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Mind Against Matter: Isolating Consciousness in American Fiction, 1980-2010

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DISSERTATION

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2016

MIND AGAINST MATTER:
ISOLATING CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMERICAN FICTION, 1980-2010

Mind Against Matter uses cognitive literary theory to explore a set of contemporary texts that emphasize characters' feelings of alienation and isolation from their social and material worlds. Focusing on novels by Nicholson Baker and David Markson, short stories by David Foster Wallace, and the film *The Truman Show*, I consider how these texts focus on characters' individual, subjective experiences while deemphasizing their physical environments and social contexts. I argue that by privileging subjectivity in this way, these texts portray their characters as independent, to varying degrees, from their material and cultural surroundings. The texts isolate individual consciousness, causing their characters to live in mental worlds of their own making. While the novel, as a genre, often depicts alienation as a condition deriving from a character's status as a social outcast, the texts featured in this study treat it as a condition inherent to consciousness, derived from what their creators envision as an inevitable separation of mind from world. Rather than bemoan alienation as a loss of social connectedness, these texts portray it as inherent to mental life.

The chapters of this dissertation explore the particular visions of alienation that emerge in each of these texts. In a chapter on Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*, I argue that Howie, the novel's protagonist, views his mind as a machine that operates according to self-sufficient, automatic processes. My analysis of David Markson's final novels demonstrates that Markson portrays artistic creation as a process through which individual consciousness is isolated from society. David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion* treats alienation as a general human condition, as Wallace's interests in loneliness and solipsism derive, I argue, from his assumptions about the individualized nature of consciousness. Finally, in a chapter on *The Truman Show*, I argue that the film's sense of paranoia stems from its protagonist's sense of being alone in his worldview. I thus present a corpus of works that maintain a close, limited focus on singular fictional minds, shutting out social and physical environments in order to depict the mind as a cloistered, self-enclosed entity. My analysis highlights the ways in which the philosophical underpinnings of these narratives render consciousness as an isolating force, stranding fictional characters on mental islands of their own making.

_____Eric Casero_____

_____04/19/2016_____

MIND AGAINST MATTER:
ISOLATING CONSCIOUSNESS IN AMERICAN FICTION, 1980-2010

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For Mom and Dad

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Mind Against Matter

Speaking extremely broadly, fictional narratives both explore and rely on the tension between individual characters' private thoughts and the external worlds in which those characters exist. These external worlds consist of both fictionalized physical settings (environment, landscapes, objects, etc.) and social milieus (dialogue, along with abstractions such as class, moral codes, etc.). Characters' internal, private thoughts are determined, to varying degrees, by their physical and social surroundings, while those internal thoughts simultaneously motivate those characters to act on their surroundings. As a basic example, we can look at this extended passage from Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, in which protagonist Holden Caulfield narrates an argument between him and his roommate, Stradlater:

> "Hey" Stradlater said. "Wanna do me a big favor?"
>
> "What?" I said. Not too enthusiastic. He was always asking you to do him a big favor. You take a very handsome guy, or a guy that thinks he's a real hot-shot, and they're always asking you to do them a big favor...
>
> ..."I got about a hundred pages to read for history for Monday," he said. "How 'bout writing a composition for me, for English? I'll be up a creek if I don't get the goddam thing in by Monday, the reason I ask. How 'bout it?"
>
> It was very ironical. It really was.

"*I'm* the one that's flunking out of this goddam place, and *you're* asking

me to   write you a goddam composition," I said. (27-8, italics original)

This passage, like many found in novels narrated in the first person, marks a very clear

distinction between internal thoughts and external dialogue, as the passages in quotation

marks are, obviously, dialogue, and the passages lacking quotation marks represent

Holden's internal thoughts. At the same time as it marks this distinction, the passage

highlights the causal relationship between thought and speech. Holden's snarky, private

asides about Stradlater are responses to his roommate's apparently presumptuous requests

for help, and Holden's dialogue is determined by his internal thoughts about his

roommate (or at least by the underlying emotions of irritation expressed in those

thoughts).

Passages such as this rely on a push and pull between the external world and

internal thought, and the dramatic action and thematic resonance of novels such as

Catcher consist not only in the deterministic quality of this push/pull, but in the tensions

generated by the schisms between inner thought and the external world. Holden Caulfield

is a famously alienated character, and his sense of alienation is expressed largely through

the incommensurability of his internal wishes and desires with the reality he observes

playing out in the world outside of his mind. Countless examples of narratives that rely

on this schism can be found in literary history, from *Hamlet* to *Jane Eyre* to *Invisible

Man*. In all such cases, narrative is largely a function of this internal/external divide.

Compare this passage from *Catcher* with Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*, a

novel narrated by a young office worker named Howie as he goes about a typical work

day. In Baker's novel, Howie's thoughts often turn to past conversations, but unlike

Holden Caulfield, his conversations are recounted in such a way as to eschew others' direct speech. For example, describing the milk allergies of his ex-lover L., Howie says that "she ascribed her dislike to her father's influence: he, she told me, associated dairy products with a certain kind of cheerful brutishness" (46). Even when Howie recounts L.'s thoughts and statements, Baker's style makes clear that L.'s statements exist only, within the novel's diegesis, as parts of Howie's memory. Unlike Salinger, Baker is not trying to place his readers within a conversation between Howie and L. as much as he is allowing them access to Howie's thoughts *about* that conversation.

Howie's narration does, of course, demonstrate a clear causal connection between his internal thoughts and his surrounding physical and social world; after all, his memories are about and are determined by (as memories must inevitably be) events that he has experienced. The distinction that I mark between novels like *The Mezzanine* and *Catcher*, however, has less to with content and more to do with temporality and process. In *Catcher*'s narration, Holden's internal thoughts, though distinguished from his dialogue, are embedded temporally within his experiences. Baker's novel, however, highlights the personalized idiosyncrasy of Howie's thoughts and memories by emphasizing their separation, in space and time, from their real-world sources. While those real-world sources remain readily apparent in the content of Howie's thought, he processes those memories apart from the time and place during which they originally occurred. Whereas in *Catcher*, conversation is presented as though occurring in real time, in *The Mezzanine*, conversation is presented only as a component of memory, of an internal thought process that operates relatively independently of the event memorialized.

This independence leads the novel toward an overall emphasis on the capacity for memory and thought to personalize reality, to take concrete phenomena and process them in a distinctly individual way. This kind of personalization is common, I argue, to a particular strain of contemporary fictional texts. *The Mezzanine*, along with David Markson's tetralogy, David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion*, and the film *The Truman Show*, portrays its protagonist's mind as inherently distinct from his social and physical surroundings. This distinctness is, of course, a matter of degree. I want to emphasize that complete severance of a character's internal thought from those surroundings is theoretically impossible, since without those surroundings, characters would have nothing to think about, and their internal thoughts would be completely lacking in content.[1] What these texts do, however, is tilt the balance of narrative emphasis away from external events and toward internal thought to such an extreme degree as to emphasize the relative independence of those characters' internal lives from their surroundings.

This mental distinctness leads these texts to portray their protagonists as alienated, to varying degrees and in varying ways, from their social worlds. Unlike a novel such as *Catcher*, however, these texts are largely stoic about this alienation, treating it as an inherent and unavoidable component of mental life. The passage from *Catcher* cited above draws its humor and dramatic tension from the schism between internal thoughts and external events, and the novel as a whole famously centers on Holden's feelings of despair and isolation from his peers and from society at large. *The Mezzanine*, however, is relayed almost exclusively through the prism of Howie's narration, largely excising

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[1] A particularly extreme example of this cognitive separation in postmodern fiction is Joseph McElroy's *Plus*, in which a brain is literally disembodied and shot into space. Even as the brain is physically separated from its surroundings, however, it retains faint traces of memory from the time when it inhabited a body.

this internal/external divide from the narrative. The distinctness and idiosyncrasy of Howie's thought are presented simply as bare facts of his reality, not conditions against which to struggle. In fact, Baker's novel presents Howie's mental isolation in a largely optimistic light. Much of his narration consists of extended meditations on not only social relationships, but on quotidian consumer products such as straws and shoelaces. While such things function as fairly mundane objects in the physical world, in the private mental world that Howie constructs for himself, they take on a new level of personal significance and interconnectedness. The novel repeatedly foregrounds these feelings of interconnectedness, but Howie achieves such feelings, paradoxically, through the private mental world in which he exists.

Baker achieves these effects at least in part through his use of unattributed dialogue and his sustained focus on a single, individual fictional consciousness. David Foster Wallace creates a similar effect by embedding unattributed dialogue into long, descriptive paragraphs. To take one example, in the middle of the short story "Good Old Neon," the narrator Neal describes a series of thoughts that he has had during a conversation with his therapist about his feelings of "fraudulence." Neal states,

> I'm aware that it's clumsy to put it all this way, but the point is that all of this and more was flashing through my head just in the interval of the small, dramatic pause Dr. Gustafson allowed himself before delivering his big reductio ad absurdum argument that I couldn't be a total fraud if I had just come out and admitted my fraudulence to him just now. (150)

By having Neal describe Gustafson's words in his own voice, Wallace maintains the story's ever-present sense of being cloistered, to an extreme degree, within Neal's

conscious mind. The use of unattributed dialogue is, of course, nothing new in literature, but it is indicative of Wallace's investment in portraying individual consciousness as distinct from its physical surroundings. As in *The Mezzanine*, the causal relationship between Neal's private thought and public experience is clear, yet the story's narrative style isolates Neal's private thought in space and time, treating his public experiences primarily as memories and mental phenomena.

In such novels and stories, characters' first-person musings tend to make up so much of the narrative that those characters' singular perspectives overwhelm, and occasionally even drown out, the events being narrated. When Baker and Wallace excise direct transcription of dialogue from their fiction, they render conversations as components of characters' memories, rather than as events that carry significance on their own. Even when they include direct dialogue in their fiction, that dialogue tends to take up so little space that it becomes far less significant than the first-person monologues that contextualize it. For example, Chapter Four of *The Mezzanine* contains an extended conversation between Howie and a co-worker named Tina. This conversation only takes up about two of the chapter's ten total pages, with the rest of the chapter devoted to Howie's musings *about* his conversation with Tina. The conversation itself is ultimately less important to the novel than the way it is transformed, within Howie's mind, into part of a tapestry of subjective, individualized thoughts about the world.

Even more significant than these works' formal choices and narrative styles is their thematic content, which often centers, in ways that are sometimes subtle or implicit, around characters' mental isolation, the stark boundaries that exists between their thoughts and their social and material surroundings. For example, the 1998 film *The*

Truman Show lacks the cloistered formal qualities that lend Baker's and Wallace's fiction their distinct senses of isolation. In fact, the film follows a three-act dramatic structure fairly standard for a mainstream Hollywood film. However, the film's premise allows it to depict the distinctness and idiosyncrasy of its protagonist's thoughts. This protagonist, Truman Burbank, lives in a fictional, media-created world in which his family, friends, and acquaintances are all characters played by paid actors. The film thus enacts a scenario in which Truman's thoughts, perspectives, and entire worldview are entirely distinct from those of the rest of the film's characters, as he believes to be real a world that others are all too aware is artificial. The film's dramatic tension arises from the actor characters' collective need to keep Truman tethered to his singular mindset even as he develops a broader understanding of his surroundings.

Other texts address these themes of isolation in more direct ways. David Markson's late novels, for example, center on protagonists who are lonely artists. The artists' stories function as meditations, for Markson, on the ways in which the creative process entails enacting an imaginative world, and by extension a point of view, that is unique from that of the social mainstream. Markson's characters exist in mental worlds of their own making, in part because of the creative paths that they have chosen. He develops thematic connections between these artists' failures, which range from the creative to the financial, and their inability to form relationships with other people. Art and life are related, in Markson's work, through the mental isolation that the author sees as inherent to both.

These writers thus adhere to a particular model of consciousness that emphasizes the ways in which it operates independently from the social and physical worlds. Their

texts make clear the causal relationships between internal thought and external phenomena while severing or isolating internal thought in space and time, portraying it as private and personal. This conception of the nature of conscious experience exists not only in fiction, but in contemporary criticism as well. For instance, Patrick Colm Hogan, in "Literature, God, & the Unbearable Solitude of Consciousness," argues that "utter, unbreachable isolation" is "an aspect of consciousness that is a central, if implicit concern in literature" (117). Hogan refers to this isolation as a "universal state," an enduring, inevitable condition of conscious life (119). For Hogan, literature is both a medium through which writers address the theme of mental isolation and a way, for readers, to "manage[] ordinary loneliness" and "put us in intimate company" (138). Hogan thus espouses a narrative about consciousness that is echoed by the novelists treated in this study. In fact, his perspective is remarkably similar to the statements of David Foster Wallace, who said in an interview with Laura Miller, "there is this existential loneliness in the real world. I don't know what you're thinking or what it's like inside you and you don't know what it's like inside me. In fiction I think we can leap over that wall itself in a certain way" (62).

While Hogan marshals a substantial amount of evidence to support his views of consciousness, I want to stress here that the narrative that he sketches about consciousness is only one possible story among many. Hogan notably cites Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to help explain the isolation that he sees as inherent to consciousness. However, Wittgenstein himself notably became critical of the *Tractatus* later in his career, modifying many of its ideas for his later *Philosophical Investigations*. In particular, rather than emphasizing the isolation of subjectivity, Wittgenstein, in

Philosophical Investigations, argued against the possibility of a "private language," a language intelligible only to a single person. For the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*, language and thought were not private things, but were instead shared by communities of speakers. Numerous other philosophers and theorists of consciousness have emphasized the role of socialization and community in shaping thought. For example, Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi, summarizing their views of the evolution of consciousness, state that "The acquisition of a growing lexicon of [mental] symbols through social interactions, probably initially based on the nurturing and emotive relationships between mother and child, allowed for the discrimination of a self within each individual consciousness" (195). Edelman and Tononi emphasize the role of community and communication in shaping selfhood, as opposed to the isolation highlighted by Hogan. Their description notably uses warm "feeling" talk—"nurturing," "emotive"—to sketch their theoretical version of history, further emphasizing the role of community in their conception of the conscious mind.

In pointing out this "community-based" model of conscious subjectivity, I am not attempting to argue for its correctness, or even for its superiority over the "isolation model." I am, however, emphasizing that there are a variety of ways to describe and theorize the nature of subjectivity, and the view that subjectivity is inherently isolating is only one such way. I argue that it is this particular view that has, by and large, been enacted in the wing of literary fiction that forms the object of this study. These fictions portray their characters' minds as interpreters of the worlds that surround them that are distinct, to varying degrees, from those worlds. While these works certainly contain social elements and character interactions, their formal contours lead them to emphasize

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the privacy of their characters' mental worlds, treating the social realm primarily as a component of those individual characters' thoughts and memories.

