impracticality of mediating reality. For each of the works, I will discuss how language and television create a parlous tension between the expression of reality and an understanding of it. Critic Clare Hayes-Brady argues that Wallace echoes Wittgenstein's resistance to the idea of a "perfect expression of anything" (3). In the exploration of language, reality, mediation and its limitations, many critics examine these larger questions of Wallace's writing: What are the limitations of language? What are the limitations of mediation? How are mediation and language related? What are the limitations of connection between one human being and another? Are these limitations defined by the inadequacies of language? Does language limit an expression and understanding of the self? Is this why Wallace frequently explores "the cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else" ("Good Old Neon" 450)? These are all topics I will explore as I connect the limitations of mediation to the limitations of understanding and expressing the self.

In his 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech *This Is Water*, Wallace posits that everything has "to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves [of it] over and over" (9). For my thesis, I hypothesize that language and television create a capture in the lives of Wallace's characters that distorts their perception of reality, and thus an understanding and expression of the self. It is only by becoming aware of this capture – that is "hidden in plain sight" – that characters can learn to transcend it.

Chapter 2

Mirrors, Monitors, and Mediation in “Little Expressionless Animals”

The distorting effects of television are often reflected in Wallace’s stories through the construction of frames. In “Little Expressionless Animals”, the visual composition of frames meta-reflexively mirror the world of television in which the story takes place. Analogous to watching a television show, the scenes depicted are often framed through glass and illuminated via cinematic lighting. As in cinema or television, mood is dictated by the mise-en-scène presented, though Wallace focuses predominantly on television. This technique has the distorting effect of trapping the characters in an emotional prescription dictated by television’s capture. Wallace demonstrates the effect of capture at the beginning of the story when the lovers, Faye and Julie, try to connect in the diminutive light of Faye’s glass apartment. The scene opens, framed like an episodic television show. We are given an establishing shot as “California’s night sky hangs bright and silent as an empty palace” (“Little Expressionless Animals” 66) to situate the viewer (reader). Similar to the opening frame of a TV show, a time-frame is given, “It’s 1986” (66), not unlike an onscreen title-card. The frame then pushes in to reveal more information, as “Little white sequins make slow lines on streets far under Faye’s warm apartment” (66); cut to an image in which “Faye Goddard and Julie Smith lie in Faye’s Bed” (66). As if looking through a television screen, the lovers are framed through the “walls of glass” (66) that make up Faye’s apartment as they lay exposed, post-coitus. As

the two rest in the tranquility of the moment, total darkness eludes them as “Little bits of Los Angeles wink on and off” (66) and they openly “stand naked at a glass wall and look at Los Angeles” (66). The image of these naked bodies viewed through the “glass wall” evokes the voyeuristic quality of television while providing a visual representation of vulnerability. As the television style frame would imply, the moment is (described through language as) “incredibly romantic” (66). Reflecting the state of Faye and Julie, the reader is only given a window from which to peer into the lives of these characters.

The limitations of communicating through television-type frames is a trope often explored in Wallace’s works. When asked about the ending of *Infinite Jest*, or lack thereof, Wallace responded:

> there is an ending as far as I'm concerned. Certain kind of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an ‘end’ can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book's failed for you. (Max 319)

In Wallace’s own description of his work, the language of television and cinema is evoked through vocabulary such as “projected”, “projection”, and “frame”. The parenthetical use of “end” also presents the irony that the reader who cannot find an “ending” to the book is merely looking for an “end”, as dictated by the conventions of television, or in this particular case, film (perhaps a more apt metaphor considering the novel’s length). Similar to a procedural television drama, the tropes of film prescribe and condition the viewer to an ending that is linear and within the frame. Dissimilar to film and television, the reader of works such as *Infinite Jest* or “Little Expressionless Animals” must play an active, not passive, role in the linear progression of the narrative. In the passage, Wallace curiously states that a conclusion “can be projected by the reader”. In cinema, this would mean that the consumer of the media form (the viewer)

would have to become a participant in moving the linear narrative forward (the projectionist) by changing the reels and determining where the frame will be projected. Similar to "Little Expressionless Animals", truth is often found beyond the frame in *Infinite Jest*. Wallace invokes the language of cinema within the book to describe the limitations of the frame, "Only the gallant stabs of his [C.T.] antenna are now visible, just inside my sight's right frame" (7). The notion that truth lies in and beyond the frame, requires the reader to consider events outside of a given linear construct. In "An Interview with David Foster Wallace" by Larry McCaffery, Wallace argues that a story is changed by "the reader's own life 'outside' the story" (141). Wallace portends, "You could argue that it affects only 'her reaction to the story' or 'her take on the story.' But these things 'are' the story. This is the way Barthian and Derridean post-structuralism's helped me the most as a fiction writer" (McCaffery 141)**.** Wallace's confirmation of Derrida's influence provides greater insight into his careful construction of frames. In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida proposes that:

> One space remains to be broached in order to give place to the truth in painting. Neither inside nor outside, it spaces itself without letting itself be framed but it does not stand outside the frame. It works the frame, makes it work, lets it work, gives it work to do…*Between* the outside and the inside, between the external and the internal edge-line, the framer and the framed, the figure and the ground, form and content, signifier and signified, and so on for any two-faced opposition. (11-12)

Derrida presents a strenuous relationship between what can be seen and what can be inferred. The implication is that truth lies somewhere in between. Wallace presents us with a similarly complex relationship between the limitations of the television frame and the limitless possibilities of the world outside of the television frame. The presumption, in works such as "Little Expressionless Animals", is that the television frame is only able

to present a partial view of a complex world. It is this contrast between what is visible and what is authentic that creates a disconnection in the lives of Wallace's characters.

The frame's warping of perspective is akin to television's distorting effects on (and of) the self. This necessary impediment leads to further misunderstandings of others. In his essay "Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace", Paul Giles argues that "Little Expressionless Animals" "makes use of (and acknowledges) John Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' as it describes the mechanical routines of Jeopardy contestants in a world where television has become anthropomorphized" (335). This method is similarly used in Wallace's "Good Old Neon" in which the character Neal mistakenly feels his life is being viewed by a "supposed audience" (447) with which he has the "facsimile of a relationship" (McCaffery 136). This misperception on Neal's part creates a disconnection between himself and the real world and ultimately leads to his suicide. While the characters in "Little Expressionless Animals" do not go to the same lengths as Neal, their anthropomorphizing of television similarly distorts their perceptions of reality and the self. In the story, the characters erringly interact with the television as if it is human:

> 'Let's all be there,' says the television.
>
> 'Where else would I be?' asks Dee Goddard, in her chair, in her office, at night, in 1987.
>
> 'We bring good things to life,' says the television.
>
> 'So did I,' says Dee. 'I did that. Just once.' (69)

This scene, concurrently framed with the title card "office, at night, in 1987", presents Dee in an ongoing conversation with the television. Giles suggests that these simulated interactions have a reflexive effect that "leads the human characters who are adrift in this

sea of commercialism to try to retain an idea of human otherness as a means of resisting incorporation into imperial forms of homogeneity" (331). This reactionary behavior distorts the expression of the self and correspondingly an understanding of others. Giles's citing of Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" provides further credence to this argument. In the poem, Ashbery details 16th century artist Parmigianino's attempt to "take his own portrait, looking at himself from that purpose / In a convex mirror" (10-11). Parmigianino's subject is his reflection "of which the portrait / Is the reflection, of which the portrait / Is the reflection once removed" (Ashbery 16-18). This exercise in examining the self through the mediation of frames results in a curious distortion. While Ashbery contends that the soul is discernible, he contemplates:

> But how far can it swim out through the eyes
> And still return safely to its nest? The surface
> Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases
> Significantly; that is, enough to make the point
> That the soul is a captive, treated humanely, kept
> In suspension, unable to advance much farther
> Than your look as it intercepts the picture. (26-32)

This inability of the soul to "advance much farther / than your look as it intercepts the picture" (31-32) illustrates the impossibility of understanding the entirety of an individual – or the self – through the distortion of frames. These frames are a visual representation of mediation as it operates in Wallace's fiction. "Little Expressionless Animals" echoes Ashbery's poem in the line, "what about the anomalous wave that came out of nowhere and broke on itself?" (97). Here, Wallace references the framework supplied by Ashbery, "Like a wave breaking up on a rock, giving up / shape in a gesture which expresses that shape" (193-94), to help the reader to better (though not fully) understand the story. Like the convex reflection in Ashbery's poem, the convex screen of the television and the convex lens of the camera in "Little Expressionless Animals" suppress a true projection

of Julie's self into, what Ashbery terms, "suspension" (31), in which further progress cannot be made. It is Julie's understanding of this convention that leads her to believe that "the whole point of love is to try to get your fingers through the holes in the lover's mask" ("Little Expressionless Animals" 83) to discover who they really are. Julie's metaphor inquisitively connects the visual of frames to the more abstract mediation of expressing the self and understanding it. The "holes in the lover's mask" are frames providing a view of the eyes (perception) and the mouth (expression). Wallace's choice of presenting this metaphor as a "mask" suggests the need for "performance" to express the self sincerely, as "sincerity indicates the performance of an inner state on one's outer surface so that others can witness it. But the very distinction between inner self and outer manifestation implies a split that assaults the traditional integration that marks sincerity" (Alphen, et al. 3, qtd. in Kelly 135). As in television, "performance" is required to mediate expression. However, distinct from television, work is required to achieve understanding. The action of the lover trying to get her "fingers through the holes" suggests the necessity of active participation in understanding a mediated experience. This metaphor can also be meta-reflexively tied to the reader's role in deconstructing the words on the page; an activity much less passive (and arguably less deconstructing) than viewing television.