This emphasis on individual, private thought constitutes a turn, within this strain of late postmodern literature, away from "systems novelists" like Pynchon, Gaddis, and DeLillo. Such novelists, who make up a characteristic sub-genre of late-20th century fiction that Mark McGurl terms "technomodernism," emphasize the ways in which disparate individuals are connected to one another through vast, far-reaching technological, social, political, and cultural mechanisms. The works I analyze in this dissertation certainly do not elide such considerations; however, they do tend to place less of an emphasis on widespread systems than they do on the particulars of individual conscious experience. Moreover, what truly defines this as a distinct strand of fiction is, I argue, the extreme degree to which this focus on individual experience treats such experience as something that can be seen to operate with a level of independence from such systems. This is, of course, a matter of degree. Markson's novels, for example, explicitly address the role of history in shaping their protagonists' experiences. However, those novels' unique forms evoke a clear distinction between history and individual experience by rigidly separating them on the printed page, segregating them into distinct paragraphs divided by large swaths of blank space. Baker's *Mezzanine* explicitly addresses the dual, interlocking roles of history and commerce in shaping its protagonist's conscious experiences. However, the novel also takes care to reduce broad, systemic elements of its diegesis to abstract, personalized traces of individual memory.

These writers' emphases on the private mind also evoke a level of epistemological certainty that suggests a turning away from the disorder and ideological relativism that

often characterize postmodern literature. Wallace, Baker, Markson, and *The Truman Show* all define the contours of their protagonists' identities to extremely precise degrees. However, critical discussions of postmodern fiction tend to define its approach to subjectivity as one emphasizing diffuseness of identity and an inability to clearly define the limits of subjectivity and individual consciousness. For example, in her introduction to the critical reader *Postmodernism*, Patricia Waugh notes that the book's essays share a "suspicion of subject-centered reason or philosophies of consciousness" (2). Alan Palmer suggests a similar definition of postmodern fiction when he notes that in postmodern novels, "The notion of subjectivity is problematical because the self is viewed as a construct and a fiction" ("Ontologies," 275). Such critics, among countless others, define postmodern literature according to its resistance to clear definitions of characters' subjectivity.[2] When critics define late-20th Century literary fiction in such terms, they likely have in mind novels such as Thomas Pynchon's *V*, in which the mysterious character known as "V" is presented in a number of guises, none of which is privileged as her "real" identity. Such critics also frequently mention metafiction as characteristic of postmodern literature, as key meta-fictional texts such as John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" create explicit uncertainty over whether their characters are, within the story-world, actual characters or mere literary constructs.

The texts explored in this dissertation lack such uncertainty, instead featuring clearly defined character identities. In this way, they have more in common with

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[2] Such critics include Linda Hutcheon, who states that in postmodernism, "The perceiving subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity" (252). Irving Howe writes that "the theme of personal identity, if it is to take on fictional substance, needs some kind of placement, a setting, in the world of practical affairs. And it is here that the 'post-modern' novelists run into serious troubles: the connection between subject and setting cannot always be made, and the 'individual' of their novels, because he lacks social definition and is sometimes a creature of literary or even ideological fiat, tends to be not very individualized" (29). Character's such as Howie and Truman are, by contrast, extremely individualized.

traditional realist fiction than with the more avant-garde branches of postmodernism.

They differ from traditional realism, however, in the extreme degree to which individual

subjectivity is emphasized. In fact, they demonstrate avant-garde tendencies, but these

tendencies are used in service to deep explorations of character subjectivity, rather than

toward the depictions of systems that form much of the content of Pynchon's and

DeLillo's respective oeuvres. For example, David Foster Wallace's "The Soul Is Not a

Smithy" is narrated from the perspective of a child who is preoccupied with an elaborate

series of imagined fantasy scenarios as he sits in his grade-school classroom. The story's

narration mainly focuses on these fantasies, even as the child's teacher begins threatening

to murder the children in the class. Wallace's story thus elides the tenets of traditional

realism by ignoring the most important events of the story and instead delving deeply into

the distracted mind of its protagonist.

Wallace's story, in fact, highlights an important feature that these texts share with

postmodernism, as traditionally conceived: the use of formal technique to implicitly

disavow objectivity. Numerous critics cite this as one of, if not the, defining

characteristics of postmodern aesthetics, echoing Jean-François Lyotard's definition of

"postmodern[ism]" as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). Gerald Graff, for

example, wrote in 1979, "In its literary sense, postmodernism may be defined as the

movement within contemporary literature and criticism that calls into question the

traditional claims of literature and art to truth and human value" (32). Jeremy Green has

more recently reiterated the centrality of this skepticism to critical definitions, writing in

2005 that postmodernism has often been defined according to its association with

"'antifoundationalist' thinking in philosophy" (2). He writes that "this approach [to

defining postmodernism]…questions the basis of metaphysical certainty and challenges many of the presuppositions of Anglo-American analytic philosophy" (2).

Wallace's story, like the other texts discussed in this dissertation, demonstrates a commitment to this kind of questioning uncertainty; however, it approaches uncertainty from the opposite direction than do Pynchon, Gaddis, et al. Whereas those writers' epic novels emphasize the mutability of personal identity and the power of globalizing economic and political systems to disrupt traditional claims to knowledge, Wallace's story is so invested in a single, solidly defined personal identity and point of view that it almost completely elides information that, within the story-world, would be considered objective fact. In other words, where the most acclaimed works of avant-garde postmodernism once questioned objectivity by going big, these texts do so by going small. Even *The Truman Show*, a film whose setting and characters are mostly functionaries of a massive entertainment company bent on controlling the life of Truman, centers its monolithic entity's aims around a single man's consciousness. In fact, the film's characters and setting are often meant to serve, for the viewer, as external manifestations of Truman's psychology, making the film analogous to Baker's and Wallace's fictions, which overwhelm their narratives with the musings of individual characters' minds.

Ultimately, what I will demonstrate through this approach is that the authors in this study are largely preoccupied with what they see as the mind's inherent idiosyncrasy, its tendency to create a vision of social and/or physical reality that is on some level distinct from that reality. Like Hogan, they portray the mind as connected to, but able to operate with a degree of independence from, its external surroundings. While the

prospect of this kind of "cognitive independence" is often bleak, suggesting as it does alienation and solipsism, some of the works under examination actually take an optimistic perspective. Baker's novel is one example, portraying the isolation of the mind as an opportunity to develop personalized experiences of the world, ways of privately intuiting the minutiae of one's surroundings that bring the author, as well as his characters, a strange kind of joy. By and large, however, the mind's perceived isolation is a means toward exploring themes of loneliness, alienation, and paranoia. My argument posits that these thematic strains, which run through much of contemporary literary fiction, are products of a widespread conceptual distinction between mind and world.

In arguing for this conceptual separation, I employ a method of criticism influenced by insights gleaned from cognitive science and the study of the mind. My approach thus bears similarities with other recent studies of fiction that focus on fictional minds, including Kay Young's *Imagining Minds*, Robert Chodat's *Worldly Act and Sentient Things*, and Brook Miller's *Self Consciousness in the Modern British Novel*. These books all focus primarily on the particular ways in which minds are portrayed in different literary movements. My arguments similarly analyze the fictional minds contained in novels and film in order to understand the particular ways in which they are shaped by their creators.

I begin exploring these fictional minds in my first chapter, using David Markson's final four novels (1996, 2001, 2004, 2007), which form a loose tetralogy, as an illustrative example of cognitive independence. These novels employ an innovative hybrid form that combines fiction and non-fiction, a combination which, I argue, leads to the kind of cognitive independence described above. While the novels combine fiction

and non-fiction, Markson keeps their fictional and non-fictional materials rigidly separated on the printed page, inserting large blocks of blank space between the novels' fictional stories and non-fictional facts. He thus evokes a conceptual division between, on one hand, the minds depicted in the novels' fictional material, and, on the other, the physical, material world evoked by the novels' inclusion of non-fictional facts. I argue that Markson employs this conceptual distinction in order to depict the interrelatedness of text and history. His novels' fictional narratives shape the presentation of non-fictional material at the same time as the non-fictional facts that they present shape the progression of the fictional narratives. Markson thus creates a fictional world in which the mind and the physical world are deeply symbiotic, yet conceptually separate.

The dissertation continues with a study of Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine* (1988). While critics of the novel have argued that Baker portrays a world of depthless, mass cultural "surfaces," I counter that *The Mezzanine* demonstrates a deep engagement with character psychology by emphasizing the ways in which the mind of Howie, its young, white-collar protagonist, is distinct from the surrounding material world of his workplace. I argue that Howie views the mechanical nature of the objects that surround him as an ideal toward which to aspire. He admires the mechanical ingenuity of mass cultural products, and he desires to transform his own mind so that it operates in a similarly mechanical, automated fashion. The separation of mind and body is, for Baker, a way to evoke an image of a fictional mind enraptured by mass cultural mechanization.

My next chapter moves on to a discussion of the role of the mind in the work of David Foster Wallace, a writer who admittedly admired Markson and whose verbose descriptions and use of footnotes suggest the influence of Baker. Wallace, as both a

fiction writer and a public figure, was preoccupied with what he saw as the isolating effects of American culture and the inevitable solipsism that attends human consciousness. Using the short story collection *Oblivion* (2004) as an exemplar of Wallace's style, I argue that Wallace's vision of alienation derives in large part from a conceptual separation, which he makes throughout his work, between the mind and its physical and social surroundings. The characters of *Oblivion* consistently demonstrate Wallace's belief in the separateness of mind and body, and it is this very separateness that, in Wallace's view, leads these characters to the kinds of depression and isolation that permeate the book.

Finally, I turn in my last chapter to a discussion of film, in order to demonstrate the ways in which mind/world separation can be presented in a medium other than prose. Film, unlike literature, cannot isolate a character's fictional mind by presenting narrative from a limited first-person perspective, because it almost inevitably displays information onscreen that is not being recounted exclusively by a single narrator. Filmmakers can, however, sometimes craft stories in such a way as to foreground the cognitive isolation of specific characters. As an illustrative example of such a screen narrative, I examine the popular, science fiction-influenced film, *The Truman Show* (1998), whose title character has, unbeknownst to him, been part of an elaborate reality television show his entire life. I argue that the film's premise foregrounds Truman's cognitive separation from his surroundings by making clear that his worldview and thought processes are almost entirely distinct from those of his friends and family, who are continually aware that they are part of a fictional program. Thus, the film's prominent themes of paranoia and uncertainty result from Truman's feeling of being separated or isolated, at the mental

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level, from the world around him. I argue that it is this very separation that allows Truman to transform his consciousness, moving from a state of ignorant bliss to one of enlightened skepticism.

These chapters, collectively, contribute to the field of contemporary literary studies through a process of close reading based on cognitive theory and the study of mind. In arguing for these texts' portrayals of cognitive independence, I highlight a key, defining feature of this strain of contemporary fiction. Additionally, by basing my argument on fictional portrayals of mind/world separation, I aim to present this separation as an area for further inquiry. The approach of analyzing a text's particular conception of the relationship between mind and world may be applied to other areas of literary and cultural studies.

Chapter Two: Inside and Outside: The Fiction/Non-Fiction Boundary in David Markson's Tetralogy

This dissertation begins with a discussion of the work of David Markson, a writer who, in the late phase of his career, specialized in combining fictional narratives centered on lonely protagonists with compendia of factoids and anecdotes about artistic, literary, and cultural history. This late period began for Markson with 1988's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, a novel structured as an extended monologue written by a woman who may or may not, depending on how one interprets her words, be the last person left alive on Earth. After *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, Markson published four novels before his 2010 death: *Reader's Block*; *This Is Not a Novel*; *Vanishing Point*; and *The Last Novel*, which, taken together, form a loose tetralogy (Markson, in an interview with Michael Silverblatt, stated his desire to see them published as a single volume). These four novels, like *Wittgenstein's Mistress*, all consist of short paragraphs that often appear disconnected. They also each contain only a single character, combining this central character's narrative with various elements of cultural history, thereby emphasizing his connections to cultural collectives while making clear just how lonely and isolated he remains.

Markson's tetralogy, however, does contain important differences that set it apart from *Wittgenstein's Mistress*. Perhaps most significantly, while the earlier novel is written as a monologue, these later novels are written in an omniscient, third-person voice. This change in voice and point of view allows Markson to place greater emphasis on the historical facts that run through the novels, and to reduce the inherent limitations

of writing through the eyes of an arguably insane protagonist. While the characters of the tetralogy fight their own battles with depression, isolation, and trauma, their perspectives are balanced by the more encompassing, omniscient viewpoint of the narrators. I argue that through aesthetic choices such as this, Markson's tetralogy continues the exploration of isolation that he began in *Wittgenstein's Mistress* while presenting a different take on the theme. Where the earlier novel saw the world's cultural history become filtered through the subjective lens of its protagonist's consciousness, the later tetralogy develops a more balanced approach, in which, even as historical narrative is subjectively interpreted by individuals protagonists, those protagonists find themselves being conversely absorbed into those same narratives. While these characters all feel lonely, cut-off from the world that surrounds them, their roles as component parts of a broad cultural history all become clear, as the novels demonstrate the ways in which these characters share their own life stories with those of the writers, thinkers, and other people who came before them in a tapestry of various, yet interconnected lives. At the same time, however, these novels portray historical narratives as inextricably connected to their protagonists' own emotions and points of view. History and individual consciousness thus exist, in Markson's tetralogy, in a symbiotic relationship, simultaneously determining one another in an endless cycle of influence.

I am not suggesting here that the very fact of these characters belonging to history is what makes them unique. After all, any novel with any historical scope at all will inevitably demonstrate that its characters are part of history, and any novel with more than one character will certainly demonstrate that that character belongs to a collective. I am arguing, however, that the form of Markson's tetralogy foregrounds this historical

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belonging, raising it to a unique level of thematic resonance. Markson, in combining the fictional narratives of his protagonists with non-fictional facts, draws a series of implicit relationships between the singular, fictional psychologies of his creations and the broader reality outside of his own writing. At the same time, he renders this broader reality subject to the whims of fictional narrative, as the selection of non-fictional facts that makes its way into these novels is clearly shaped by the needs of the narrative, reflecting as it does the states of the characters' minds. The text foregrounds the interconnectedness of personal narrative and collective history by, paradoxically, rendering them utterly distinct. Markson's tetralogy rigidly separates fiction from non-fiction by severing the two strands of prose into separate paragraphs. This severing enhances the sense of mental isolation built into the texts, as their protagonists all feel disconnected, at the psychological level, from the social world, an isolation rendered in part through the stark emptiness of Markson's pages and the ways in which he distinguishes prose genres within his work.

One of the most striking instances of Markson making connections between the distinct realms of individualized narrative and collective history comes at the end of *Reader's Block*, the first novel of the tetralogy. *Reader's Block*, perhaps more than any of the other novels in the tetralogy, is a narrative about stalled momentum. The main plot thread centers around a character named Reader who is writing a book about a character named Protagonist. Reader begins to concoct some scenarios for Protagonist and some facts about Protagonist's background. Mostly, however, Reader just wonders what to do with his story. In fact, much of the text of *Reader's Block* consists of questions about Protagonist that demonstrate Reader's uncertainty about the character, questions such as

the following: "Names for Protagonist's children? If such? / Whereabouts? If known?" (49) As the novel begins to draw to a close, these questions become more emotionally evocative, as the text asks "*Did it ever, once, enter even Protagonist's bleakest conjecturings that he would finish out his life alone?*" (188, italics original)

This question sets off the novel's conclusion by establishing a relationship between Protagonist's loneliness and his death. By the ending, Protagonist, as Markson puts it in a letter to Ben Underwood, is "probably a suicide" (99). Before reaching this end, however, the novel strings together a long list of names (a list that goes on for nearly a page and a half, but which has been abbreviated here), all of which belong to non-diegetic fictional characters who themselves committed suicide:

> Emma Bovary.
> Anna Karenina.
> Othello…
> Phaedra.
> Alcestis.
> Launcelot. (189-90)

Here, the novel steps away from both Protagonist's narrative and the framing narrative of Reader's composition process to simply present information in the barest way possible, using the form of a list. The novel isolates literary history from both Protagonist's and Reader's respective narratives by abandoning those narratives in favor of raw data. The information in this list implies, of course, the narrative event of suicide. *Reader's Block* thus produces a correspondence between this external information and the limited perspective of its main narrative thread. Whereas Protagonist is only a single fictional character who has not yet even been sufficiently developed by his creator, the list implies that he exists as part of a long history of literary deaths, a history that extends beyond the boundaries of *Reader's Block*'s diegesis. Protagonist's is not a singular instance, but a

part of literary history. At the same time as this list makes Protagonist a part of history, however, it also suggests that literary history, as portrayed in Markson's novel, is being relayed in accordance with Reader's own creative process. Since Reader is creating a character who is committing suicide, the impression of literary history presented here follows suit, zeroing in on the suicidal theme.

Part of what makes Markson's technique effective is that it does not absolutely privilege either fictional or non-fictional elements. In fact, each kind of information is emphasized in its own way. Markson makes the fictional elements appear more significant by crafting them into a continuous narrative thread, something he does only implicitly with non-fictional elements. The non-fictional elements, however, are given emphasis through their sheer volume; as Markson himself estimates, "In *Reader's Block*, I talk about the so-called Reader for roughly 20% of the book. In the last three, that figure [the different writer figure around which each novel is centered] is mentioned about 1½% of the time" (interview with Tayt Harlin). This way, the novels become neither first-person fictions whose narration consists largely of historical anecdotes, nor compilations of historical anecdotes with an occasional fictional aside. Instead, Markson combines fiction and non-fiction to create a give-and-take between both types of literary elements.

Markson himself apparently came to different conclusions, over the course of the last part of his career, about the nature of these novels' narration. In an interview with Tayt Harlin, he says of the central character of each novel of the tetralogy that "the intellectual odds and ends [Markson's term for the non-fictional elements of his work] are meant to convey a portrait of what's in his mind. My object is to create him, too, and it seems to work." Here, the author suggests that everything in these novels is the product

of a single narrating perspective, that Reader, to take one example, is the character who

makes factual statements about literary characters and historical figures throughout

Reader's Block. In an interview with Alexander Laurence however, he compares

Reader's Block to his previous work, stating "*Wittgenstein's Mistress* is a monologue, and

the new book is not even a monologue. It's a semi-non-fiction, semi-fiction[3]." Markson

characterizes *Reader's Block* as "not a monologue," suggesting that its contents are not

the product of a single narrative voice. He also applies the invented genre tags "semi-

non-fiction" and "semi-fiction," further suggesting that much of the material in his book

is indeed intended as non-fiction, not as the diegetic statements of a fictional character.[4]

　　　Markson's decision to privilege both kinds of material means that on one hand,

the characters are absorbed into the broad scope of history that Markson sketches in his

novels and on the other, the historical material is filtered through, and shaped by, the

needs of narrative. The long list of fictional suicides near the end of *Reader's Block*

demonstrates both of these results; even as Protagonist's fate gets lost in the shuffle of

multiple pages of names, the names themselves reflect Protagonist's narrative fate,

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[3] *Vanishing Point* and *The Last Novel* each notably refers to its central character's writing as "semifictional semifiction" (93, 83, respectively). Markson often incorporated snippets from conversations and book reviews into the novels that make up the tetralogy.

[4] The books' jacket copy present similar uncertainty over the novels' narrative voice. The back cover of *Reader's Block* states: "In this spellbinding, utterly unconventional fiction, an aging author who is identified only as Reader contemplates the writing of a novel. As he does, other matters insistently crowd his mind—literary and cultural anecdotes, endless quotations attributed and not, scholarly curiosities." The description suggests that all of the material in the novel consists of Reader's thoughts. The back cover of *This Is Not a Novel*, however, describes the book's plot as follows:

> An author, called only 'Writer,' is said to be 'weary unto death of making up stories,' not to mention inventing characters or contemplating plot or setting or theme—and yet is determined to seduce the reader into turning pages and 'getting somewhere.' What follows is then threaded through a sequence of extraordinary literary and artistic anecdotes, glittering quotations, and astonishing details about the travail…of the creative life.

This description suggests that the "anecdotes" that make up much of the novel's text exist independently of Writer's story, as the main narrative is "threaded through" such anecdotes.

implying his suicide even while shifting the text away from it. Even the suicide itself is never described directly, but only implied, as conveyed in the following passage:

Toward what final grievous contemplation amid the disarray?

The sun will run out of hydrogen and commence to die in approximately one billion, one hundred million years.

In the interim, what more for the elderly man in the house at the beach but to saunter out among the sandpipers and the gulls one afternoon, and stand for a time abstractedly in late autumn solitude, and then walk unremarkably into the sea?

In the interim, what more for the elderly man in the house at the cemetery but to pause at his accustomed window one afternoon, and gaze for a time abstractedly at the ranks of still white stone beyond, and then turn unremarkably to the gas?

And Reader? And Reader? (192-3)

Markson states that at the end of the book, "The character that Reader creates suddenly bifurcates into the one on the beach and the one in the cemetery. He has nothing left but suicide" (interview with Alexander Laurence). Reader's character is now no longer given even the minimally descriptive name of Protagonist and is instead referred to as two different characters (or perhaps as a single character in two different locations). His already generic identity has been further dispersed into narrative fragments, narrative fragments which are themselves further dispersed into the broad swath of non-fictional history outlined in *Reader's Block*. In fact, even in the middle of the novel's concluding death, Markson makes sure to balance fictional and non-fictional elements by inserting a brief, factual aside. Notably, as Reader's narrative reaches a tragic apex, the book's non-fictional threads reach apocalyptic heights when Markson presents statistics about the sun's impending death. *Reader's Block*'s death scene, the scene which typically draws a novel's highest levels of pathos (as suggested by the list of fictional suicides) is both

overshadowed and mirrored by Markson's use of non-fiction. The statistics about the sun's demise show that any death, let alone a fictional one, is but a small part of a larger process of decay, yet at the same time, they reflect and amplify the first-person anguish felt by Protagonist and, by extension, Reader, whose possible suicide is implied by the repeated question "And Reader?"

This technique is prominent throughout all four of the novels that make up the tetralogy. Each contains broad, sweeping non-fictional threads which both mirror and place into relief the more minor details of the fictional narratives. Many of these non-fictional threads run throughout the entire tetralogy. The most prominent of such threads is a litany of descriptions of the deaths of famous people, many of whom are artists and authors, a thread which most deeply permeates *Reader's Block* but which is important to the other three books as well. Markson's novels also sketch a history of racial and ethnic hatred and discrimination, most notably in a series of statements that follow the form "_____ was an anti-Semite," statements which are implicitly connected to a few intermittent descriptions of the horrors of the Holocaust. Some of these are oblique, as when the text simply lists a series of Nazi death camps, as follows: "Auschwitz. Dachau. Treblinka. Maidanek. Sobibor. Chelmno. Mauthausen. Ravensbrück. Birkenau. Belzec. Theresienstadt" (58). Others are more explicit, as in a series of descriptions of famous figures' experiences. For example, the text notes that "Robert Desnos, who had been tortured by the Gestapo for working with the French Resistance, survived periods in Auschwitz and Buchenwald" (158). A multitude of similar examples abound.

The Power of Failing

Such historical atrocities and faded lives run parallel to the concerns of the novels' main characters, concerns which include their own failing or doomed artistic projects. In *Reader's Block*, Reader faces constant uncertainty over what to do with his Protagonist, while in *This Is Not a Novel*, a character named "Writer" attempts to compose a novel with no story, no characters, and no clearly identifiable genre, only for the text to ask, at the end, whether Writer's project was "possibly nothing more than a fundamentally recognizable genre all the while, no matter Writer averred?" (189), suggesting that Writer, despite his best intentions, has failed to achieve his literary ambitions. *Reader's Block* thus emphasizes the theme of artistic failure, a theme which is even more explicitly connected to death in *Vanishing Point* and *The Last Novel*, the final two novels of the tetralogy, which feature more frequent references to the physical issues of aging, infirmity, and senility. In all of these novels, the writer characters' failures and rejections thus become parts of broad histories of rejection and hatred, while the novels' depictions of death and hatred reflect those characters' experiences of failure and pain within the narrative.

Markson depicts different degrees and types of pain throughout the tetralogy. Alongside the large-scale historical atrocity of the Holocaust, Markson interweaves a multitude of more mundane experiences of suffering and humiliation. Many of these experiences take the form of scalding judgments that artists have received, both from other artists and from critics. For example, *This Is Not a Novel* tells us that "At least one Boston newspaper suggested in all seriousness that Whitman should be horsewhipped for *Leaves of Grass*," and *The Last Novel* tells us that Auden referred to Poe as "An unmanly

sort of man whose love life seems to have been largely confined to crying in laps and playing house" (7). The novels also contain multiple descriptions of artists' physical suffering, poverty, and destitution. For example, *Vanishing Point* tells us that "Swinburne suffered epileptic seizures," and *Reader's Block* notes that "At thirty-nine, when his first wife died, Monet was so poverty-stricken he could not afford the few centimes to redeem a pawned locket that he knew she wished to be buried with, and had to borrow" (144-5).

The varieties of painful experiences included in both the tetralogy's fictional and non-fictional material produce a series of implied connections. The physical pain felt by Novelist in *The Last Novel* is connected to the failure of Writer, in *This Is Not a Novel*, to produce the kind of work he wants to, a failure connected to the regret and failure of artists across the historical spectrum. This failure is further connected to poverty and rejection, which are related to death. Death and hatred form the background of historical atrocities like the Holocaust and the great wars of human history (The novels frequently reference events from both World Wars). This is another way in which the tetralogy transforms events from its characters' lives into components of a rich historical tapestry while simultaneously using historical events to reflect these characters' experiences.

Another way that Markson turns history into the substance of narrative and narrative into the substance of history is to describe events and phenomena that highlight the arbitrariness of historical narratives, thereby questioning these narratives while simultaneously affirming their power to shape history. Such phenomena include instances in which some of kind of accident has radically, yet almost unnoticeably, altered the historical narrative that has passed down over time. For example, *Reader's Block* tells us that "Throughout the Middle Ages, often no more than a single manuscript of certain

classics existed. One leaking monastery roof and the *Satyricon* could have been lost forever, for instance," and that "Thomas Traherne died in 1674. The manuscripts of his poems, never before published, were come upon on a bookseller's cart in 1897" (14, 61). *Vanishing Point* tells us that "Copies of all of the now long lost plays of Sophocles and Euripides still existed at Constantinople until 1203. / When the city's churches and libraries were indiscriminately ravaged and torched by the abortive Fourth Crusade" (52). Such examples either explicitly state or at least imply an alternate set of historical circumstances in which the same texts are published but end up being forgotten, lost to humanity's collective historical memory. In such alternate circumstances, the same historical events would occur, but a different historical narrative would be passed down over time.

Other passages suggest these kinds of alternate narratives less stridently, but imply them nonetheless. The novels of the tetralogy often mention then-contemporary judgments of artists that have subsequently been eclipsed or revised over time. For instance, *Vanishing Point* states: "The best dramatic writer since the days of Shakespeare and Massinger, Walter Scott called Joanna Baillie. / Who was forgotten before her death" (54). Again, such a note suggests an alternate set of historical circumstances, one in which the literary history passed down by Western culture reserves a more prominent place for Baillie. *Vanishing Point* presents a contrasting scenario immediately afterward, when it notes that "Fragonard was so little known at his death that there would appear to have been no obituary anywhere" (54). Once again, the passage suggests an alternate history, this time one in which Fragonard is forgotten, rather than remembered. It is also worth mentioning here that the "alternate histories" suggested by Markson in these

passages are related to the larger themes of discrimination and hatred that run throughout the tetralogy. An example demonstrating this theme occurs in *The Last Novel*, which quotes Thomas Jefferson as saying that "The appointment of a woman to public office is an innovation for which the public is not prepared, nor am I" (164). Jefferson's statement suggests a broader alternate history in which women who were denied entry to public office could have served. The example of Joanna Baillie presents a more specific example of a person who was forgotten, despite her talents, because of her gender. Markson reinforces the implication of gender discrimination by immediately contrasting her situation with that of a man, in the case of Fragonard. Several of the "alternate histories" that Markson suggests in his tetralogy revolve around highlighting instances in which women's works have been excluded from the literary canon.

Markson's suggestions of alternative histories emphasize the distinction between actual historical events and the narratives that accompany such events. An event can occur, yet can be forgotten, excised from the narrative, due to circumstances beyond the control of the people involved in that event's occurrence. If Traherne's book hadn't happened to have been found at a book sale, for instance, it may have been forgotten forever. If Baillie's works had been written by a man, they may have ended up being more widely read. Conversely, because Traherne's book was found, and because the *Satyricon* was not leaked upon, these texts have been preserved for posterity. At the same time as these examples foreground the distinction between events and narrative, however, highlighting the circumstantial nature of these works' survival in the public consciousness also foregrounds their inseparability, since if it weren't for the historical

narratives that have kept these works alive, people wouldn't even know about them in the first place.