The distorting effects of television's mediation – via frames – can negatively impact the individual's perception of both art and reality. It is worth noting that "Little Expressionless Animals" falls into Wallace's early fiction. While it is not a full articulation of his theories expressed in later interviews and essays, it does provide a scaffolding for the ideologies he would develop further in his subsequent fiction. In his

essay “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction”, critic Adam Kelly posits that from *Infinite Jest* on, Wallace’s artistic project “became primarily about returning to literary narrative a concern with sincerity not seen since modernism shifted the ground so fundamentally almost a century before” (133). According to Kelly, Wallace believed that any return to sincerity would require a study into “postmodern fiction, in order to properly take into account the effects wrought by contemporary media, particularly TV and advertising” (134). Kelly’s use of the word “wrought” (in describing Wallace’s stance) suggests a tainted predisposition of the American public in their analysis of fiction due to television’s ubiquitous presence. In Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan argues that “the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (9). The distorting effect that new technology has on media – in this case television – fails to create an understanding of itself and its operations before it is used, or as McLuhan states, “If it works, it’s obsolete” (4). McLuhan maintains:

> In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology. (7)

If we are to view the “medium” of television as an extension of ourselves, then it is evident that we would need to look beyond the surface of the medium for a true understanding of the self. McLuhan reasons that “the artist is indispensable in the shaping and analysis and understanding of the life of forms, and structures created by electric technology” (13). Wallace correspondingly states that “TV promulgates the idea that good art is just art which makes people like and depend on the vehicle that brings them

the art" (McCaffery 130), and warns that this "seems like a poisonous lesson for a would-be artist to grow up with" (McCaffery 130). Wallace reasons that TV's purpose is to be "liked" (McCaffery 130) so that the audience will "stay tuned" (McCaffery 130). This "purpose" is evident throughout "Little Expressionless Animals" as the JEOPARDY! TV executives strive to present a version of Julie that can be "liked" on television. This version of Julie presented through the television frame is a clear distortion of who she really is:

> Faye and Dee watch Julie as the red lights light and Trebek's face falls into the worn creases of a professional smile. Something happens to Julie Smith when the red lights light. Just a something. The girl who gets a three-score and who stares with no expression is elsewhere. Every concavity in that person now seems to have come convex. The camera lingers on her. It seems to ogle. (76)

As the camera holds and the artificial "lights light", Julie becomes an inversion of herself. Julie "is mystery" (83) to the studio executives who view her only through the convex distortion of the television studio camera. Using the specific language of television, the Merv Griffin character describes her as, "some lens, a filter for that great unorganized force that some in the industry have spent their whole lives trying to locate and focus" (82). However, it is Griffin's inability to see past the frame that prevents him (and the other executives) from understanding Julie on a human level. The mediation of the television frame distorts Julie's appearance to the executives but it has also – prior to this moment – distorted their perception of reality. According to Wallace, all who have been viewers have been subject to this often-undetectable influence:

> For 360 minutes per diem, we receive unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant quality of truly alive persons is watchableness, and that genuine human worth is not just identical with but *rooted in* the phenomenon of watching. Plus the idea that the single biggest part of real watchableness is seeming to be unaware that there's any watching going on. ("E Unibus Plurum" 155)

The executives assess Julie in terms of "watchableness" based on their prior – unconscious – conditioning of television's conventions. Like the mask that Julie hopes to put her fingers through, television acts as an imperfect mediator, presenting part – but not all – of a real person.

The inadequacies of the frame's mediation can be connected to the insufficiencies of language itself to mediate. In the aforementioned scene in which Julie and Faye experience an "incredibly romantic" ("Little Expressionless Animals" 66) moment while framed through the glass of Faye's apartment, the couple resort to seeking linguistic counsel in order to articulate their feelings. The moment is lit cinematically, only partially illuminating the characters through the refracted ambience of Los Angeles city light; providing a limited perspective of what can be perceived in the frame. In the limitations of this frame, the characters begin to "examine and reexamine […] the little ignorances that […] line the path to any real connection between persons" (66) only to discover that they are unable to fully pronounce their feelings. Uncertainty arises when "Faye says she had liked Julie long before she knew that Julie liked her" (66), and the couple immediately refer to the Oxford English Dictionary to "examine the entry for the word 'like'" (66). Corresponding to the limitations of the frame that the scene is presented in, the language through which the characters communicate is unable to fully express their sentiments. While language does allow them to mediate their experiences, the deficiencies of language prevent them from communicating fully. Faye and Julie's affections are similarly investigated when the two try to connect on the beach. The scene opens familiarly framed with the title card description, "1987, at the edge of the surf, nude, on a nude beach, south of Los Angeles, just past dawn" (70). As in Faye's

apartment, the duo lay naked and vulnerable as they try to express their feelings: “First they exchange anecdotes and inclinations. Then each tells the other what she believes. Then each observes the relation between what the other says she believes and what she in fact *does*” (70). This tedious operation demonstrates the limitations of the language utilized. The process of speaking, reflecting, and then analyzing what can be inferred, can be related to both the process of observing the light projected from a television frame or the creation of a portrait through a convex mirror. Each is susceptible to distortion, restrictions, and the need for reexamination. As in the previous scene at Faye’s apartment, the characters revert, once again, to language in the hopes of finding greater commiseration. After twenty straight months of “exchanging anecdotes and inclinations” (70) without being able to fully connect, Julie provides a key into herself. She “tells Faye that she, Julie, best likes: contemporary poetry, […] words with unequivocal definitions, […] an obscure and limited-edition Canadian encyclopedia called *LaPlace’s Guide to Total Data*, […] and the *O.E.D.*” (“Little Expressionless Animals” 70). Julie’s fondness for prose (“poetry”), definitive expression (“unequivocal definitions”), totality of knowledge (“encyclopedia”), and referential certainty (Oxford English Dictionary) can be viewed as a reflection of her desire to express herself (and to be understood) fully. Ironically, the limitations of language are also expressed here, as Julie’s favorite “Guide to Total Data” is not titled in English, but rather with the French name, “LaPlace”. In these scenes, the inability of the characters to connect fully on an interpersonal level can be linked to the limitations of the frame and the limitations of language to objectively provide depth, demonstrating what critic Friedrich Schlegel paradoxically describes as “the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" (55).

Chapter 3

"Capture": Television and Disconnection in "Good Old Neon"

The domination of television on the modern audience's consciousness has created a disconnection with reality, as it did in Wallace's life. This disconnection – which pushed Wallace further into himself – was meta-reflexively articulated in his short story "Good Old Neon". As in "Little Expressionless Animals", the reader is given a protagonist who creates a scaffolding of reality modeled through the distorting lens of television. However, if "Little Expressionless Animals" is meant to articulate the dangers of misrepresenting reality when captured through the lens of a camera, then "Good Old Neon" is the inverse of that predicament. In "Good Old Neon" the protagonist, Neal, has distorted his own reality through the consumption of media projected through the television screen. Neal has spent so much time "participating" as a studio audience member in his own home that he has begun to imagine that the events of his life are being observed by his own studio audience. The danger in this perception is that Neal assumes – as in television – that his life should follow a narrative arc in which all calamities are concluded before the final commercial break. When the circumstances of his own life do not match that of television's culturally projected structure, the disconnection in Neal's life becomes too great and he decides to end it. The parallels between Neal's life and Wallace's life are – categorically – striking. The story is in many ways an articulation of Wallace's own feelings on television's effect on American culture as he has expressed them in essays and interviews. In "Good Old Neon" there is a clear correlation between

the character Neal and the author Wallace, demonstrated through similarities in both attitude and language. What complicates the matter is Wallace's insertion of (a version of) himself into the story. Neal's imagined audience is ultimately "David Wallace" ("Good Old Neon" 451). This makes Wallace's own story all the more tragic. Unlike Neal, the author was able to view the disconnection in his life from both inside and outside of it but was – tragically – unable to escape its capture.