This state of affairs mirrors the relationship between fiction and non-fiction in Markson's tetralogy. The style that Markson adapted for these novels emphasizes the distinction between genres by stating historical, non-fictional information as series of facts, while framing narrative, fictional information as part of a fictional narrative by centering it around obviously fictional characters. At the same time, the fictional and non-fictional elements are closely intertwined, paralleling one another closely. The ending of *Reader's Block* demonstrates this parallel movement by escalating the literary-historical death count at the same time as Protagonist and Reader move toward what become their inevitable ends.

The other novels of the tetralogy rely on a similar approach, with some variation. Just as *Reader's Block* follows a main character who is struggling to compose a piece of writing, so does *This Is Not a Novel*. However, Writer, the main character of *This Is Not a Novel*, has grander ambitions than simply writing a novel. Instead, he wants to do something far more difficult, by writing "A novel with no intimation of story whatsoever" (2). This novel would also have "no characters…no *sequence of events*…no indicated passage of time…no *setting*…no so-called furniture…no overriding central *motivations*…no conflicts and/or confrontations…no social themes, i.e., no picture of society…no depiction of contemporary manner and/or morals" (2-7, italics original). Thus, the fictional plot of Markson's novel involves Writer's quest to create a novel with no novelistic elements (hence, of course, the semi-ironic title *This Is Not a Novel*). The text continues to enumerate Writer's goals, while the non-fictional elements respond to

these goals in a way that, at first, appears to contradict Writer's story, as in the following

passage:

> Ultimately, a work of art without even a subject, Writer wants.
>
> There is no work of art without a subject, said Ortega.
>
> A novel tells a story, said E.M. Forster.
>
> If you can do it, it ain't bragging, said Dizzy Dean. (9-10)

Immediately after reaching the point of highest emphasis in describing Writer's goals, the

text produces a non-fictional response that immediately undercuts those goals. The Dizzy

Dean quotation that appears immediately afterward continues a playful back-and-forth

between Writer's ambitious goal to subvert literary conventions and the skepticism and

sense of impossibility that greets the announcement of such a goal. Markson makes it

appear as though there are cross-purposes at work here that run across both the fictional

and non-fictional elements of the text.

After the opening pages detailing Writer's goals, the novel proceeds to describe

some of his difficulties in achieving those goals. These difficulties include an existential

crisis, as the narrator asks, "Does Writer even exist? / In a book without characters?" (12)

Writer is caught within the uncertain fiction/non-fiction divide that permeates Markson's

tetralogy. He is not sure whether he actually exists, and in fact, he seems to assume that

even if he does exist, he does so only within the fictional world he is composing.

Thankfully for Writer, he quickly solves this crisis by finding some answers to the

question of whether or not he is fictional, as the narrator notes, "Obviously Writer exists.

/ Not being a character but the author, here. / Writer is *writing*, for heaven's sake" (13,

italics original). Writer realizes that he exists, because he is the one creating this fictional

world, not one who is caught up in it. He also validates this realization when he notices that he "can have headaches" and "does have headaches," as well as when the text refers to "Writer sitting and/or talking to himself being no more than renewed verification that he exists" (14, 15).

These passages thus emphasize that on one hand, the division between the fictional and non-fictional worlds is absolute, but on the other, fictional worlds can, for Writer, *feel* like they are a part of the actual world. The non-fictional text of *This Is Not a Novel* reflects this theme of blending these distinct worlds, as in the following anecdote:

> When I saw a performance of this play at Drury Lane, a beautiful pale-faced Englishwoman stood behind me in the box and wept profusely at the end of the fourth act, and called out repeatedly: The poor man is wronged.
> Wrote Heinrich Heine. (18)

Markson's novel also refers to "The inexplicable logic by which Thackeray convinced himself that Desdemona actually did have an affair with Cassio" (23). Both of these passages serve as examples of instances in which a reader or observer has reacted to a fictional narrative as though it were real, or at least as if it were a part of the non-fictional world, which Writer does, at least momentarily, with his own work when he wonders whether or not he actually exists.

This notion, that fiction can *feel* like non-fiction, reinforces the connections, which run throughout *This Is Not a Novel* (as well as the rest of the tetralogy) between fictional and non-fictional material. Markson both strengthens and expands these connections as the novel reaches its conclusion. Though there is no way to definitively divide this novel into sections (It contains no breaks, chapter or otherwise), Markson does seem to signal that he is working toward a conclusion when he starts to bring together the book's major themes and narrative strands in the following passage:

Does Writer still have headaches? And/or backaches?

As from the start, affording no more than renewed verification that he exists.

In a book without characters.

Not being a character but the author, here.

Turning older or no.

Writer is *writing*, is all. Still. (178, italics original)

This passage repeats much of the material from the beginning of the novel: Writer is writing a book without characters, and he verifies his existence through his physical pains. The key addition here is the new information that Writer is "turning older." The passage thus establishes an implicit connection between Writer's aging and his ambitious writing project. In fact, the text suggests that Writer uses this project as a way to fend off death, and perhaps achieve some sense of immortality, by following the news that Writer is "turning older" with the assertion that "Writer is *writing*."

The intertwining themes of aging/death and artistic ambition/failure run throughout the rest of the novel in both the fictional and non-fictional material. From this point on, the text informs us that Writer suffers from a variety of ailments, including "tendonitis…[a] pinched nerve…sciatica…[a] silent heart attack…[a] right lobectomy and resected ribs," and finally, on the last page, "Writer's cancer" (180-90). At the same time as Writer is apparently moving closer and closer to death, while also trying to preserve his legacy in his writing, the non-fictional material reflects these dual themes and further reinforces their connection. The narrator refers to Proust's bronchial pneumonia, Bach's stroke, and Donne's consumption, diseases that caused these artists to die, before relating three quotations about immortality, in the following passage:

When the city I extol shall have perished, when the men to whom I sing shall have faded into oblivion, my words shall remain.
Said Pindar.

Non omnis moriar. I shall not wholly die
Said Horace.

Per saecula Omnia vivam. I shall live forever.
Said Ovid. (188)

These quotations suggest that a person's works can live on after that person's death. Here, Markson really drives home the connection between Writer's impending death and his ambitious project. Work, for Writer, is a way to stave off death by making him, in a sense, immortal. Unfortunately for Writer, one can never know whether this work will be remembered or forgotten, as is made clear by the narrator's presentation of a series of quotations that suggest that, rather than live on, a person's work may simply be forgotten, lost to history:

Tell me, I pray thee, how fares the human race? If new roofs be risen in the ancient cities? Whose empire is it that now sways the world?

—Asked one of the fourth-century desert monks, the names of most forever unrecorded.

The time is close when you will have forgotten all things; and when all things will have forgotten you.
Said Marcus Aurelius. (188-9)

These quotations suggest an uncertainty, on Writer's part, over the status of his work after his death. He is unsure whether it will live on, providing him immortality, or be forgotten, leaving his death as nothing more than the end of a life, with no broader significance. The theme of historical contingency that ran throughout *Reader's Block* returns in these passages, but Markson applies this theme much more directly to his main character. Writer experiences historical contingency as a part of his own death, rather

than that of one of his fictional characters, wrestling with the uncertainty of whether or not his ambitious writing project will stave away his demise for just a bit longer.

As in *Reader's Block*, the non-fictional material not only reflects and reinforces the fictional narrative; it also absorbs and meshes with it. In this case, Writer, who began *This Is Not a Novel* by optimistically undertaking the task of writing a novel that subverts all of the accepted conventions of Western literature, now finds that his attempt is merely a small part of a larger history of such attempts. Writer is certainly not the first artist to try to produce revolutionary work, and whether he succeeds or fails (and it increasingly looks like he is going to fail), he will neither be the first artist to succeed at his task nor the first to fail. This absorption into non-fictional history, along with the more general (and certainly more pertinent) themes of failure and death, is wrapped up in the final lines of the novel, which read:

> *Western wind, when will thou blow*
> > *The small rain down can rain?*

> It is the business of the novelist to create characters.
> Said Alphonse Daudet

> Action and plot may play a minor part in a modern novel, but they cannot be entirely dispensed with.
> Said Ortega.

> If you can do it, it ain't bragging.

> Or was it possibly nothing more than a fundamentally recognizable genre all this while, no matter what Writer averred?

> Nothing more or less than a *read*?

> Simply an unconventional, generally melancholy though sometimes even playful now-ending read?

> About an old man's preoccupations.

> Dizzy Dean died of a heart attack.
>
> Writer's cancer.
>
> *Christ, if my love were in my arms*
> *   And I in my bed again!*
>
> Then I go out at night to paint the stars.
> Says a van Gogh letter.
>
> Farewell and be kind. (189-90, italics original)

This conclusion uses a new set of quotations to repeat the general idea, proposed near the beginning of *This Is Not a Novel*, that a novel must have plot, characters, a story, etc. However, while such an idea, at the beginning of Markson's book, seemed a way to playfully contradict Writer's ambitions, here it reads as an assertion of failure. Just as the vagaries of historical contingency have absorbed Writer's attempts at a new art form, so have the rules of literature absorbed his work, as well. Where Writer attempted to write a story with no plot, he has, despite his intentions, stumbled into the most dramatic plot resolution of all: death. He has also, in his very attempt to produce a story with no characters, become something of an interesting character himself. His curious motivations and subsequent failures drive the narrative momentum of *This Is Not a Novel*, which quickly builds up steam as it reaches its dramatic conclusion. Writer's questions reinforce his sense of failure. He wonders if he has, after all, produced a work in a "recognizable genre," a "simply unconventional" book that is "nothing more or less than a read."

Laura Sims believes that this section actually signals a kind of success for Writer. As evidence, she cites the line "If you can do it, it ain't bragging," a quotation from baseball player Dizzy Dean that is repeated earlier in the novel. She writes, "The Dizzy

Dean quotation seems muted here, sandwiched between these ambivalent revisions. But if what we have witnessed is not, after all, an eradication of the novel form, it is at the very least a significant reinvention, and therefore gives Markson just cause to brag" (64). I read this quotation, however, as an ironic undercutting of Writer's sense of futility. After all, Markson conspicuously mentions Dean's death shortly after quoting him, reinforcing the inevitability of death at the end of a life of difficult work.[5] The last few lines of the novel suggest that Writer is turning away from his ambitions and accepting his oncoming demise. The text subtly evokes methods other than work for bestowing meaning on life, first in the form of love, suggested by the line "Christ, if my love were in my arms" (lyrics from the Middle English song "Western Wind," which are continued from the earlier lyrics "Western wind, when will thou blow / The small rain down can rain?"), then in the form of religion, suggested by the van Gogh quotation, the omitted beginning of which reads "And it does me good to do what's *difficult*. That doesn't stop me having a tremendous need for, shall I say the word — for religion…" (letter to Theo van Gogh, italics original). Finally, the text suggests that Writer is giving up the search

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[5] Markson discusses his references to Dizzy Dean in an interview with *Conjunctions*:

> In *This is Not a Novel*, I quote Dizzy Dean, the old ballplayer, who was very colorful and massacred the language when he was an announcer, but was very popular and a great pitcher. In the beginning of the book, I quote E.M. Forster and other writers on how a novel has to follow certain rules and how you can't write a novel without doing this and that. And then I throw in Dizzy Dean: "If you can do it, it ain't bragging," contradicting what these authors have said about the nature of fiction. Late along in the book, after I've written an entire novel breaking all the rules, I quote some more people on them, and then, without attribution this time, I throw in the Dizzy Dean line again, "If you can do it, it ain't bragging." But I knew it would be forgotten, and people don't know who Dizzy Dean is anymore. So I made sure I dropped in—let's say a third of the way and two-thirds of the way through—other Dizzy Dean references. One of them is a Marianne Moore quotation about him, and one is an anecdote about Ezra Pound, how, when he was locked up in a cage at Pisa during the second World War, his exercise was to swing a stick like a baseball bat. I worked a mention of Dizzy Dean into that. And then, because I had that list of deaths throughout—this one died from this, this one died from that—I put in "Dizzy Dean died of a heart attack," and this just a few pages after that unattributed quotation occurs for the second time.

for deep significance and accepting his fate, ending with the simple exhortation to "Farewell and be kind."

Autobiography in Markson's Tetralogy

As the tetralogy proceeds, Markson continues to blend genres by incorporating an increasing amount of autobiographical material into his work. This material lends greater complexity to the correspondences between worlds that Markson develops in *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel*, where the factual world described by the author's non-fictional material both reflects and absorbs the fictional narratives that he creates. By inserting his own persona more directly, and more explicitly, into the text, Markson makes it so that the fictional and historical materials in his novels not only interact with each other, but with his own personal history, as well. Historical facts and fictional narratives become ways for Markson to express his own opinions and personal experiences. At the same time, fiction and history also absorb Markson's personal life, to the point where this life becomes a part of both. Hints of the tetralogy's autobiographical underpinnings emerge in *This Is Not a Novel*, in a passage that conspicuously parallels Markson's own life:

> Your last novel was a flop. You've got two wonderful children depending on you. Don't you think it's time to consider doing something more financially responsible in your life?
>
> This is also even an autobiography, if Writer says so. (53)

The details developed in this passage coincide with Markson's life; he did have two children, and he did have trouble getting his novels published, most notably receiving fifty-four rejections for *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (interview with Joseph Tabbi 107).

Markson also follows this apparently autobiographical detail by bringing in Writer's

claim that his book is "even an autobiography," if he says so. Writer's various generic

categories for his work form a recurring motif in *This Is Not a Novel*; he variously refers

to his work as "a sequence of cantos awaiting numbering," "a continued heap of riddles,"

"a polyphonic opera," and "a disquisition on the maladies of the life of art," in addition to

numerous other descriptions (23, 70, 73, 86). Placing the tag "autobiography" in such

close proximity to this statement about dim literary prospects suggests a correspondence

with Markson's own life story.

      This autobiographical content is given new significance through repetition and re-

contextualization. Later on in *This Is Not a Novel*, the text reads:

> Writer incidentally doing his best here—insofar as his memory allows—
> not to repeat things he has included in his earlier work.
>   Meaning in this instance the four hundred and fifty or more deaths that
> were mentioned in his last book also…
>
> Your last novel was a flop.
>
> All of this preoccupation implying little more, presumably, than that
> Writer is turning older…
>
> Though with Writer also now recalling the refrain from Dunbar's *Lament
> for the Makers*, about the deaths of such as Chaucer and Lydgate and Henryson
> and Gower:
>   *Timor mortis conturbat me.*
>   The fear of death distresses me. (147-8)

This passage begins with what clearly appears to be a direct reference to Markson's

previous work in *Reader's Block*, mentioning the "four hundred and fifty or more deaths"

that occurred in Writer's last book. This line thus connects Writer to Markson, the author,

even more directly, a connection that continues when Markson repeats the line "Your last

novel was a flop" right before mentioning Writer's preoccupation with getting older. This

section thus brings together Markson's own life with Writer's story, along with the themes of literary failure and death, themes which are further emphasized by the references (many of which I have replaced here with ellipses) to other pieces of literature and to other famous deaths sprinkled throughout this passage. Finally, Writer thinks directly about his own fear of death, making it difficult not to interpret this passage as a way for Markson to both fictionalize his own fear through the character of Writer and to place this fear in the context of a historical laundry list of famous deaths, as he does when he recalls Dunbar's laments for "Chaucer and Lydgate and Henryson and Gower."

While *This Is Not a Novel* (and, to a lesser extent, *Reader's Block*) includes some details and basic plot elements that appear to have been adapted from Markson's life, Markson's autobiographical material becomes both more specific and more prominent in the last two novels of the tetralogy. *Vanishing Point*, which appeared after *This Is Not a Novel*, is largely a retelling of Markson's own artistic practices, corresponding more directly with the author's life than do Writer's struggles in *This Is Not a Novel*. *Vanishing Point* begins with the statement "Author has finally started to put his notes into manuscript form" (1). The novel goes on to provide some skeletal details of Author's writing process and his current state of health, noting that he has been "scribbling notes on three-by-five-inch index cards," he has "been procrastinating," he experiences a "lack of energy," and he has spent a lot of his writing time not by typing, but by simply "shuffling and re-arranging…the index cards" (1, 3, 4, 6, 8). While *Reader's Block* focuses largely on the content of Reader's writing project, and *This Is Not a Novel* focuses on Writer's general goals, *Vanishing Point* is more concerned with the specific details of what Author is doing and feeling as he writes. This shift is indicative of a more

general shift in focus away from the work itself and to the person producing the work. As Françoise Palleau-Papin notes, "The writer of the previous novel is now called Author, and the change is meaningful. The word 'writer' insists on the work of writing, while 'author' draws our attention to the authority of the writer who signs his name to the book" (252). Markson uses this shift in naming to signal a shift towards the increased importance of autobiography in his final two novels.

Markson's autobiography shines through the text in the way that these passages from *Vanishing Point* echo his own writing process and his then-current concerns. *Vanishing Point* describes its main character's composition process as one of compiling and re-arranging a series of three-by-five-inch note cards. This is how Markson himself compiled notes for his late novels, as he outlines in an interview with Tayt Harlin: "I use index cards. I store them in the tops of a couple of shoes boxes. If I made a stack of them, they'd probably be about two feet tall. I'm constantly shuffling." *Vanishing Point* also demonstrates a more pointed, and more prominent, concern with aging and its effects on Author's work, a concern which apparently preoccupied Markson during this period of his life. In fact, an excerpt from an interview with Joey Rubin from July 2005, about one-and-a-half years after the publication of *Vanishing Point*, contains passages that appear as though they could have come directly from the novel. Responding to a question about how much of a factor age plays in his reading habits, Markson tells the interviewer about his "damned medical problems," his increasing need to rest, his tendency to forget names and words, and his growing sense that his fading mental acuity prevents his work from attaining its previous level of quality. These comments demonstrate that for Markson, aging was painful not only for its effect on the body but for its effects on the mind and on

the process of producing literary work. The connections between Markson's life and the character of Author thus strengthen the connections, apparent throughout the trilogy, between aging, death, and the struggles that attend the creative process. Whereas in *This Is Not a Novel*, writing was a way for Writer to fight off death and aspire to immortality, in *Vanishing Point*, Author has more modest goals, finding that even getting started on his work is a struggle, due to the pain and loss of energy that attend his aging. This struggle reflects Markson's own during the end of his life.

The rigors of age also lead *Vanishing Point* to present non-fictional material differently than do the previous novels of the tetralogy. *Vanishing Point* still consists largely of factoids and quotations, often related without direct intervention from the main character. It also includes multiple instances, however, in which Author's presence intrudes on the presentation of facts, as his hazy, fading memory causes him to remark on his uncertainty and forgetfulness. The novel establishes a pattern of such instances, beginning with the question:

> Why does it seem like the earliest fragment of American history that Author can remember ever having learned—
> That Dolley Madison saved Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington when the British burned the White House in 1814? (21)

Here, Author trudges as far back as he can go through his past by trying to figure out the earliest fact he can possibly remember learning. The passage contains multiple hedges that suggest the uncertainty of Author's memory; he is unsure *why* it *seems like* the earliest fragment he *can remember* having learned.

In instances such as this, facts are thus presented not with objective certainty, but as pieces of Author's mental life that are slipping away from him. Later in the story, the text presents more questions about Author's mental life:

> Whose tale, locked for some decades, now, in Author's memory?—
> Of someone visiting at an old people's home and noticing a woman
> beyond an unclosed bathroom door—scrubbing her face in a toilet bowl.
>
> And why particularly indelible? (48-9).

The tale sketched here is notably bare; in fact, what is presented is less the plot of a story and more a hazy stream of details from a single scene. Markson's use of the word "locked" to describe the tale's status in Author's memory is evocative, suggesting, with a single word, what *Vanishing Point* establishes throughout; that Author's memory is a vast storehouse of facts to which he himself lacks complete access. This passage also presents multiple levels of ambiguity, as Author wonders not only whose tale this is, but why it has stuck with him.

Instances such as this set up a pattern that runs through *Vanishing Point*. While the novel's format is similar to *This Is Not a Novel*, in that it intersperses snippets of its main character's fictional narrative among non-fictional material for, according to Markson "only about 1½%" of the book (as opposed to the "roughly 20% of [*Reader's Block*]," the content of these snippets focuses less on Author's work and more on his struggles to dredge up facts from the storehouse of his memory (interview with Tayt Harlin). He "paus[es] to recall" the ways that people told time before the invention of watches, he asks himself "why…it seem[s] odd…that Yeats and Kipling were born in the same year," and he wonders "why [he] does…not know if what used to be named Arbor Day is still celebrated" (52, 100, 132). In the tetralogy's earlier volumes, the non-fictional material absorbed the primary narratives, turning Reader's and Writer's fictional concerns into components of a broader history. Non-fiction served as a way for Markson's characters and, by extension, Markson himself, to connect with the world. In

Vanishing Point, the non-fictional material does often serve this function, but the text also emphasizes Author's disconnection from the world, documenting his attempts and struggles to recall and re-organize his memories.

Not only does Author have trouble connecting to the world because of his inability to remember; he also has difficulty adequately communicating his ideas, a difficulty which underlies the tetralogy's overarching theme of the struggle to write. This communicative difficulty becomes more and more apparent as *Vanishing Point* draws to a close, starting around page 178, which begins:

> *Selah*, which marks the ends of verses in the Psalms, but the Hebrew meaning of which is unknown.
>
> And probably indicates no more than pause, or rest.
>
> Why does Author wish it implied more—or might stand for some ultimate effacement, even?...
>
> *Selah*. Absolutely, all the illimitable connotations of Einstein's cosmic *Oy, vey* Author hereby personally endows it with—a terminal desolation and despair.
>
> Done? Done. Beware *Selah*. (178, italics original)

Author struggles here because the language available to him isn't able to express the ideas that he has in mind. Much as Writer, in *This Is Not a Novel*, found that his artistic ambitions were doomed to failure, Author finds that he is unable to make his meaning clear. His solution to this problem is to simply decide for himself what "Selah" is going to mean. Even in doing so, however, he finds it necessary to try out different meanings in order to express what he wants to say. The implication is that Author still struggles to get his point across. Appearing in close proximity to this passage are, significantly, a reference to what Author believes to be a successful piece of art, the 1953 recording of *Tosca*, the unflattering comparison to which foregrounds Author's feelings of

incompetence, as well as multiple references to famous writers' deaths (including Dante and Virgil). Such references once again reinforce the connection between death and artistic failure, as well as the connection between Markson's non-fictional material and the fictional, yet semi-autobiographical, narrative of Author.

These strands merge at the novel's conclusion, as Author gradually loses the ability to communicate. He experiences bright lights and "gaps in his consciousness" (187). Eventually, his inability to make himself clear and connect with the world becomes a problem not just for his work and for his ability to remember non-fictional material, but for even the barest acts of communication. Author's voice (but not Author himself) disappears from the picture completely on the last few pages, reaching the "vanishing point" of the book's title, leaving only Author's children to carry the narrative:

> "Dad? Dad? Say something."
>
> *Rosie, You Are My Posy.*
>
> A sentence consists of a noun and verb. If you want to use an adjective, come and ask me first.
>
> Orchestra play like pig.
>
> "Dad? Please? You can't just sit there and stare. Talk to us. Answer us, Dad. We love you, you know?'
>
> I do at least three paintings a day in my head. What's the use of spoiling canvas when nobody will buy anything?
>
> A symphony is no joke.
>
> You know I can't stand Shakespeare's plays, but yours are worse.
>
> "Dad? We truly want to bring the children. But they won't understand at all, if you just sit and don't say anything. They'll be frightened. Dad?"

Couldn't that lady cut herself, standing on that seashell?

Go, litel bok.

"Oh, Dad. Oh, Dad."

Selah. (190-1, italics original)

The passages addressed to "Dad" are, significantly, the only passages in Markson's tetralogy that appear in quotation marks, even when we include actual historical quotations. This differentiates these passages from the non-fictional material that runs throughout the tetralogy, suggesting that they are not statements that make their way from the non-fictional world into Author's fiction, but are instead spoken by other characters, presumably Author's children, who express deep concern for their ailing, disoriented father, who is now apparently speechless.

Markson also tweaks the approach that he used in ending *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel*. Whereas in those books, the non-fictional material that Markson included on the final few pages reiterates major themes such as death and suicide, the material presented at the end of *Vanishing Point* appears thematically unconnected; we get a quotation about linguistic brevity, one about Shakespeare, one about the orchestra, etc. What actually holds these quotations together is that they repeat earlier passages from *Vanishing Point*. However, where earlier in the novel, the text identified the original speaker of each of these quotations, this time around, they are unattributed, presented without the same context as when Markson first used them. For example, the song title "*Rosie, You Are My Posy*" appears on page 8, as the text explains that Al Jolson used to sing the song for a free meal. The line "I do at least three paintings a day in my head" appears on page 7, but it is attributed to Modigliani. When they appear at the end of

Vanishing Point, Markson removes these bits of context. This increases the effect of Author's struggles, throughout the novel, to remember information. Author's fading memory now applies to the novel's non-fictional material, which becomes disconnected from its sources, left to float aimlessly, both on the space of the page and in the disorganized storehouse of Author's mind.

The disconnected information that ends *Vanishing Point* further develops the theme of breaking down historical narratives. Markson strikes a delicate balance throughout the tetralogy by establishing themes and ideas through suggestion and implication, rather than through explicit statement. The historical, non-fictional material thus suggests overarching narratives, even though many of the bits of information don't have any direct connection to each other. The ending of *Vanishing Point* shows these connections breaking down, so that pieces of information actually exist as separate, discreet bits. The non-fictional material reflects Author's state of mind at the same time as it absorbs his narrative. Just as the continuous references to death and suicide in *Reader's Block* and *This Is Not a Novel* render Reader and Writer as components of broader histories of death and suicide, so do the breakdowns in narrative render Author's life just another series of pieces of information that are transformed into disparate bits. Even his children's desperate pleas for communication are buried, fighting for narrative space with fragments of half-remembered quotations and song titles. Thus ends *Vanishing Point*, with Author himself disappearing into nothingness.

This ending presents the most extreme of example of a character's being subsumed into history that occurs in Markson's tetralogy. Markson takes care to distinguish Author's consciousness from the flow of history as portrayed in *Vanishing*

Point, only to eventually have that consciousness merge with Author's historical context. Author is lost to history. At the same time, however, this very process of being lost is narrated in such a way that it reflects Author's own consciousness, continuing a pattern that recurs throughout the tetralogy. Ultimately, this pattern develops a nuanced portrait of the mind/world relationship. The mind, in Markson's work, is a part of history, but at the same time, subjectivity is the only perspective from which an individual can understand broader historical forces. The characters of Author, Writer, and Reader live this relationship, often with tragic ends.

Chapter Three: Nicholson Baker's Miniature Histories

Fredric Jameson famously characterized postmodern art as marked by a "waning of affect," a loss of deep feeling that Jameson associates with what he sees as postmodernism's broader theoretical critique of "the hermeneutic," with "the hermeneutic" referring, in this case, to the capacity for an appearance to signify some deeper meaning or significance. In Jameson's formulation, postmodern art was marked by an emphasis on the superficiality of images and a de-emphasis on any emotion, feeling, or meaning that might be signified by such images. To illustrate what he sees as the difference between postmodernism and its predecessor, high modernism, Jameson compares Andy Warhol's painting *Diamond Dust Shoes* (which he cites as a paradigmatic example of postmodern art) with "Van Gogh's well-known painting of the peasant shoes" (which he cites as an example of high modernism) (6). For Jameson, the Van Gogh "may be described as *hermeneutical*, in the sense in which the work in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth" (8, italics original). In this case, the "vaster reality" that Jameson describes is the working life of the peasant to whom the shoes depicted in the painting presumably belong (Jameson 7-8). Jameson believes that in Warhol, however, there is "no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture and restore to these oddments [the shoes depicted in the painting] that whole larger lived context of the dance hall or the ball, the world of jetset fashion or glamour magazines" (8-9). The "waning of affect" that Jameson

describes is thus produced by what he sees as the detachment of artistic images from the type of lived contexts that allow viewers to complete the types of "hermeneutic gestures" that imbue these images with meaning.

Warhol's painting does portray its subject in such a way that it appears detached from lived context, setting the shoes off against a plain, black background, an abstract backdrop that eschews the earthy, impressionistic realism of Van Gogh's muted gray background. I question the notion, however, that this detachment represents some kind of decline in the realm of "affect." To isolate one aspect of Warhol's painting, we can look at the brand labels that are clearly visible in some of the shoes. One of the most basic tenets of marketing is that individuals can and do form deep emotional attachments to brand names and labels. The same can be said of the particular styles of Warhol's shoes; these styles and fashions exist largely because of the emotional value that consumers attach to them. I want to suggest here that Warhol's painting represents not so much a "waning of affect" or, to cite another of Jameson's key phrases, "a new depthlessness" inherent to postmodernism, as much as it simply places affective depth in a new context of mass-cultural consumerism. Warhol's painting suggests not that affect has waned, but that it exists in a changed world. The affect that Jameson describes now has the capacity to be transferred in new ways, through mass-cultural products and images.