In "Mind of Captives", Kessler suggests that part of the disconnection in Wallace's life stemmed from the fact that Wallace himself "was haunted by the 'fraudulence paradox,' as he called it in 'Good Old Neon'" (82). Kessler suggests that Wallace created the story to examine the contradictory impulses that ultimately "pushed him further into himself" (81). Like Neal in the story, Wallace was caught between opposing feelings, "yearning for greatness yet feeling like a fake with every new achievement" (81). Kessler believes there is:

> a common mechanism underlying many of our emotional struggles and mental illnesses. Simply put: A stimulus—a place, a thought, a memory, a person—takes hold of our attention and shifts our perception. Once our attention becomes increasingly focused on this stimulus, the way we think and feel, and often what we do, may not be what we consciously want. I have termed this mechanism "capture." Capture underlies many forms of human behavior, though its effects may be detrimental. (82)

Kessler asserts that it was this "capture" that led to Wallace's disillusionment and eventual withdrawal from life. He writes that Wallace "once scribbled in the margin of a book, 'Grandiosity- the constant need to be, and be seen as, a superstar.' Something about this notion stuck and became a reflexive thought—one that made him feel very bad" (Kessler 82). Wallace's use of the term "superstar" is curious, as it suggests the lexicon of television and film.

If we are to view television as a perception-altering stimulus, or as Kessler puts it "capture", this would link the experiences of Neal ("Good Old Neon"), Julie Smith ("Little Expressionless Animals"), and Wallace himself. Similar to Kessler, the book *Television Culture* by John Fiske argues that "Realism is not a matter of any fidelity to an empirical reality, but of the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed" (21). Fiske's statement presents a relationship between the viewer's knowledge of television conventions and their perception of "reality". Specifically, the more time spent watching television's expressions of "realism", the more the viewer's perceptions of reality will be distorted. In "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace By Larry McCaffery", Wallace characterizes America's dependence on television as a relationship "based on seduction" (127). Specifically, Wallace states that "TV's become such a dominating force on people's consciousness, if only because we under forty have spent our whole conscious lives being 'part' of TV's audience" (McCaffery 127). Wallace's quotation marks on being "part" of television's audience suggest an ironic detachment on the part of the viewer. While the audience cannot actually be an active participant in a television show, the seductive illusion presented is that they *can* be. With the admittance that television was a "dominating force" on Wallace's own consciousness, it can be argued that media, particularly television, played a role in the capture that created a disconnection in his life. The articulation of this disconnection is evident in the examination of the characters in "Good Old Neon" and "Little Expressionless Animals" and the effects that television's capture has on them.

Wallace's disconnection can be viewed as analogous to Neal in "Good Old Neon" whose whole life is a performance for an imagined audience. The story opens with its

protagonist conceding, “My whole life I’ve been a fraud. I’m not exaggerating. Pretty much all I’ve ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people. Mostly to be liked or admired” (“Good Old Neon” 418). While a version of “David Wallace” later appears in the story, the meta-reflexive characteristics of David Foster Wallace and Neal are evident in both language and content. Neal’s casual yet acute register addresses the reader in a lexicon not dissimilar to that of the story’s author. When asked by McCaffery who Wallace “imagines” (128) his readership (or audience) to be, Wallace’s language mirrors that of Neal. In the interview, Wallace states that “pretty much” (128) all of the younger writers “I admire” (128) are the readership. Similarly, Neal tells his story – not to an imagined readership but – to an imagined viewership. Neal addresses this viewership directly with asides such as, “although to you I imagine” (“Good Old Neon” 441) and “you get the idea” (418). Critic Cory M. Hudson argues that in the story Wallace creates a metafictional projection of “his own concerns about his own struggle with fraudulence onto Neal” (304). In the story, Neal’s fraudulence paradox is explained to an imagined audience akin to a television viewership. In preparing his suicide note, Neal describes, “I’d somehow chosen to cast my lot with my life’s drama’s supposed audience instead of with the drama itself, and that I even now was watching and gauging my supposed performance’s quality and probable effects” (“Good Old Neon” 447). Neal’s specific use of television’s lexicon (“cast”, “drama”, “audience”, “performance”, “effects”) demonstrates a detrimental relationship in which he is unable to separate reality from the perception altering stimulus of television. As the scene continues, Neal’s point of view shifts slowly away from a first-person account to a third-person perspective reminiscent of a television shot. Neal reports his view, “hovering

above and just to the left of myself, evaluating the scene, and thinking what a fine and genuine-seeming performance in a drama it would make if only we all had not already been subject to countless scenes just like it in dramas" (446-47). Again, Neal cannot remove himself from the language of television as he evaluates "the scene". Furthermore, his use of the pronoun "we" suggests an assumed audience who, with Neal, is evaluating the quality of a "genuine-seeming performance". The utilization of "we" to define a television audience was similarly used by Wallace in his interview with Larry McCaffery nearly ten years before writing "Good Old Neon". Wallace stated that, "with televised images, we can have the facsimile of a relationship without the work of a real relationship" (McCaffery 136). This statement has Wallace present a clear disconnection between television and reality. Perhaps more importantly, Wallace's use of "we" in describing an audience articulates an inescapable irony of television: It is difficult to describe from the outside but impossible to describe objectively from the inside.

Performing for a "presumed audience" creates a larger disconnection with the self. The shallow relationship that requires no work on the part of the individual sets up false expectations and a need for immediate feedback – as heard by a studio audience. Perhaps the greatest example of the destructive influence of television's capture is when Neal happens "on part of an old *Cheers* episode" ("Good Old Neon" 440) that destroys him. The character Lilith's laconic description of Neal's problems through the simplicity of the joke, "If I have one more yuppie come in and start whining to me about how he can't love, I'm going to throw up" (441), leads to Neal's decision to end his life. His rationalization for this choice stems from his inability to separate the value of his life from the opinion of the audience. Neal rationalizes his perception by stating that "*Cheers*

was an incredibly popular series" (441) and the "line got a huge laugh from the show's studio audience" (441). Critic David P. Rando asserts that it is the projection of himself into the television show that causes Neal to implode. Rando describes that Lilith's comment to Frasier and "the other man in this televisual triangle, devastates the narrator. His own agonizing and apparently irresolvable condition is represented as a joke, the loveless yuppie reduced to a stock type millions of Americans will immediately find funny" (580). Rando's explication of Neal as "the other man in this televisual triangle" is an apt exegesis for Neal's relationship with television and the capture it creates. It is the effects of television on his consciousness that ultimately separate Neal from himself. In the end, Neal says he feels "as if I [he] were one of those stock comic characters who is always both the butt of the joke and the only person not to get the joke — and in sum [...] went to bed feeling [...] fraudulent, befogged, [and] hopeless" ("Good Old Neon" 441). Neal's failure to fully understand or express himself due to the distortion of television's capture can be linked to his own fraudulence paradox, and consequently to that of the author.

Wallace utilizes Neal as a meta-reflexive expression of the fraudulence paradox at the cost of pushing "further into himself" (Kessler 81). The more Wallace was able to express his feelings of fraudulence in his literature, the greater he created a divide in himself. Critic James Dorsan maintains that the fraudulence paradox is a "recursive trap" (66) in Wallace's work. Dorsan argues that the paradox is:

> inherent in popularity culture—where seeking approval is a cause for disapproval which causes one to seek approval—has been internalized. The recursive game that one plays with others, one also plays with oneself. The effect is not only that a wedge is driven between people who may feel that others are fraudulent, but that one feels fraudulent oneself. (66)

This recursive trap is articulated by Neal early in "Good Old Neon" when he confesses, "Putting in all this time and energy to create a certain impression and get approval or acceptance that then I felt nothing about because it didn't have anything to do with who I really was inside, and I was disgusted with myself for always being such a fraud, but I couldn't seem to help it" ("Good Old Neon" 419). While this statement coincides with Kessler's argument that Wallace felt "like a fake with every new achievement" (81), the language utilized is also significant.

Despite feelings of fraudulence, for Wallace there is truth in language. Critic Adam Kelly presages that in many of Wallace's works "language is drawn almost wholly from a pre-established discourse, with the characters in the story constituted (and often self-constituted) through the frame of that language, which language the reader then encounters in the process of its deconstruction" (53). Having established that Neal's own lexicon and register are analogous to Wallace, why would the author have Neal – and arguably himself – admit fraudulence if that very honest action would disable the ability to defraud? Aside from the overt catharsis to an "imagined" audience or – in Wallace's case – readership, the predicament itself presents a great irony. Like Neal, Wallace is more willing to be honest to narrative than he is to people. While "Good Old Neon" was written in the latter years of Wallace's career, the stem of this concept is evident in his interview with McCaffery in 1993. In the discussion, Wallace portends that an author's basic problem is one of "mediating narrative consciousness" (144). Wallace's choice to express himself through "metafictional recursion" (144) – as demonstrated through Neal in "Good Old Neon" – is the lesser of two evils when compared to the alternative, minimalism. In the interview, Wallace expresses that both:

> minimalism and metafiction try to resolve the problem [mediating narrative consciousness] in radical ways. Opposed, but both so extreme they end up empty. Recursive metafiction worships the narrative consciousness, makes 'it' the subject of the text. Minimalism's even worse, emptier, because it's a fraud: it eschews not only self-reference but any narrative personality at all, tries to pretend there 'is' no narrative consciousness in its text. (144)

For Wallace, the greater "fraud" is pretending that there is no narrative consciousness at all. Doing so would remove the human element from Wallace's fiction and would present a narrative far from a "New Sincerity". Specifically, the elimination of narrative consciousness in Wallace's fiction would mean the elimination of – as Wallace so directly states it – "what it is to be a fucking human being" (131).