I question Jameson's formulation of postmodernism in order to introduce the work of Nicholson Baker, which raises similar concerns about the affective value of mass culture. Much like Warhol's paintings, Baker's fictions are packed with depictions of mass-cultural products, including consumer goods, brand labels, and office accoutrements. The characters in Baker's novels tend to develop deep emotional

connections to these products. In fact, Baker's work represents, if anything, not so much a waning but an *excess* of affect, since nearly everything in his fiction has a deep, emotional significance for his characters. His work suggests a turn in late postmodern fiction away from the ironic parody that characterizes the fiction of authors like Donald Barthelme and Thomas Pynchon, and toward an enthusiastic engagement with the modern world.

However, despite these differences between Baker's work and the work that Jameson describes as typically postmodern, critics have employed Jameson's terminology and formulations to describe Baker's novels. Philip E. Simmons, for example, argues that *The Mezzanine* exemplifies a "postmodern historical imagination" that "both invokes and rejects traditional modes of historical understanding in 'depth,' as it reconfigures the human subject and ranges among local and contingent historical narratives organized at the mass-cultural 'surface'" (2). Essentially, Simmons argues that the mass-cultural experiences that pervade *The Mezzanine* are particularly postmodern in that they fail to signify anything beyond themselves, existing in a perpetual present that is unconnected to any broader historical narratives.[6] He thus reads *The Mezzanine* as indicative of the kind of "depthlessness" that Jameson sees in Warhol, emphasizing the role that this "depthlessness" plays in defining Baker's novel as typically postmodern. The structure of Simmons's analysis of *The Mezzanine* even echoes that of Jameson's essay, as Simmons compares *The Mezzanine* with a modernist foil (in this case, Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer*).

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[6] Graham Thompson makes a similar argument when he states that Baker's novel "fashions a theory of periodization that abandons 'trends and events' and attempts to capture the way that decades are experienced constantly in media res" (302). Thompson, like Simmons, emphasizes what he sees as *The Mezzanine*'s deliberate turning away from overarching historical narratives.

The problem with Simmons's argument is that it simplifies Baker's conception of history by essentially excising it from *The Mezzanine*. While Baker's novels do indeed emphasize small-scale events over broad, historical "meta-narratives," they are actually acutely informed by history, especially by the ways in which history shapes the particulars of human experience. More specifically, *The Mezzanine* explores the historical implications of the relationships that its protagonist, a young office worker named Howie, forms with the then-contemporary technological innovations that make up his workplace environment, the environment in which almost the entirety of the novel's narrative takes place. In my discussion of Jameson's critique of Warhol's shoe painting, I argued that Warhol's painting suggests an affective, emotional element particular to the branded, mass-cultural environment implied by the shoes' designs and labels. Similarly, *The Mezzanine* depicts a particular kind of affective experience that attends its protagonist's interactions with the mass-produced, technological entities that make up his workplace environment, as well as his home life and personal history.

These interactions form the basis for Baker's particular conception of history in *The Mezzanine*, as the objects that interest Howie are inextricably tied to his own historical imagination. Howie envisions his own, personal history as one defined largely by these objects, as they often stand in, in his memory, for entire relationships. For example, Howie engages in a lengthy reminiscence about earplugs that leads him to thoughts of how L., his one-time lover, would lovingly place the plugs in his ear before bedtime (109-10). A long series of thoughts about neckties becomes a way for Howie to reconstruct his relationship with his father, with whom he bonded over male office wear (27-8, footnote 1). Earplugs and neckties thus become means of encapsulating a vast

personal history, attached as they are to crucial, formative memories. Howie also demonstrates a deep interest in the histories of objects' developers, as when he recounts going to a library to research information on Frederick Mennen, the inventor of Jiffy Pop popcorn, or when he remembers reading about a man named Z. Czaplicki, who conducted research on the subject of shoelace durability (107, footnote 1, 132-3, footnote 1). [7]

Howie expresses explicit enthusiasm over all of these memories, demonstrating the affective dimension of historical imagination that permeates *The Mezzanine*. He even remembers that when finding that somebody had conducted research on the subject of shoelace wear, "The joy I felt may be difficult for some to understand" (132, footnote 1). Howie's memories also make clear that he is keen to identify the human elements that can be related to inanimate objects, associating ties with his father and Jiffy Pop popcorn with the mysterious life of its inventor. Howie tends to imbue these objects with human, emotional significance, and it is his historical imagination that allows him to do this, whether he is imagining a personal history shared with his father or researching the history (one that is, for Howie, both personal and cultural) underlying products like popcorn and shoelaces. In *The Mezzanine*, history and emotional depth, precisely the things that critics like Simmons see as absent from the novel, are not only crucially important, but closely related, as Howie's emotions are presented largely as products of the ways in which he constructs history.

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[7] Mark O'Connell evokes the way in which Howie's interest in this kind of research reflects Baker's own interest in humanizing objects, when he writes,

> There is a sense in which Baker, like his narrators in *Room Temperature* and *The Mezzanine* (and this is a distinction numerous critics have declined to make), can be seen as having an almost anthropomorphizing degree of compassion toward objects, a tendency from which his desire to preserve as much as possible stems. It is not a case, however, of his valuing objects equally to humans; it is a case, rather, of his valuing objects because of their status as products and records of human endeavor. There is, as such, a profoundly humanistic and humane foundation to this concern with the mundanely material and ephemeral (294).

Historical imagination thus shapes Howie's relationship to technology in *The Mezzanine*. More significantly, I argue, this relationship also functions in the opposite direction, as Howie's historical imagination is shaped by his technologically saturated environment. *The Mezzanine* makes clear that Howie's view of the world is one of technological determinism. He sees his world, including its human denizens, as exhibiting the same kind of mechanical, deterministic motivation as inanimate objects like the escalator that he rides to work, operating on a fixed trajectory toward predetermined destinations, as opposed to operating according to human intentions and desires. A reader has the right to be skeptical of Howie's view of humanity, but regardless of any of the human characters' various intentions within *The Mezzanine*'s fictional world, Howie consistently portrays these characters as though they are almost completely lacking in intention, as if they are complex machines whose desires are determined by externally observable forces. While Howie does not explicitly outline this kind of deterministic theory of history, he implies his belief in it, as I argue in this chapter, through his depictions of the people who populate his work environment.

Moreover, Howie makes it clear that not only does this mechanistic determinism influence his worldview; he actually believes that it is desirable, a goal or ideal worth striving toward. Howie takes such joy in mechanical objects in part because he loves their rote predictability, the reassuring certainty that they provide when functioning properly. I argue, in the final section of this chapter, that *The Mezzanine* is in large part a novel about Howie's desire for the mechanistic determinism that he sees operating in the world around him. Contrary to the arguments of Simmons and Thompson, Howie's outlook is explicitly historicist, and his particular brand of historicism derives from his desire to

impart mechanistic qualities onto his environment. This desire suggests that one of the defining features of the novel's postmodern milieu is a desire for certainty in an ever-changing world, as well as a need to make that world's unpredictability clear and predictable, to turn the uncertain march of history into the kind of safe, mechanical forward movement of Howie's escalator. Consequently, *The Mezzanine* is not so much a novel that, as Simmons suggests, elides history, but one that depicts a desire to control it.

Unbecoming Humans

Howie tries to affect this kind of predictability in part by imbuing humans and human activities with mechanistic, machine-like qualities. This mechanization produces Howie's particular sense of historical determinism, as the novel depicts human behavior as being controlled by outside forces. *The Mezzanine* thus collapses conceptual distinctions between humans and objects, making objects more human-like and humans more object-like. In Howie's mind, humans and objects are parts of a single, cohesive system of emotional resonances and interrelated operations. The interrelatedness of humans and objects is, of course, built into the very premise of the novel. *The Mezzanine* contains very little action that occurs in real time, and much of this action consists in Howie's escalator ride. The escalator is an excellent example of an object that assists people in performing actions. Howie and the escalator form, in essence, a coupled system that produces Howie's movement toward the mezzanine.

The escalator's upward movement also helps lead Howie toward developing his mechanistic view of humanity. Howie emphasizes this sense of historical determinism at the beginning of Chapter 12, when, describing his position atop the escalator, he notes that "From this height, the height of sociology and statistics, foreshortened employees

55

moved in visible patterns" (99). Howie portrays his viewpoint as one of objective, scientific detachment, invoking the academic disciplines of sociology and statistics, even as his description of his fellow employees makes clear that he is projecting his own limited, subjective perspective on the scene, as the adjective "foreshortened" emphasizes the way that these employees look to Howie, rather than the way that they would look from a more detached, objective perspective.

As Howie describes these employees' activity in detail, his narration makes clear that the mechanistic aspects of this scene are not inherent to the scene itself, but are instead projected upon it by Howie, since the deterministic overtones of this passage are produced not by the world that Howie observes, but by the grammatical style he uses to describe this world. He employs a passive voice in order to emphasize what he sees as his fellow employees' lack of agency, stating that they are "held in" each other's conversation or "propelled by" the lobby's revolving door, as opposed to actively (in both the physical and grammatical senses) pursuing these movements (99). When Howie does use the active voice here, it describes the lobby denizens' willful sublimation into predetermined patterns of movement, a sublimation that he, notably, desires to affect in his own life. His coworkers "coalesced in front of elevators whose arrival dinger just lit," forming groups whose movement is determined by the movement of a machine, the "dinger" that motivates their behavior further suggesting behaviorism by evoking the image of Pavlov's dogs (99). Howie also notes that they "renewed the permanent four-person line at the cash machine," once again allowing the operation of the machine to determine their behavior while they are simultaneously subsumed into the permanent structure of the line (99). In fact, many of these people exist as components of abstract

structures, rather than as individuals. They are parts of "intersecting rushed trajectories," a "neat clockwise semicircle," and a "loop-the-loop," patterns of motion that, in Howie's view, structure the human behavior of the office (99).

Howie notably projects this sense of mechanical determinism not only onto others' actions, but on his own experiences, as well, as demonstrated by an earlier scene, in which, while riding the escalator, he realizes that the escalator will cause him to cross paths with a co-worker named Bob, with whom he "had never had one of those less-than-a-minute chats that are sufficient to define acquaintanceship in large companies" (60). The word "define" is significant here, since it suggests that an abstract entity like "acquaintanceship" can be broken down into discrete bits, as if it were a tangible object. Once again, Baker uses the passive voice here in order to emphasize the individuals' lack of agency. As Howie puts it, he and Bob are "going to be brought" closer to each other, neither having a choice in the matter, the wording here emphasizing the way in which the escalator and its rider function as a single, interlocked system. Howie does note that he and Bob would, upon crossing paths, have a choice as to whether to acknowledge one another or to find some distraction in order to feign ignorance; however, he also stresses that they "would have to" make the choice to do one of these things while they are brought into "forced proximity," foregrounding the ways in which the system of movement in which the men are caught up circumscribes the types of choices that they have the capability to make. The passage ends with the possibility that the two men's scant conversational history will be brought, in Howie's words, "onto an even higher plane of awkwardness" (60). Their relationship will, in Howie's mind, exist as a distinct, abstract entity that Howie refers to as a "plane." The implication here is that the

relationship itself, or the awkwardness of it, exerts a kind of social force on Howie and Bob that determines, to at least some degree, their interactions with one another.

Howie does solve the problem of forced awkwardness by, in his words, "freezing in mid-stride, the instant I caught sight of [Bob] (just before I had actually stepped onto the escalator), pointing in the air with an index finger, as if I had just thought of something important that I had forgotten to do, and walking off quickly in another direction" (60). He is thus able to exert his will on the situation, to a degree, by choosing to simply walk away from the escalator and avoid passing Bob altogether, thereby obviating the need to choose between acknowledging or ignoring his co-worker. Even Howie's decision here, however, is shaped by the "plane of awkwardness" that he sees emerging. He wants to walk away but cannot simply do so, instead making a show of acting as though something else besides the imminent encounter with Bob is causing him to make his decision. Howie thus portrays the escalator and the office's social codes, along with Howie and Bob's interactive history, as interlocking, mechanized systems that shape his own behavior in this scenario.

When Howie describes instances when he does engage in conversation, he portrays his behavior as similarly circumscribed by a series of mechanized social codes, as he makes clear in an earlier scene, in which he converses with Tina, another of his co-workers. The conversation begins with a discussion of Ray, another co-worker who is out of work with an injury. Tina has composed a poster for Ray containing the message "Ray, missing you, hoping you come back to work soon! From your Co-Workers" (30). The poster also depicts "a vase holding five large, loopy outlined flowers," whose petals contain signatures of various office employees (30). The image on the poster is clearly

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generic: a picture that could appear on just about any poster at just about any office building in America during the time when *The Mezzanine* was published. However, Howie, who consistently derives aesthetic pleasure from the repetitive rituals and routines of his workplace, "made an exclamation about its beauty: it *was* beautiful" (30, italics original).

As he does in his interaction with Bob, Howie describes his behavior as circumscribed by abstract systems of convention, and the histories of his interactions with his co-workers combine with these social codes to shape his present actions. He recounts his signing of the poster, saying

> I found an unobtrusive petal of the fourth flower: not too prominent, because I had a feeling that I might have been a little on the cool side to Ray recently—you go through inevitable cycles of office friendliness—and I wanted him to see signatures of people whose sentiments he would be absolutely sure of first. (30)

Howie is motivated here by his own past behavior toward Ray; however, he credits this behavior to "inevitable cycles of office friendliness." Once again, he attributes agency to an abstract entity, in this case a "cycle," that determines his and Ray's behavior. His decision to sign the poster is made according to his own volition, though even this decision is influenced by the system of social conventions and personal histories within which he relates to his co-workers.

After signing the poster, Howie continues to emphasize the deterministic elements of his office social life in his description of his conversation with Tina, during which Tina is suddenly interrupted by a phone call. Howie wants to leave, but decides that "it would have been brusque to do so" (32). This is due to the fact that, as he puts it, his and Tina's

"interchange had passed just barely beyond office civility into the realm of human conversation, and thus had to be terminated conversationally" (32). Howie, as he often does, uses grammar to de-emphasize human agency, making "interchange" the subject of his sentence, suggesting that the conversation is performing actions on its own, taking on a new status that requires behavioral adjustments from the two co-workers. Howie also portrays "etiquette" as a discrete entity, noting that it "requires [him] to wait until [Tina's] phone duty was done in order to exchange one last sentence with her" (32). Tina is similarly, in Howie's mind, expected to produce certain types of behaviors in response to both Howie's signals and to the conventions of the social scenario, as he believes it her duty to inform him if her conversation will take up a significant amount of time. Although Howie and Tina make conscious decisions, Howie suggests that their decisions are directly influenced by a broad system of social etiquette and office relations. Howie conspicuously describes these relations as discrete entities, emphasizing the systematic nature of his conversation.

The kinds of abstract, deterministic systems that Howie sees shaping his conversations also appear, to him, to shape the course of his internal thought processes. While his tone throughout *The Mezzanine* is generally optimistic, he mourns, at certain points, the ways in which his thoughts and experiences will be shaped by forces beyond his own control, as the continuous march of history renders certain kinds of experience unobtainable. In Chapter Thirteen, Howie begins to think about the different varieties of shampoo brands and products that have passed through his life. These brands, as do so many other consumer products in *The Mezzanine*, form an important part of the emotional texture of Howie's life. This is true even of products of which Howie does not

make direct use. As he puts it, "I am not proud of the fact that major ingredients of my emotional history are available for purchase today at CVS. The fact seems especially puzzling, since mine was entirely a spectator's emotion: I did not use any of the great shampoos" (115). Instead, he is simply fascinated with the various sounds and images that become associated, in his mind, with the products, including the products' names and labels (along with all the connotations of sophistication and/or tackiness they may carry), and the voice-overs that permeate the shampoos' TV ads.

Howie, however, isn't simply "not proud" of his emotional connections to these products; his thoughts about shampoo actually carry a deeper sense of sadness and regret. He ponders the historical cycles of branding and popularity that products like shampoos go through, connecting these cycles to his own life. For Howie, the interaction between these cycles and his own "personal pantheon" of familiar shampoo brands shapes the roles that these brands play in his emotional state:

> Eventually, as products continue to be launched year after year, your original shampoo pantheon, or toothpaste or vending machine or magazine or car or felt-tip pen pantheon, becomes infiltrated by novelty, and you may find yourself losing your points of reference, unable to place a new item in a comparative nest of familiar brand names because the other names still themselves feel raw and unassimilated. (115-6)

This passage shows Howie continuing his tendency to de-emphasize human agency by using the passive grammatical voice to attribute actions to abstract entities. His "shampoo pantheon" is "penetrated by" novelty, and this novelty, not Howie himself, causes Howie to feel lost among the new brand names that pop up on the CVS shelves. As he continues,

he cites a nest of brand references which, along with his personal history of interactions with these brands, alters the texture of Howie's conscious experience, causing new brands to "*feel* raw and unassimilated" (116, italics added). The Flex brand "wore him down," and now any other brand "feels dead" to him, no longer entering his mind as a living, vital, piece of conscious information.

This seemingly minor diminishment of joy is connected, for Howie, to a broader, more all-consuming diminishment, as he worries that the kind of process that has caused him to lose the immediate pleasures of shampoo will eventually "reach some critical point and leave [him] saturated, listless, unable to entertain a single new enthusiasm," a powerless victim of the inexorable march of history (116). The connection that Howie draws between shampoo and this broader loss of enthusiasm is an important example of the kind of significance that seemingly minor details frequently take on in *The Mezzanine*, as well as the importance of the deterministic force of history that Howie sees operating on him and his co-workers. This passage also shows Howie attributing his own emotional condition to abstract, mental entities. The "critical mass" that he posits will be reached by, in his words, "the combined volume of all the miniature histories of miscellanea that have been collecting in parallel in my memory" (116). Note that the "volume" is the subject of the sentence, and that it consists of smaller "histories" which perform the action, in Howie's mind, of "collecting." Howie's description suggests that this action takes place apart from his own intentions and volitions.

In this way, Howie sketches an autobiographical narrative of an individual whose life (as well as the lives of his acquaintances) is shaped by abstract, mechanized systems of interacting forces, including the relentless, intersecting forces of personal and cultural

history. Howie feels that his and his acquaintances' actions are circumscribed and, to some degree, even determined, by such systems. *The Mezzanine*'s stylistic choices, including the strategic use of passive voice, emphasize Howie's belief in determinism by portraying humans as though they have been stripped of agency. Howie also collapses distinctions between such abstract systems and the physical world by describing these systems as though they are concrete entities, while describing people as though they are components of abstract systems. The novel's portrayal of humans as mechanized entities combines with Howie's continuous attribution of emotional significance to objects to collapse conceptual distinctions between the abstractions of human thought and the physical movement of concrete objects. In Howie's (and, by extension, Baker's) world, uniquely human experiences like socialization and emotion enter into systematic relationships with non-human objects. While such a perspective may seem dystopian, Baker's view is, with some exceptions, actually an optimistic one, and he, along with Howie, celebrates the possibilities for objects to carry emotional resonance and for humans to become lost in historically grounded systems of objects.

Loving the Machines

This celebration of cold, mechanical determinism is what lends *The Mezzanine* its own particular brand of emotional affect, an affect peculiar enough that critics such as Simmons have failed to identity it. Simmons's characterization of the novel as a work concerned with surface depth is likely a result of the fact that in *The Mezzanine*, Howie's emotional experiences are inspired so often by his interactions with mechanical entities that are likely to initially appear cold and unemotional to a new reader who has not been

initiated into Howie's particular way of thinking. The fictional world that Baker creates is one which is populated by mechanistic, deterministic systems, systems that are nonetheless lived in and put into use by human characters who register deep emotional responses to them.

On a basic level, this is clearly the case with Howie, as his extended monologues on subjects such as shampoo brands, paper towel dispensers, shoelaces, and straws make clear his deep fascination with the mass-produced, mechanical products of mass culture. On a deeper and more evocative level, however, Howie is not simply interested in these products, but in series of underlying processes which determine the operation and dissemination of these products. Moreover, he reads these kinds of deterministic, mechanical processes into the human behaviors that he observes, both in himself and in others. He is not only interested in the operation of mechanical products, but he desires to affect their mechanistic determinism in the behavior of himself and others. Thus, mechanization, in *The Mezzanine*, is actually a primary cause of Howie's emotional relationship to his surroundings, rather than a deterrent.

The discussion of shoelaces that occupies much of Chapter Two demonstrates the centrality of mechanization to this relationship, as the text makes clear that Howie is interested not simply in shoelaces themselves, but in the mechanistic processes that accompany their use. He notes his wonderment at the consistency of his shoelaces' wear. His right and left shoelaces have each broken "less than two days apart," leading Howie to wonder what it is about his shoe-wearing and/or tying practices that have led the laces to wear so evenly (15). Howie's sense of wonder is part of a larger pattern that recurs

throughout *The Mezzanine* of Howie observing a phenomenon, then trying to decipher the mechanism or process that undergirds said phenomenon.

In this case, Howie envisions his own actions constituting such a process, one that he portrays as operating almost unconsciously, apart from his own will and knowledge. Thinking back on his childhood experiences of learning to tie his shoes, he remembers a moment in which, stopping to retie a loose lace, Howie, in his words,

> found as I retied the shoe that I was doing it automatically, without having to concentrate on it as I had done at first, and, more important, that somewhere over the past year since I had first learned the basic moves, I had evidently evolved two little substeps of my own *that nobody had showed me*. (18, italics original)

Howie notably describes this as a time when he, without any apparent conscious thought, developed a mechanistic, repetitive routine, then retroactively became aware of that routine. His shoe-tying routine evolved, according to him, in an almost automatic way, proceeding of its own accord without any conscious input from his own mind. I am not suggesting here that Howie himself did not play a role in his own show-tying. What I do want to emphasize, however, is that the particular style of Howie's narration emphasizes the automatic qualities of his actions, as he both chooses actions that appear to him automatic and quasi-mechanical (as in his description of the shoe-tying incident) and describes actions in such a way as to emphasize their deterministic elements (as in his description of his workplace lobby).

This emphasis on the mechanistic nature of human actions is consistent with Howie's narration throughout the novel, even recalling a description that occurs earlier in Chapter Two, when Howie remembers the particular feel of his office's carpeting on his

shoeless foot. As he describes it, "my foot had, without any sanction from my conscious will, slipped from the untied shoe and sought out the texture of the carpeting; although now, as I reconstruct the moment, I realize that a more specialized desire was at work as well…" (12). As Howie proceeds to describe the feelings that made him want to slip out of his shoes, it becomes clear that he was driven to this action by the tactile sensation of his foot against the carpet. Howie's description suggests, however, that rather than proceed according to his own feelings and desires, the action happened apart from his "conscious will," and that his foot acted of its own accord (12). By making "foot" the grammatical subject, Howie further suggests that it is his foot, acting independently of his own will, that is responsible for slipping out of the shoe.

Moreover, Howie makes it clear that he not only sees his world (or at least substantial parts of it) as mechanized and deterministic, he actively enjoys and seeks out this kind of determinism, viewing it as something to appreciate and aspire to. As he ponders the "near simultaneity" of his shoelaces' fraying, he concludes that the explanation for their coinciding wear must be that his "shoe-tying routine was so unvarying and robotic," and that "The near simultaneity was very exciting—it made the variables of private life seem suddenly graspable and law-abiding" (15). Howie is attracted to the mechanical, automatic qualities of his actions, actions of which he was, crucially, unaware at the time he performed them. This attraction is grounded not only in the comfort that this routinization affords him; it stems from active enthusiasm and excitement.

Examples of this kind of enthusiasm abound in the text. For instance, Howie makes it clear that he admires the "mechanical ingenuity" of the modern office bathroom,

pointedly wondering, "where but in the corporate bathroom do we witness mechanical engineering in such a pure form?" (72) His evocation of "purity" further reinforces the notion that he views mechanical efficiency as an ideal toward which humans ought continually to strive. This idealization of mechanization is very much a part of Howie's thought processes about himself and his own actions, as well. After finishing tying his shoes, he "watched with interest the fluent, thoughtless fumblings of [his] own hand" (25). He acts as a detached observer of his own body, emphasizing the automatic qualities of that body's movement, which proceeds, according to Howie's description, absent of any thought.

Howie's idealization of mechanization gradually emerges throughout the novel as a defining component of the personal history that he sketches, a history whose arc suggests that Howie has, over time, become increasingly interested in mechanizing his own behavior. This much is suggested by what is perhaps the climactic passage of *The Mezzanine*, in which Howie produces a long table displaying the frequency of thoughts he has per year (127-8). The list demonstrates Howie's desire to quantify even the most ephemeral aspects of his experience, a desire that Howie makes clear when he compares his thought list to the little numbers that appear in his paperbacks, noting that thanks to these numbers, "you feel that your forward progress is confirmed more objectively than when you merely reach a new chapter" (126). Howie wants to see his progress marked in a quantifiable, objective way, in a manner that elides the fuzzy ephemerality of human judgment, subjectivity, and emotion. Of course, this desire for objectivity is clearly an unreachable ideal, as Howie himself makes clear when he comes to the conclusion that "thoughts were too fluid, too difficult to name, and once named to classify, for my

estimate of their relative frequency to mean very much" (128). The course of Howie's musings about his "thought frequency" table encapsulate what I am positing as a key theme of *The Mezzanine*: the desire for mechanized certainty in the face of the unquantifiability of human experience.

Howie's desire for objective measures of personal progress is perhaps best illustrated by a list of eight "major advances" in his life that he periodically refers to. All eight "advances" have at least something to do with instances where Howie was able to alter his behavior to make it more efficient, and the fact of his referring to these instances as "advances" reinforces their status as moments when he made steps toward the ideal of mechanization. The sixth advance, "discovering that sweeping was fun," exemplifies the novel's particular combination of human affect and cold mechanization. Howie expresses palpable enthusiasm for his "advances," and his sense of enthusiasm emerges precisely from his ability to accomplish tasks efficiently. It is important that Howie's list consists not of jubilant, celebratory events (such as weddings, graduations, etc.), but events, including sweeping, that are simple, and that can be completed in a mechanistic fashion similar to his shoe-tying. Howie makes clear the importance of efficiency in producing his happiness when, describing the joy that he takes in sweeping, he quotes things that "Samuel Johnson said about the deadliness of leisure and the uplifting effects of industry" (21). Howie, throughout the novel, expresses greater enthusiasm over industriousness than in fun.

The development, over time, of Howie's enthusiasm for mechanized efficiency, is perhaps best illustrated by his description of his evolving attitudes toward escalators and escalator passengers. He notes that he has, over time, developed the "habit of standing

still and gliding for the entire ride, rather than walking up the steps" of an escalator (100). This habit stands in contrast to earlier times, when Howie was adamant that escalator passengers ought to walk up the escalators, rather than standing still. He felt this way for several reasons, all of which illustrate key tendencies of Howie's thoughts on the relationships between people and machines. One reason is that he feels that the original intent of the escalator's inventor was to assist motion rather than take it over, a feeling that continues a tendency of Howie's to take interest in the human intentions that underlie the invention and implementation of mechanical apparatuses (100).

Another reason has to do with the frustration of waiting behind stationary passengers, a frustration borne not only of sheer impatience, but of Howie's interest in efficiency. He notes his annoyance over the "pattern of sloth and congestion that may persist for hours" which he envisions resulting from others' standing still (101). Finally, Howie envisioned walking up the escalator as an aesthetically pleasing marriage of human intention and machine-like efficiency of movement. He would exhort his fellow riders to "*Feel* your own effortful, bobbing steps melt into the inexhaustible meliorism of the escalator" (101, italics original). His description evokes visions of a kind of blending of intentions, intentions that belong to both the riders and, in Howie's utopian futurism, to the machine itself, as suggested by his attribution of "meliorism" to the escalator. All of Howie's reasons for initially preferring walking to standing still while riding an escalator thus accord with patterns of thought that he demonstrates throughout the novel.

Eventually, however, Howie develops a change of heart, a change also inspired by his interest in mechanical efficiency, an interest that has apparently increased over the course of his lifetime. He notes that now that he is a frequent passenger on the escalator,

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presumably riding it regularly out of job-related necessity, he understands the desire to stand still while riding (101-2). It is important to note here that Howie comes to an appreciation for escalator rides through habit and regularity; just as he appreciates the consistent efficiency of mechanical movement, so does he come to appreciate his own life more when he himself engages in patterns of regular, consistent activity. His appreciation for the escalator also follows from his desire to meld human intention with this mechanical efficiency, and from the joy that he takes in this efficiency. He notes, "My total appreciation for the escalator deepened, eventually becoming embedded along my spinal column," once again suggesting his vision of a glorious melding of man and machine (101). He also describes the stationary escalator ride as a "trance of motorized ascension," a phrase that associates Howie's positive emotions precisely with the mechanical aspects of his environment (102).

It is this joy and appreciation that Howie takes in his mechanized office environment that constitutes the "excess of affect" that I alluded to earlier. *The Mezzanine* is not a book of depthless, postmodern surfaces, but is rather a novel that points toward a particular kind of depth that its protagonist reads into the ephemera of 1980's American office life. My reading of the novel demonstrates that not only does Howie enjoy his interactions with mechanical, mass-produced objects; it is the very fact of this mechanization that makes them attractive to him. Howie revels in the mechanical determinacy of his surroundings, and he does what he can to impose this determinacy on his social environment, portraying his co-workers, and even himself, as mechanized entities with little-to-no choice in how they run their lives. While the notion of an entirely

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mechanized world is clearly a fantasy, *The Mezzanine* portrays a singular mind for whom

this fantasy holds an unyielding attraction.