If, through the admittance of fraudulence, Wallace is – in fact – pushing "further into himself" (Kessler 81), causing a "recursive trap" (Dorsan 66) from which there is no escape, then the author's actions are more akin to martyrdom than hypocrisy. It is – ironically – through meta-reflection and the admittance of a feeling of fraudulence that honesty able to be expressed in a human way to the real "audience", Wallace's readership. Critic Andrew Warren argues that this type of "modeling of narrative within narrative is not mere deconstructive play or postmodern recursion but instead gets at the heart of why Wallace writes fiction at all" (Warren 389-90). If Wallace is sincere about writing what it is to be a "human being" (McCaffery 131) then Warren's hypothesis is proven accurate in the conclusion of "Good Old Neon" in which we are presented with a "narrative within narrative" (Warren 389-90). The story closes with "David Wallace trying, if only in the second his lids are down, to somehow reconcile what this luminous guy [Neal] had seemed like from the outside with whatever on the interior must have driven him to kill himself" ("Good Old Neon" 451). In Neal's case, the audience is the character "David Wallace" and for David Foster Wallace the audience is his readership.

This readership would eventually read Wallace's texts after he had taken his own life and – like the character "David Wallace" – contemplate what was going on inside of him at that time. The paradox presented is, that like television, this is a one-sided relationship or as Wallace states, "the facsimile of a relationship without the work of a real relationship" (McCaffery 136). However, unlike television, work *is* required here. The narrative within the narrative functions as "if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes" ("Good Old Neon" 447). Wallace asks us to "try" to understand what is going on inside of Neal and thus inside of Wallace. This language of effort is echoed throughout the story with the word "try" reiterated over twenty times throughout. It is often presented as a concentrated effort, with characters peering through what can hardly be seen to reveal an inner truth. This is evident when, "David Wallace blinks in the midst of idly scanning class photos from his 1980 Aurora West H.S. yearbook and seeing my [Neal's] photo and trying, through the tiny little keyhole of himself, to imagine what all must have happened" ("Good Old Neon" 450). Perhaps the most telling passage is when Neal states, "All I'm trying to do is sketch out one little part of what it was like before I died […] so that you'll have at least some idea of why what happened afterward happened and why it had the impact it did on who this is really about" (451). In light of what has happened since the publication of *Oblivion* in 2004, it is more evident than ever who this story is "really about". If Wallace had to push "further into himself" to honestly express his feelings of dishonesty, what was the cost? In contemplating his suicide, Neal states, "I actually seemed to have no true inner self, and that the more I tried to be genuine the more empty and fraudulent I ended up feeling inside" (430). Was this true of Wallace himself? Dorsan reasons that seeking "approval empties out the self because it

introduces a level of calculation to our sense of self, which we believe should be free of calculation in order to be genuine" (66). For Wallace, the "trap is that the more empty inside one feels, the more one needs approval, which in turn makes one feel all the more empty" (66). If so, Wallace's expression of fraudulence was not hypocritical but comparable to martyrdom. The greater Wallace pushed to express the human experience, the greater he pushed himself away from humanity.

The domination of television in Neal's life created a disconnection that separated him from the real world, just as the capture in Wallace's own life pushed him "further into himself" (Kessler 81). However, it was Wallace's adherence to a human expression of postmodernism that elevated his work to a "New Sincerity". In Wallace's own words to McCaffery he states that, "Postmodern irony and cynicism's become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naive to all the weary ironists" (McCaffery 147). Perhaps this is most analogous to the closing passages of "Good Old Neon" when "David Wallace" considers "the cliché that you can't ever truly know what's going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid" ("Good Old Neon" 451). However, after years of being "at war with himself […] the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him" (451) emerges victorious "commanding that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, 'Not another word.'" (451). This is the Wallace that emerges at the end of the story, bravely pushing his narrative forward at the cost of pushing "further into himself".

Chapter 4

Television Apotheosis: Intervention and Escape in *The Pale King*

"That's obscene, to suggest that sitting on a couch watching a box is rebellion."

~Sandover, Supplement Scene Four, *The Pale King* (25)

In his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction", Wallace argues that in 1990s America, for six hours a day, "we receive unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant feature of truly alive persons is watchableness, and that genuine human worth is not just identical with but rooted in the phenomenon of watching" (155). This thesis, prescribed by American television, plays a detrimental role in the lives of Julie Smith ("Little Expressionless Animals) and Neal ("Good Old Neon"). The latter character is so convinced by this thesis that he is unable to escape television's capture and the results are terminal. However, in – and outside of – Wallace's final novel, *The Pale King*, the author presents two characters who are able to escape television's capture by totally separate means. One of these characters, Chris Fogle, who narrates "§ 22", undergoes three religious experiences that ultimately separate him from the divide that screens have created in his life. The other character, T. Hovatter, who appears "somewhere beyond the right frame" (Max 319) of the novel, is able to escape the capture of both television and the US market that has created it. In both of these stories, a relationship between proximity and truth is presented. By examining this relationship and connecting it to role that television plays in the lives of these two characters, we can

come to an understanding of how they are able to transcend television's capture altogether.

A method for escaping television's capture is presented outside of the novel's pages. In the paperback version of *The Pale King*, four Supplement Scenes are given that did not make editor Michael Pietsch's first publication. The fourth scene focuses on the lunchroom hokum of eight IRS agents debating the logistics of recording one month's worth of television via 1986 technology. As seven of the agents hotly debate the methods of codifying twelve channels worth of information on a linear timeline (one year of straight television watching), the pet project's squire, T. Hovatter, leans back and puts his hand behind his head with "the universal posture of relaxed self-assurance" ("Reading Group Guide" 24). The previously unintroduced character, Hovatter, knows something that the rest of the group has yet to figure out: If American consumers are going to be forced to participate in a system by "having to not-choose more and more just to be able to choose anything" (24) then the only way not to participate in this system is by choosing everything. Hovatter's scheme: save a "maximal percentage of his salary" (13) to take an entire year off of school and work to devote himself to "watching every last second of television broadcast in the month of May 1986" (14). As if taken from a television transcript, Hovatter's plan is chronicled by his coworkers:

> Tantillo: Hovatter's thesis is they don't think we can do it. He's going to show that it can be done. It's rebellion in the only form that rebellion'll be meaningful from now on. He'll absorb whatever they can throw at him. He'll take in every last bit. (24)

The tranquil Hovatter, remains mostly quiet throughout the scene, watching – like a television audience member – as his coworkers theorize the logistics and reason for his strange project. It is unique that Hovatter's perspective comes from a chapter outside of

the (reconstructed) text, for it is only by removing himself from television's capture that Hovatter can see the strings of the system being pulled.

There is a relationship presented in the novel, between proximity and truth, that is essential for escaping television's capture. In Wallace's now famous 2005 commencement speech to the graduates of Kenyon College, the author tells the anecdote of two young fish who are greeted by an older fish asking, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" ("This Is Water" 1). After swimming away, one of the younger fishes asks, "What the hell is water?" ("This Is Water" 1). Wallace goes on to explain that the point of the story is that "the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about" ("This Is Water" 1). This sentiment is echoed in the fourth Supplement Scene of *The Pale King*, "The more extraneous the choices, the more hidden the real thing is" ("Reading Group Guide" 24) and "I'm talking about the signal and noise, the signal getting lost in the noise" (24-5). The latter is an appropriate metaphor for Hovatter's television inspired rebellion. The scene acts as a piece of the whole (of the novel) with the characters at the center of the problem unable to see its relevance. The bulk of the scene has the agents arguing how Hovatter could complete the project that requires "him to be able to tape whatever was on the other channels besides the one he was watching at a given time, using a VCR and/or Sony Betamax" (14). This discussion spirals concentrically into a colloquy of problems within problems:

> 'Or of course the other option is he could change them [the tapes] himself.'
>
> 'So he'll need thirteen months total, not twelve,' Wakeland said, 'because the whole first month he'll be driving around changing out tapes, including of course his own house because he'll never be home to watch whatever's on; he'll be driving around all the time.' (24)

However, it is only Keith Singh – watching the discussion from a distance – who thinks to ask, "one question, and that question is why" (21). Singh's vantage standing, watching the "turdnagels in the automat" (14) sit and eat their lunches, affords him a grander perspective on the topic at hand. It is Singh who notices at some point, "that Hovatter was no longer there at the table" (20) while his coworkers continue to discuss the complexities of recording a surfeit amount of network television. It is Singh who notices that Hovatter "wore a watch on either wrist" (14), (a facet to be explored in further detail) and it is only Singh who notices Hovatter's "cool shrug" (22) repeated to try and impress the other G-2s "in a high schoolish way" (22). The irony presented throughout this scene, is that the G-2s could ask Hovatter at any time how he plans to accomplish his mission, but they are too deep inside of the problem to notice that the answer is right in front of them. It is only Singh and Hovatter who are aware of this irony and it is they who choose to listen – rather than speak – gaining the most perspective. Perhaps the person furthest removed from the conversation is Hovatter himself who – not surprisingly – is amused by the group's failure to fully grasp his project's purpose. For Singh and Hovatter, it is their distance from the discussion that provides them greater insight into what the debate is truly about.

The complex market system of the United States – defined by commercialization and consumer choice – is analogous to television in *The Pale King*. By understanding how to transcend the market, we can understand Hovatter's method for emancipating himself from television's capture. It is appropriate that *The Pale King* is set largely within the automaton gears of the US Internal Revenue Service as this setting presents the real world as a dull and endless series of rote tasks. This is a sharp contrast to the colorful and

commercialized world of television which prescribes a romanticized version of reality that often serves as escapist entertainment for the characters within the story. However, both the IRS and television are inescapable arms of influence within the economic system that the novel takes place. Many of the characters within the various subsections seem only to be connected through a shared system of taxation and commercialization. Critic Marshall Boswell argues that the novel, "zeroes in specifically and relentlessly on the Reagan tax cuts of 1981 and the subsequent ascendancy in American political discourse of so-called 'supply side economics' as a pivotal and damning moment in postwar American civics history" (465). If the novel is viewed as a mélange of vignettes set entirely within the US economic system of the 1980s, then how would the characters within these stories ever be aware of the confines of this system? It would require a view from outside, or as the fish in Wallace's commencement speech propose, an understanding of "What the hell is water" ("This Is Water" 1). America's complex, ever-present, and exhausting system of economics is characterized in the novel by a bombardment of advertisements, products, and services, all based on market choice. This is demonstrated in Supplement Scene Four when the very description of television choices available in Peoria is inundated with a surplus of name brand commercial choices, "there were not just the four classic traditional TV stations available anymore; there were also Home Box Office, Cinemax, Chicago's WGN, Atlanta's TNT-Superstation, CNN, ESPN, USA Network" ("Reading Group Guide" 14). Wallace articulates this complex system of market choices through the simplicity of television. The market and television are directly linked during the G-2's lengthy discussion about the endless choices presented when watching television:

> ‘Four channels was one thing. Now twelve. Next year how many, or after that? What do you do when they offer fifty channels? What do you do when they offer fifty channels?’
>
> Sandover said: ‘Besides having no grok on who “they” means, what’s wrong with having a choice of fifty channels?’
>
> ‘It’s not choice if it drowns you in choices so you can’t meaningfully choose because there’s too many options to choose from.’
>
> ‘You’re saying it’s a conspiracy?’
>
> ‘It’s the market. People want choice, you give them choice? (24)

If we are to assume that the G2 is correct in his analysis that television *is* the market, then what is television’s currency? It is time. Like the consumer making choices in the market with the limited funds at their disposal, the viewer too must make a decision with their restricted time. In the scene, time and money are described interchangeably, “this kid was working a sixty-hour shift and evidently practicing an extreme ascetic frugality in his personal life” (13) so that “he could take a year entirely off work and school and devote himself to a personal project of evidently watching every last second of television broadcast in the month of May 1986” (13-14). Hovatter’s “project” will require all of his time and finances. These devices are linked further as Hovatter – relaxing from a distance – watches his coworkers discussion as the “visor shaded his face greenly [the color of US currency]. Singh noticed only then, when Hovatter’s sleeves slid up from the stretch, that he wore a watch on either wrist” (24). Hovatter’s possession of two watches implicates value both monetarily and temporally. It is as if Hovatter has two lives, one in which time and money are earned with the IRS and one where time and money are spent on the world of television. Viewing television in the 1980s was a largely linear endeavor and these timelines run parallel in Hovatter’s life. It is also worth noting that the only person who observes Hovatter’s watches is Singh, who – like Hovatter – is not *in* the discussion

but watches it from a distance. The very language of the scene is also influenced by television with sporadic transcript style colons appearing before a character's dialogue, such as "Tantillo said:" (24) or "Sandover said:" (24). These conventions are not used by Singh or Hovatter who are not "inside" of the discussion. While Singh is not able to fully grasp why Hovatter is so confident and relaxed, his proximity allows him to know that there is a reason for it: if television *is* the market, then Hovatter has devised a way to escape it.

By consuming all, Hovatter is able to transcend the system. Like the American market, television asks the viewer to choose one product (or program) over another. As one of the G-2s in the lunchroom states it, "You watch one thing, there's eleven other things to watch. You're having to not-choose more and more just to be able to choose anything" ("Reading Group Guide" 24). By this logic, the decision to watch one program is coincidently eleven more decisions "to not-choose" other programs playing simultaneously on a linear timeline. Since cable television programming in 1980s America was funded largely through commercial sponsorship, the content decisions made by American viewers at this time can be directly correlated to market decisions. Here, Americans were making purchases with their time rather than their wallets. Wallace contends, "If we want to know what American normality is – what Americans regard as normal – we can trust television. For television's whole *raison* is reflecting what people want to see. It's a mirror" ("E Unibus Plurum" 152). According to Wallace, that "mirror" is viewed by the average American household for over six hours a day (151). This mirror informs the market, it informs the economy, and by choosing to watch six hours of television the viewer is invariably not choosing dozens of other products and programs

whose funding derives from commercial entities. Wallace argues that "once television introduces the element of watching, and once it informs an economy and culture like radio never did, the referential stakes go way up" (160). But what are these stakes? How does Hovatter hope to overcome them? The implicit danger in mirroring what people want to see is that *that* is all they will ever see. It hides what is difficult, what is real, and what is of value. As Tantillo states it, "The more extraneous the choices, the more hidden the real thing is" ("Reading Group Guide" 24). Tantillo's word choice is curious. What is "the real thing"? For Tantillo it is "something really important. Something crucial" ("Reading Group Guide" 24) that is buried in a sea of endless choices. The stakes (for Hovatter and America) are being buried in these overwhelming choices with no way to decipher what is "real" or of value. Sandover describes this bombardment as "a kind of meta-censorship" (25) in which the ominous "they" pulling the strings of the market will be able "to put anything out there, get away with anything, because everyone will be too paralyzed and overwhelmed to pay attention" (25). The stakes presented are a loss of choice, individuality, and an understanding of what has real meaning. By "drowning" consumers in a sea of choices that mirror what will hold their attention, the viewer actually has few choices at all. In this system, there is no way of knowing what "choices" will have value. Wallace posits that, "television has become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside of it" ("E Unibus Plurum" 160). This makes the ubiquity of television dangerous as "Six hours a day [watching television] is more time than most people (consciously) do any one thing" (160). If Americans are spending the majority of their free time watching programming with no "meaningful connection to the world outside of it" then television will eventually create a capture that

distorts the viewer's understanding of reality. How then does Hovatter hope to overcome the "Herculean challenge" ("Reading Group Guide" 22) of transcending this system? By rebelling. In a system that forces one choice, Hovatter plans to make *all* choices. By saving enough time and salary, Hovatter is able to escape television and the market by consuming all as a "sort of super-consumer" (25). Hovatter will watch "every last second of television broadcast in the month of May 1986" ("Reading Group Guide" 14) at what "may be the last time a lone man can absorb it all" (25). "He'll absorb whatever they can throw at him. He'll take in every last bit" (25) and ultimately "It'll give them pause" (25). Hovatter hopes to freeze the mysterious "them" controlling television, controlling the market, controlling the very gears of the system to which he is a part. By consuming all, Hovatter is able to understand all, and the system is powerless against him. Through Hovatter's pansophic eye, he alone is able to understand "how hidden the real thing is" (24). Akin to Hovatter, Chris Fogle also has a transformative experience that allows him to evade television's capture. Similar to Hovatter, this experience affords him the opportunity to become a "hero" (as defined by the Jesuit father). The irony presented is that Fogle is only able to escape television's capture by climbing the very scaffolding it has provided for him. Fogle's understanding of right and wrong is defined by television's lexicon: "Cowboy, paladin, hero?" (*The Pale King* 234) announces the Jesuit accounting professor during Fogle's philosophic paradigm shift. This life-changing scene unfolds in the only way he knows possible, through the conventions of television programming. Fogle has three religious/life-changing experiences, reminiscent of the Christian Trinity, each of them in front of screens.

Fogle has his first religious experience while sitting in the social room at Lindenhurst College in front of the TV. Ironically, Fogle utilizes the language of television to describe the very experience that will lead him to liberation from its capture. Paradoxically, it is television's capture – applied to real world experiences – that allows Fogle to transcend its influence. By trying to find story structure and purpose – akin to television – in random real-world events, Fogle begins to find moments of meaning in his life. It is not until a third of the way into "§22" that Fogle curiously concedes the point of his story:

> Anyhow, all this is part of the question of how I came to be posted here in Examinations—the unexpected coincidences, changes in priorities and direction. Obviously, these sorts of unexpected things can happen in all sorts of different ways, and it's dangerous to make too much of them. (*The Pale King* 211)

Fogle provides the ironic disclaimer that it is dangerous to make "too much" of coincidences, as well as "changes in priorities and direction". For it is after this moment that Fogle begins to read into "coincidences" and ultimately changes both his priorities and the direction of his life. It is in the social room that Fogle likes to smoke his "little brass one-hitter and watch TV, prompting all sorts of predictable arguments with the Christian [dorm-mate], who often liked to treat the social room as a Christian clubhouse and have his girlfriend" (212) and all of her friends over. This part of the story is set during the years when Fogle harbours a "cynical, nihilistically wastoid attitude" (213), although in retrospect he admits, "I was much more like the Christian than either of us would ever be willing to admit" (213). This detail is important as Wallace sets up just how "primed" (216) Fogle is to receive the information that comes his way. In front of the TV, Fogle has a long conversation with his roommate's Christian girlfriend about her conversion story. She sits between him and the television and it is at this point that a

deconstruction of Fogle's capture begins. As he attempts to understand the Christian girlfriend's transformation, Fogle is only able to do so through the scaffolding of television conventions. He details, "all she really told was her little story's dramatic climax, which was the preacher's comment and the sudden inward changes she felt as a result" (216). This "dramatic climax" followed by "sudden inward changes" will apply to Fogle's own life in the scenes to follow. The Christian girlfriend's story, starting from the "dramatic climax", is not unlike Fogle tuning into the tail-end of a television show but catching enough of the story to give it meaning. It is only this climax that Fogle needs to codify the rest of the Christian girlfriend's experience via the conventions of television. These conventions serve to provide Fogle a scaffolding for understanding his experiences in the real world. Not surprisingly, Fogle employs a lexicon of film and television to depict these experiences. He routinely refers to his Christian roommate as "pepsodent boy" (213), elucidating the iconic television commercial image of a clean-cut American boy with a perfect smile. Commercial imagery is further illustrated in Fogle's retelling of the Christian girlfriend's conversion with the "evangelical Christians sitting there fanning themselves with complimentary fans with slick full-color ads" (214). When the Christian girlfriend tells her transformation story, Fogle remembers "making a show" (214) of pressing his tongue against the inside of his cheek. The moment the she enters the church for the first time, Fogle recalls that "she wandered aimlessly in and sat down in the rear of the church in one of the plushly cushioned theater-type seats their churches tend to use instead of wooden pews" (214). These "theater-type seats", reminiscent of a movie theater, suggest that she – like Fogle – is a viewer in this transformative experience. The Christian girlfriend similarly describes herself "sitting there in the church audience"

(215), rather than congregation, suggesting a need to be entertained. Ultimately, television's capture influences more than just Fogle's use of language.

Fogle's mind is apt at remembering television-frame type images, demonstrating television's capture over his construction of reality. He admits that he remembers almost no physical details about the Christian girlfriend except:

> that she wore pointy-toed leather cowboy boots decorated with flowers—that is, not cartoons of flowers or isolated floral designs but a rich, detailed, photorealist scene of some kind of meadow or garden in full bloom, so that the boots looked more like a calendar or greeting card. (213)

Fogle's memory of the Christian girlfriend consists of a narrative arc and iconic imagery. Fogle is not able to remember her face but remembers a framed "photorealist scene" of flowers on "cowboy boots" that are "not cartoons". The "cowboy boots" introduced suggest the heroic entry of a character into Fogle's life who will greatly affect him. This cowboy imagery will be reiterated in the scene with the Jesuit that is to follow. While Fogle may not realize it, the Christian girlfriend enters Fogle's "nihilistically wastoid" (213) life with his "circumstances at just that moment of deep spiritual need" (214). All of this follows a structure – that of television – which Fogle is not yet aware of but is consequently "primed" (216) to follow. Fogle concedes, "Unlike the Christian girlfriend, I never seem to recognize important moments at the time they're going on—they always seem like distractions from what I'm really supposed to be doing" (219-20). It is the Christian girlfriend who enters the social room, distracting Fogle from the imagined world of television. She is the first to divide him from the capture that has made his life devoid of meaning. She is the one that puts him on a "hero's journey". Like television, "It's true that her story was stupid and dishonest, but that doesn't mean the experience she had in the church that day didn't happen, or that its effects on her weren't real" (216).

Similarly, Fogle will use the scaffolding of television conventions to construct meaning from – seemingly – meaningless events to transcend the capture that television has placed on his life.

Following the Christian girlfriend's account that "she was *'*saved' or 'born again' and became a Christian" (*The Pale King* 213), Fogle is "primed" (216) for a similar transformative experience to become an accountant. Prior to her conversion to Christianity, the Christian girlfriend feels "totally desolate and lost and nearly at the end of her rope, sort of wandering aimlessly in the psychological desert of our younger generation's decadence and materialism" (213). It is at this point that she feels "psychologically *'primed'* to hear the pastor's general, anonymous comment in that personal way" (216) that gives her life direction. The flaw in her story, Fogle argues, is that "all she really told was her little story's dramatic climax, which was the preacher's comment and the sudden inward changes she felt as a result" (216). Due to the capture in his life, Fogle is only able to view the structure of the Christian girl's story through the lens of television. When Fogle finds himself in a similar existential predicament, he coincidently discovers himself in the "dramatic climax" of his own story and is "primed" for a divine, lifechanging experience. Fogle's second religious experience also happens in front of the television screen in the social room. Analogous to viewing events through the lens of television's capture, Fogle frames the scene "so that everything on the little TV was framed by my [Fogle] knees, and watching *As the World Turns* while spinning the soccer ball in an idle, undirected way" (223). Even the frame of the television screen is "framed" between Fogle's knees, as if the scene of him watching television is itself the scene of a "dramatic climax". Congruent to the Christian girlfriend feeling "desolate and

lost" (213) prior to her awakening, Fogle describes himself as "idle" and "undirected". He further describes himself as "an unmotivated lump" (223) who was often "passively sucked" (223) into CBS soap operas. Like the Christian girlfriend, Fogle is "wandering aimlessly in the psychological desert" (213). Like her, he is "primed" and ready to receive a message just for him. However, in Fogle's conversion scene he does not receive his epistle from a "pastor or father" (214) but from a television broadcaster. Fogle testifies:

> It was as if the CBS announcer were speaking directly to me, shaking my shoulder or leg as though trying to arouse someone from sleep— *'You're watching* As the World Turns*.'* It's hard to explain. It was not even the obvious double entendre that struck me. This was more literal, which somehow had made it harder to see. All of this hit me, sitting there. It could not have felt more concrete if the announcer had actually said, *'You are sitting on an old yellow dorm couch, spinning a black-and-white soccer ball, and watching* As the World Turns, *without ever even acknowledging to yourself this is what you are doing.'* This is what struck me. It was beyond being feckless or a wastoid—it's like I wasn't even there. (224)

The "sleep" that Fogle needs to be raised from is television's capture over his life. He is only able to experience his moment of conversion as a scene, admitting that it was as if he "wasn't even there". The "black-and-white soccer ball" spinning on Fogle's finger is analogous to the world turning on the "black-and-white Zenith" (223) television, as if the memory itself is a "black-and-white" scene from *As the World Turns*. Fogle even admits that the "literal" – untelevised – nature of the event "made it harder to see". Like the Christian girlfriend, Fogle feels "sudden inward changes" (216) as a result of the CBS announcer (Fogle's pastor) delivering his "comment in that personal way" (216). It is at this point that Fogle is able to escape television's capture long enough to come to the "dawning realization that all of the directionless drifting and laziness and being a *' wastoid'* […] was, in reality, not funny, not one bit funny, but rather frightening, in fact,

or sad" (225). Fogle's word choice, "in reality", is critical as he is *now* beginning to view the world free of television's capture. Despite his earlier admittance to being "the worst kind of nihilist—the kind who isn't even aware he's a nihilist" (156), Fogle is now becoming aware. While he does not have a *religious* transformation like the Christian girlfriend, he does have a life-changing experience that alters his perception. With the final admittance, "whatever a potentially *'lost soul'* was, I was one" (226), Fogle is ready to discover his life's purpose, to be an accountant.

With his mind freer of television's capture, Fogle is ready for his final transformation. Following his second religious experience, it is clear that Fogle is transitioning away from television's capture and focusing more pertinently on reality. After returning to school in the new year Fogle states that he knew very little about what was going on in the news admitting, "I had not watched any TV since that experience in mid-December with the soccer ball and *As the World Turns*" (*The Pale King* 239). Not only is Fogle watching less television, but his perception of television watching itself has changed. He concedes, "after the pre-holiday experiences, I now felt far too far behind to be able to afford to waste time watching TV" (239). This is a very different Fogle than the "unmotivated lump" (223) who chooses to watch television on a yellow dorm couch or wait around idly "to watch the foot sign go dark" (165). During his first religious experience, the nihilistic Fogle observes that "Fervent Christians are always remembering themselves as […] lost and hopeless and just barely clinging to any kind of interior sense of value or reason to even go on living, before they were 'saved.'" (213). With the confession that he *is* a "lost soul" (226) after his second religious experience, Fogle is – unwittingly – prepared for the final stage of his conversion: a complete escape from

television's capture. Analogous to the Christian girlfriend, Fogle's life changes forever. Just as she who – in her "lost" state – "wandered aimlessly in and sat down in the rear of the church" (214), Fogle ends "up in the wrong but identical classroom" (192) for "one of the most unexpectedly powerful, galvanizing events" (192) of his life. The effects of television's capture are reversed as Fogle – appropriately – enters the "mirror opposite" (227) classroom building. In this inversion, the "pastor or father" (214) is not a CBS announcer talking from behind a screen but instead is a "real Jesuit father" (218) teaching in front of a "white A/V screen" (220). The Jesuit's presentational approach is – appropriately – the opposite of television, "manifested not as style but as the lack of it" (221). It is during the Jesuit's speech that Fogle is able to finally escape television's capture, though he cannot escape television's lexicon. He describes the Jesuit's speech as "undramatic" (221). Similar to the "black-and-white Zenith" (223) the Jesuit wears a "black-and-white clothing ensemble" (192) that has a "boxy look" (217). The father also gives the impression of "box-like solidity" (219). When he talks, Fogle describes "It felt as though he and I were at opposite ends of some kind of tube" (232). At this point Fogle is "primed" (216) to receive spiritual revelation – again – from a screen, "I remember thinking again, as he said this, of the A/V screen's quote I had thought was biblical: 'the moral equivalent of war.' It seemed strange, but not ridiculous" (231). Here, religion and television are merged. However, the screen and the Jesuit are here to "'inform' and not 'opine'" (230) or entertain. The father literally stands – like the Christian girlfriend – between Fogle and the screen so that Fogle is "deeply affected and changed by the hortation" (234). Comparable to the Christian girlfriend, Fogle feels "that much of what the Catholic father (I thought) said or projected seemed somehow aimed directly at me"

(222). The message, "projected" like a television, assumes the form of television archetypes in order to be understood by Fogle. "You have wondered, perhaps, why all real accountants wear hats? They are today's cowboys" (235) announces the Jesuit as he defines "true heroism" (232) for the class. He states that his definition is "not heroism as you might know it from films" (231) or "childhood entertainments" (*The Pale King* 231) designed to "gratify an audience" (231) but it is "you, alone, in a designated work space" (232). After the Jesuit finishes deconstructing Fogle's concept of heroism that has been built by television's scaffolding, he concludes, "Gentlemen, welcome to the world of reality—there is no audience" (231). This message, which would have made a profound difference in the life of Neal from "Good Old Neon", affects Fogle unequivocally. This final moment separates Fogle from the world of television and allows him to finally escape its capture forever. The once "nihilistic child" (230) reaches "childhood's end" (231) and dawn's the hat of reality's enduring hero, the accountant.

A relationship is presented between truth and proximity in *The Pale* King that is critical for escaping television's capture. Hovatter and Fogle are both slaves to this system, the latter being unaware of this capture until he is finally able to escape it. For Hovatter, it is only by zooming out and considering *all* that television has to offer that he is able to see it for what it really is, a distraction from "dullness" (*The Pale King* 87), a system of (seemingly) endless choices to distract the viewer – or consumer – from what is real, inside. As Tantillo states, "The more extraneous the choices, the more hidden the real thing is" ("Reading Group Guide" 24). Like viewing the Earth from space, Hovatter is able to understand the entire system and emancipate himself from it. By consuming all choices, Hovatter is able to make *no* choices and ultimately transcend television and the

market force that has created it. In "§ 22", "AUTHOR'S FOREWARD", "David Wallace" (*The Pale King* 87) discusses his time working for the IRS in the 1980s – just like Hovatter and Fogle – and addresses the topic of "dullness" as a means for literary exploration. In the section, "David Wallace" contends that "surely something must lie behind not just Muzak in dull or tedious places anymore but now also actual TV in waiting rooms, supermarkets' checkouts, airports' gates, SUVs' backseats" (87). The IRS, in Wallace's world, presents a stark contrast to the world of television explored in works such as "Little Expressionless Animals". This world is dull. It is not meant – or needs – to hold our attention. It requires effort since – as "David Wallace" states – "we recoil from dull. Maybe it's because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that's where phrases like 'deadly dull' or 'excruciatingly dull' come from" (87). "David Wallace" goes on to state that his time in "the Service" (87) taught him that dullness is "endless" (87) and requires "negotiating boredom as one would a terrain" (87). Why negotiate with boredom? Because it is in these "endless wastes" (87) that the truth lies. The Jesuit professor, similarly argues that "today's cowboys [accountants]" (235) are "Riding the American range. Riding herd on the unending torrent of financial data. The eddies, cataracts, arranged variations, fractitious minutiae. […] You deal in facts" (235). It is in this "minutiae" – or boredom – that the "facts" – or truth – are found. This is why, prior to being "called to account" (235), Fogle is a lost nihilistic "wastoid". Television's capture has presented an unrealistic view of reality and he fails to see the truth in anything. As an "unmotivated lump" (223) on the dorm couch, Fogle tries to escape the "dullness" of reality by indulging in "childhood entertainments" (231) intended to "gratify an audience" (231). An intervention is necessary to separate Fogle from

television's capture long enough for him to see – as Hovatter does – just how hidden the "real thing is". Before his conversion, Fogle uses television as an escape from the "dullness" of reality, just as Neal does in "Good Old Neon". In his address to the reader, "David Wallace" suggests that:

> dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention. (87)

This statement, that is one of the clearer theses in the novel, seems as critical for Fogle as it was in Wallace's own life. It was by enduring monotony, minutiae, and "dullness" that Wallace was able to find purpose during his lifetime and create a "New Sincerity" that rewards truth to its reader after excessive effort is exercised. Like Hovatter, it is only by stepping back, viewing all, and considering how "hidden the real thing is" that we can come to an understanding of truth. Perhaps David Wallace's discussion of "dullness" provides the greatest metaphor for Wallace's work, "There may, though, I opine, be more to it…as in vastly more, right here before us all, hidden by virtue of its size" (87).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In his Kenyon College commencement speech *This Is Water*, David Foster Wallace contends that everything has "to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves [of it] over and over" (9). It is not just an understanding of "What the hell is water" ("This Is Water" 1) that is important, but it is essential that we are continually be mindful of its influence. Without an active and cognisant awareness of what water is, one may forget they are in it. In Wallace's fiction, "capture" operates in a similar way. It is, as David A. Kessler suggests, a stimulus that "takes hold of our attention and shifts our perception" (82). This capture is often represented in Wallace's works through the distortion of mediation since "Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real" ("This Is Water" 6). Conversely, our own real thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to others somehow, and inexact forms of communication are axiomatically required to fulfill, what critic Friedrich Schlegel paradoxically articulates as, "the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication" (55). In "Good Old Neon", "Little Expressionless Animals", and *The Pale King*, Wallace explores mediation as it is employed through the framing of language and television. These two imperfect means of arbitration create capture in the lives of Wallace's characters that distorts their

perception of reality, and hence their understanding – and expression – of themselves. In order to transcend the capture that influences their lives, it is vital that these characters first become aware of "What the hell" ("This Is Water" 1) capture is.

The evolution of Wallace as a writer – and a person – is meta-reflexively manifested in his fiction over time. For that reason, I placed the chronology of the works discussed in a linear order beginning with "Little Expressionless Animals" (published 1988), continuing with "Good Old Neon" (published 2002), and concluding with *The Pale King* (published 2011). It is necessary, like T. Hovatter in – or more precisely outside of – *The Pale King*, to sit back and view all the mechanisms in these works in order to understand how they operate and progress over time.

"Little Expressionless Animals" examines the difficulties inherent for two people to connect on an interpersonal level. This disconnection can be linked to the limitations of frames – often related to television – and the limitations of language to objectively provide depth. Frames and language are connected to television, both directly and indirectly in the story. It is ironically television that provides the opportunity for Julie and Faye to connect while it concurrently creates a disconnection in their relationship. Set appropriately in the JEOPARDY! television studio, the story investigates the contrast between what is visible and what is authentic. In an "An Interview with David Foster Wallace" (1993) the author states that one of the reasons for setting the story in the banal world of a game show was to "try to reconfigure it in a way that reveals what a tense, strange, convoluted set of human interactions the final product is" (143). This "set of human interactions" is made all the more complex by television's distortion of reality. There are two Julie's presented, one is the shy girl "who stares with no expression"

("Little Expressionless Animals" 76) in the real world and the other is an inverted television facsimile "who gets a three-score" (76) in JEOPARDY!. Once on camera, "Every concavity in that person now seems to have come convex. The camera lingers on her. It seems to ogle" (76). It seems that Faye and Julie's relationship is doomed from the start, as it is on camera that Faye first realizes that "she had liked Julie" (66) and falls in love with her television persona. According to Wallace, "TV's 'real' agenda is to be 'liked,' because if you like what you're seeing, you'll stay tuned" (McCaffery 130). The juxtaposition between the two Julies creates confusion in Faye and Julie's relationship. The mediation of television creates a distortion or capture that negatively impacts their lives. Television's capture makes it impossible for Faye to fully understand Julie, just as it makes it impossible for Julie to fully express – or understand – herself. This capture also distorts the very language with which the two characters express themselves. During a romantic moment off of set, the couple find the need to refer to the Oxford English Dictionary and "examine the entry for the word 'like'" ("Little Expressionless Animals" 66) in order to try and accurately express what they are feeling. What makes this work interesting (at this point in Wallace's career) is the meta-reflexive capture that television has on the story itself. Wallace introduces many scenes with title card-esque descriptions – reminiscent of television – such as, "1987, at the edge of the surf, nude, on a nude beach, south of Los Angeles, just past dawn" (70). These moments of escape from the television studio are not able to elude television's language. Furthermore, these moments are composed as if looking through a television screen. In the beginning, the two lovers are framed through the "walls of glass" (66) that make up Faye's apartment as they lay exposed. This opening provides a voyeuristic, televisions-like, quality to the story. Two

years after writing this opening, Wallace would state in his essay “E Unibus Plurum”, “It’s interesting that so much classic voyeurism involves media of framed glass-windows, telescopes, etc. Maybe the framed glass is why the analogy to television is so tempting” (152). In that same essay, Wallace would describe the type of capture that makes Julie insecure, as it relates to the viewership of which he is a part:

> when we’re talking about television, the combination of sheer Audience size and quiet psychic intercourse between images and oglers starts a cycle that both enhances pretty images’ appeal and erodes us viewers’ own security in the face of gazes. (173)

In the essay on television, Wallace reiterates the same language used to describe Julie on camera, “ogle”, five times. It is clear that when Wallace wrote “E Unibus Plurum” in 1990 he was still not able to escape the capture that influenced him to write “Little Expressionless Animals”. However, it is also clear that Wallace is aware of the capture that was affecting him at this time. “Little Expressionless Animals” provides a clear cynicism that would be less evident in Wallace’s later works. Critic Adam Kelly suggests that from *Infinite Jest* (1996) on, Wallace’s artistic project “became primarily about returning to literary narrative a concern with sincerity not seen since modernism shifted the ground so fundamentally almost a century before” (133). According to Kelly, Wallace believed that a return to sincerity in literature would require a study into “postmodern fiction, in order to properly take into account the effects wrought by contemporary media, particularly TV and advertising” (134). With this in mind, it seems appropriate that after identifying the causes of television’s capture in his earlier works, the author would begin to strategize methods for transcending it in his later works.

In “Good Old Neon”, Wallace pushes further – and past – "Little Expressionless Animals" by examining the dangers of television's capture on the life of the individual.

However, the author is less cynical than in "Little Expressionless Animals" and commands a focused effort for poignancy in the story's conclusion. Written after his mandate for a "New Sincerity" (post *Infinite Jest)*, Wallace seeks redemption in the story's conclusion. Despite dealing with suicide and the fraudulence paradox, the story employs humour and a sardonic tone to humanize a victim of capture. Language and television are also tied together as imperfect means of mediation that – like water – are difficult to describe from outside but impossible to describe objectively from inside. Congeneric to Wallace in real life, Neal pushes “further into himself” (Kessler 81), causing a “recursive trap” (Dorsan 66) from which there is no escape. The story operates as a functional intermediate between "Little Expressionless Animals" and "§22" of *The Pale King*. Both meta-reflexive and thematically similar, "Good Old Neon" builds on a framework suggested in "Little Expressionless Animals" that would be more fully articulated in *The Pale King*. In *Television Culture*, critic John Fiske argues that “Realism is not a matter of any fidelity to an empirical reality, but of the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed” (21). This theory is demonstrated by Neal in "Good Old Neon" who unconsciously creates a scaffolding of reality modeled through the distorted lens of television's capture. While preparing his suicide note, Neal describes, “I’d somehow chosen to cast my lot with my life’s drama’s supposed audience instead of with the drama itself, and that I even now was watching and gauging my supposed performance’s quality and probable effects” ("Good Old Neon" 447). Not only has television deluded Neal into believing that his every action is being viewed by a studio audience, but the very language with which he expresses himself has also fallen prey to the lexicon of television production: "cast", "lot", "drama", "audience",

"watching", "performance". Neal's language in telling the story closely mirrors that of the author in the aforementioned nonfiction works, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace" and “E Unibus Plurum”, in which the author – appropriately – addresses metafiction and television's impact on the American consciousness. The influence of the "New Sincerity" is most apparent in the conclusion of "Good Old Neon" in which the character "David Wallace" considers “the cliché that you can’t ever truly know what’s going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid” (451). But, after years of being “at war with himself […] the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him” (451) emerges victorious “commanding that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, ‘Not another word.’” (451). This insertion (of a version) of the author into the story's conclusion provides a concentrated personal sentiment that juxtaposes the more cynical and abrupt ending of "Little Expressionless Animals". While Neal is not able to escape the capture that has overtaken his life, a humanistic approach is taken by the author to add empathetic weight to both the character and the problem. Redemption is not yet attained but is considered with gravitas. Wallace would further develop these ambitions by offering solutions for emancipation from capture in his final work.

Civics, numismatics, economics, "sadness and boredom" (*The Pale King* xiii) are just a few of the many topics that Wallace would make a supererogatory examination of in his final novel, *The Pale King*. In the work, Wallace not only identifies capture but develops methods for escaping it despite the difficulties presented in his earlier works. The book's Editor, Michael Pietsch, states that "David set out to write a novel about some of the hardest subjects in the world [...] and to make that exploration nothing less than

dramatic, funny, and deeply moving" (*The Pale King* xiii-xiv). Arguably Wallace's most ambitious work, *The Pale King* tells a melange of human stories set in the automaton gears of America's economic landscape. Wallace takes the principles of the "New Sincerity" further than ever before, juxtaposing the rote mechanical operations of the Internal Revenue Service with poignant human moments. At the risk of seeming "cheesy or maudlin" ("Good Old Neon" 447), Wallace pushes past his postmodern roots exhibited in works such as *The Broom of the System* and *Girl with Curious Hair* to ponder the "complicated emotional realities that are almost impossible to articulate" ("Good Old Neon" 447). Building on the groundwork laid by "Good Old Neon", Wallace not only identifies capture as it affects the lives of his characters, but elucidates methods for escaping its autocracy. Wallace links the ineluctable nature of television and language to the bureaucracy of the American market of which the novel's characters are a part. Critic Andrew Warren posits that in the book any "transaction" between the writer and the reader are "mediated through a vast, seemingly immovable economic and legal apparatus" (391). He states that it is the "one discussed in the first 'Author Here' section: 'right here before us, hidden by virtue of its size'" (391). One method of identifying what is "hidden" and escaping the dominion of capture is adduced in Hovatter's scheme to watch “every last second of television broadcast in the month of May 1986” (“Reading Group Guide” 14). As the character Tantillo states, "It’s rebellion in the only form that rebellion’ll be meaningful from now on. He’ll absorb whatever they can throw at him. He’ll take in every last bit" (24). Hovatter's strategy to pull back, view all, and choose all, provides him a pansophic perspective from which he is able to choose nothing. Since the "more extraneous the choices, the more hidden the real thing is” (24), Hovatter's vantage

allows him to avoid all choices, see what is "real", and conclusively escape capture. Meta-reflexively, the reader can only identify this method of escape by zooming out from the novel itself and examining the text as a whole where Hovatter's story can be found in the attached supplement scenes.

Another method for escaping capture, as it is presented in *The Pale King*, involves an intervention to create a disconnection from capture itself. Specifically, the model that has created disconnection in the lives of Wallace's characters must be inversed to create a disconnection from itself. When Julie Smith first appears on camera in "Little Expressionless Animals" and capture takes hold of her life, “Every concavity in that person now seems to have come convex. The camera lingers on her. It seems to ogle” (76). A reversal of this process would return Julie to her natural concave state, with no camera to linger, ogle, or distort her self. In the case of Fogle in "§22", this is exactly what transpires as the once nihilistic “wastoid” (*The Pale King* 213) experiences three religious interventions in front of screens. In these moments, the "lost" (213) Fogle goes from criticizing the Christian girlfriend's religious experience, to having his own religious experience, to having his own life-changing experience with the “real Jesuit father” (218) who inspires him to serve a life of purpose as reality’s hero, the accountant. In each of these scenes, Fogle requires a literal break from television and its capture in order to see what is real. Seeing what is real, as in Hovatter's example, requires pulling back and viewing the full apparatus that is "right here before us, hidden by virtue of its size" (87). Warren suggests that, "Perhaps another name for the apparatus is 'Reality' (or in the Kenyon Speech, 'Water'), and any narrative that aims to render the readerly contract

transparent must remain attentive to that arbitrating third party" (Warren 391). Without an active and cognisant awareness of what water is, one may forget they are in it.

In his article, “Mind of Captives”, Kessler suggests that part of the disconnection created in Wallace’s life arose from the fact that he “was haunted by the ‘fraudulence paradox,’ as he called it in ‘Good Old Neon’” (82). The critic believes that Wallace created the story to examine the disconnection that ultimately “pushed him further into himself” (81). Wallace would continue to explore this capture throughout his career. Through his narratives he would eventually develop a means for his characters to transcend the capture that had recursively distorted their understanding of reality and – an expression of – the self. Unfortunately, Wallace was not able escape his own disillusionment, nor his eventually withdrawal from life. However, what he left in his legacy was a "New Sincerity" and the categorical knowledge that “the most obvious, ubiquitous, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about” (“This Is Water” 1).

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