Chapter Four: David Foster Wallace's Private Prison

In a well-publicized commencement speech delivered at Kenyon College, David Foster Wallace narrates his vision of an "average adult day." He describes a scene in which a hypothetical person, after a long day at work, goes to a supermarket and experiences a multitude of minor frustrations of a type that regularly occur in large, corporate American stores: bad lighting, annoying music, crowds, etc. Wallace concludes his description by stating that such an experience is frustrating, "Because my natural default setting is the certainty that situations like this are really about me. About MY hungriness and MY fatigue and MY desire to just get home, and it's going to seem for all the world like everybody else is just in my way" (6). The ostensible purpose of this hypothetical anecdote is to demonstrate Wallace' belief in the importance of choosing what one pays attention to. He believes that the nondescript individual featured in this scene can reduce their frustration by choosing to think about their surroundings differently and paying less attention to their own ill feelings.

While Wallace's intentions in this speech were to deliver the kinds of reassuring platitudes typical of a college commencement, I want to point out that the scenario Wallace sketches demonstrates a tendency in his thought that recurs throughout his writing: namely, the tendency to see an individual's mind as somehow separate, or detached, from the surrounding social world. Wallace believed that consciousness was an individualized phenomenon: that an individual's thoughts exist in a closed-off space,

detached from others' minds. He makes this belief clear in an interview with Laura Miller, in which he says, "there is this existential loneliness in the real world. I don't know what you're thinking or what it's like inside you and you don't know what it's like inside me" (62). Wallace was preoccupied by this sense of separation between minds, by what he perceived as a lack of access that people have to others' thoughts. He tended to treat the issue of mental access as both an emotional problem, as suggested by his reference to "existential loneliness," and as a moral problem, as suggested by his supermarket scene.

Wallace's belief in the inherent loneliness of consciousness is informed by his perspective on language, as he often demonstrated a belief that language's capacity for people to express thoughts to one another is essentially limited. His interest in such linguistic limitations finds expression in his thoughts about Wittgenstein, a philosopher in whom he maintained an interest throughout his writing career. Speaking to Larry McCaffrey about Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Wallace summarizes the book's argument as follows: "In order for language both to be meaningful and to have some connection to reality, words like *tree* and *house* have to be like little pictures, representations of real trees and houses. Mimesis. But nothing more. Which means we can know and speak of nothing more than little mimetic pictures. Which divides us, metaphysically and forever, from the external world" (44). Wallace notes that Wittgenstein "trashed" this argument in his later work, in order to develop a community-based model of language as a "function of relationships between persons" (44). However, Wittgenstein's repudiations of his early work did not entirely satisfy Wallace, who tells McCaffrey, "we're still stuck with the

idea that there is this world of referents out there that we can never really join or know because we're stuck in here, in language" (44).

Wallace's choice of the word "stuck" is revealing, suggesting as it does a vision of language as a kind of prison. This, I argue, is the central informing image of Wallace's fiction. Wallace viewed consciousness as just such a prison, cut off from society by what he saw as the limitations of language. The feelings of anomie, isolation, alienation, and depression that pervade his work are products of this viewpoint. Wallace himself tended to ascribe these feelings to widespread social causes, often speaking in generalities about moods and ideologies that he saw pervading America, his particular generation, or both. In his interview with McCaffrey, he states, "If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough" (26). Wallace envisioned his fiction as mirroring contemporary society by depicting the difficulty of being human. However, it would be more accurate to state that his fiction mirrors his own particular vision of this difficulty. Wallace tended to perpetuate a narrative that suggested that contemporary times presented unique difficulties for humans' emotional lives, a narrative threaded throughout his fiction.

Related to this narrative is Wallace's tendency to generalize the psychological travails of vast national or generational entities. In a harsh critique of John Updike, Wallace compares his generation to Updike's, stating that where Updike's generation feared social conformity, "Today's sub-40s have different horrors, prominent among which are anomie and solipsism and a peculiarly American loneliness" ("Certainly" 54). These horrors can more accurately be ascribed to Wallace himself than to Generation X-

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ers or Americans generally, as the loneliness and anomie he discusses here are the same

feelings he mentions in countless interviews and depicts in his fiction. Wallace described

his own role as a writer as something of a cultural doctor, diagnosing and finding cures

for widespread social ills; he even refers to the role of art as "CPR" in his interview with

McCaffrey (26). Critics have tended to support this view, as both Stephen J. Burn and

Marshall Boswell, Wallace's two most prominent academic critics, refer to selections of

the author's work as a "diagnosis" of various elements of American culture (8,

Understanding 65). I argue, by contrast, that any cultural diagnoses implied by his fiction

are outgrowths of Wallace's assumptions about the isolated nature of consciousness and

the emotional valence he attaches to these assumptions.

At the same time as he views language as isolating consciousness, Wallace

paradoxically sees it as the means through which people are able to escape this isolation.

Speaking to Miller about "existential loneliness," he states, "In fiction I think we can leap

over that wall [of loneliness] itself in a certain way" (62).[8] Wallace's goal in his fiction

was to forge emotional bonds with his readers and to battle against what he saw as the

self-alienation built into consciousness and language. He regarded language as both a trap

from which human consciousness can never fully escape and the very thing that people

can use to escape from that trap. This belief informs his characters who, similarly to

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[8] Similarly, he tells Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk,

> I think all good writing somehow addresses the concern of and acts as a anodyne against
> loneliness. We're all terribly, terribly lonely. And there's a way, at least in prose fiction, that can
> allow you to be intimate with the world and with a mind and with characters that you just can't be
> in the real world. I don't know what you're thinking. I don't know that much about you as I don't
> know that much about my parents or my lover or my sister, but a piece of fiction that's really true
> allows you to be intimate with…I don't want to say people, but it allows you to be intimate with a
> world that resembles our own in enough emotional particulars so that the way different things
> must feel is carried out with us into the real world. I think what I would like my stuff to do is make
> people less lonely. (16)

Wallace himself, feel themselves unable to communicate with or understand other people, yet try desperately to do so. This goal of using communication to stave off loneliness is the basis for Wallace's unabashed moralism, perhaps the defining quality of his fiction. Wallace, famously among his critics, advocated the espousal of "single-entendre principles": direct, possibly even sentimental statements that would counter the stance of ironic detachment Wallace saw as endemic to contemporary American life ("E Unibus" 192). This commitment to direct statement and moral purpose informed not only Wallace's fiction, but critical interpretations of his writing, as well. In fact, much of the critical literature surrounding Wallace focuses on what critics see as his moral acuity and urgency. In "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline," Adam Kelly elucidates this morally centered strain of criticism. Kelly also argued in a later essay that Wallace is a "novelist[] of ideas," implying that Wallace ought to be read in order to understand the abstract concepts depicted in his fiction ("David Foster Wallace and the Novel of Ideas" 3). This type of critical approach is also carried out by major Wallace critics such as Boswell and Burn.

I argue that Wallace's interest in "single-entendre principles" derives from his particular sense of consciousness as isolated from the social world. Wallace's belief that language was inherently limited and that its limitations isolated people from one another meant that he felt that using words to communicate ideas, the very task of the author, was an act of intense difficulty.[9] For Wallace, this difficulty goes hand-in-hand with what he believed to be the over-prevalence of irony in contemporary culture. He outlines this

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[9] Wallace's sense of communication as inherently fraught with uncertainty may explain his writer's block. As described in D.T. Max's biography, Wallace worked on his third novel, *The Pale King*, from the 1996 publication of *Infinite Jest* up until his 2008 death, but was unable to complete it. Max's biography contains multiple mentions of Wallace throwing away pages from the novel out of frustration.

stance in "E Unibus Pluram" (described in Kelly's "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author" as an "artistic manifesto"), in which he argues that the self-conscious narrative stances that defined postmodern metafiction (as exemplified, in the essay, by John Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse") had pervaded mainstream culture, and that the antidote to ironic distance was sincere engagement, or as Wallace put it, "reverence and conviction" (193). Wallace's career-long battle against irony was in many ways a quixotic quest, and I want to suggest that his preoccupation with the intentional self-consciousness of writers like Barth was largely a projection of the persistent, nagging self-consciousness that Wallace felt in his own life and depicted in his fiction. The metafictional techniques employed by Barth (and countless other writers) are designed to detach a story's narrating consciousness from the narrative itself. Wallace saw this detachment as more generally pervasive in human thought, viewing consciousness as necessarily detached from the events it perceives.

This sense of detachment pervades nearly all of Wallace's fiction, but finds particularly acute expression in *Oblivion*, his 2004 short story collection. *Oblivion* is, as Boswell has pointed out, arguably the "bleakest" of Wallace's books ("The Constant Monologue" 151). This bleakness derives from the degree to which the book's protagonists are isolated, at the level of consciousness, from other people. While Wallace frequently depicts characters who are alone in their minds, the stories of *Oblivion* takes this loneliness further, often evoking their protagonists' utter, inevitable hopelessness in their attempts to form social bonds with others. The book exemplifies Wallace's moral commitments to the value of sincerity and communication. It also, I argue, demonstrates the ways in which these moral commitments derive from Wallace's assumptions about

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the mind's isolation. The characters of *Oblivion* express (sometimes almost verbatim) Wallace's own anxieties about human consciousness, the feeling that one is somehow "trapped" by the limitations of language and perception. The stories frequently read as moral allegories, but their true value, I argue, lies in their expression of authorial angst.

A Loss for Words

One of the ways in which *Oblivion* expresses Wallace's belief in the individualized nature of consciousness is through repeated instances of characters' inability to communicate their thoughts and feelings. The connection Wallace saw between individualized consciousness and communicative difficulties is expressed most explicitly in *Oblivion* by the character of Neal in "Good Old Neon," who laments what he sees as the inherent "fraudulence" of the human condition when he states, "And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction [of self] anyone ever sees? Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part [other people] see if you know it's only a part" (179). These lines evoke anxieties about self-presentation that were apparently actually felt by Wallace, who "was intensely concerned with his public image" (Kindley).[10] Neal's

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[10] Indications of such anxieties abound. For example, in a letter to Elizabeth Wurtzel, Wallace wrote,

> I go through a loop in which I notice all the ways I am self-centered and careerist and not true to standards and values that transcend my own petty interests, and feel like I'm not one of the good ones. But then I countenance the fact that at least here I am worrying about it, noticing all the ways I fall short of integrity, and I imagine that maybe people without any integrity at all don't notice or worry about it; so then I feel better about myself. It's all very confusing. I think I'm very honest and candid, but I'm also proud of how honest and candid I am--so where does that put me? (qtd. in Lipsky 175).

This kind of self-reflexive fussiness over appearances emerges in multiple interviews, including Wallace's 1997 televised interview with Charlie Rose. Images of anxiety related to self-presentation also abound in Wallace's fiction, including in the story "My Appearance" (from *Girl with Curious Hair*), in which a minor celebrity is coached before her appearance on a late-night talk show, or an extended, speculative

statements also trace the cause of this anxiety back to Wallace's feeling that an unbreachable chasm exists between a person's thoughts and others' perceptions. Acting as a mouthpiece for the author, Neal extrapolates the basic fact that a person cannot express to others every single facet of his personality, thinking that the inevitable result of this incomplete knowledge is a kind of "fraudulence" in human behavior and presentation.

Whereas Neal, who is characterized as a socially savvy extrovert, is obsessed with the "fraudulence" that results from donning multiple personalities and identities, other characters in *Oblivion* are rendered as having a more basic, yet more pressing problem, which is that they are simply unable to make their thoughts understood to others. Wallace embodies this inability in a physiognomic image in the story "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," which is narrated by a man whose mother, according to himself, underwent a botched plastic surgery that "caused her to look *insanely frightened* at all times" (182, italics original). The mother underwent a second surgery that only made her condition worse, leaving her with an expression that the narrator describes as "a *chronic mask of insane terror*" (182). Naturally, this becomes a problem, as others tend to interpret the mother's face as indicating feelings of fear, or are least uncertain of how to read her expressions, regardless of what she is actually feeling. She thus manifests in physical form the anxiety of self-presentation expressed by Neal. Both characters, in their own ways, reflect Wallace's preoccupations with the inherent limitations of self-expression.

The title of the story is meant to recall Richard Rorty's philosophical book of the same name, which, in Rorty's words, refers to his argument that, "The picture that holds

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description in *Infinite Jest* of the invention of the video phone, which causes widespread self-consciousness among telephone users.

traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods" (12). In other words, Rorty is critical of the notion that the human mind simply reflects reality. The thematic connection with Wallace's story emerges through the image of the mother's face. Just as Rorty is skeptical of the mind's ability to reflect nature, so does Wallace, in his story, want to convince his audience to be skeptical of the ability of the mother's face to reflect her inner emotions. Greg Carlisle believes that the story's parallels with Rorty lie in themes of self-absorption, stating, "Wallace's characters highlight the fact that we resist adapting our beliefs, that we fear the potentially negative reactions of others, and that we feel the pull of the isolating comfort of our mirror-gazing" (91). I argue here that the story's connections with Rorty have less to do with what Carlisle calls "mirror-gazing," and more to do with the ways in which truth is negotiated in Wallace's fictional world. Rorty pushes his readers to see "*conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood" (389, italics original). Similarly, Wallace's story presents a vision of truth as negotiated through interpretations of events, and the mutability of truth is, for Wallace, another root cause of the anxiety and alienation that attend the difficulty of self-expression.

The mirror also appears in the story in a more direct form, in a scene where the narrator describes his mother's first view of her inanimate face after plastic surgery. As he relays the incident,

> They [presumably the doctors] brought her the mirror and the first surgery's
> bandages came off then one could at first not ascertain whether the face's
> expression was a reaction to what she saw in the mirror or if it itself was what she

saw and this was the stimulus causing the noises. Mother…could herself not

ascertain at first if the look of insane terror was the response or the stimulus. (185)

Like many of the images that populate Wallace' writing, this is an exaggerated gag that,

in its exaggeration, evokes the author's mindset. Wallace often went through elaborate

verbal contortions to control his image, suggesting an unceasing self-consciousness of his

uncertainty about others' perceptions of his public persona.[11] Such uncertainty is

reflected (no pun intended) in the mother's mirror-gazing, to which nobody, not even she,

knows how to react. This uncertainty reverberates around the room, since one person's

interpretation (or misinterpretation) is based on another's interpretation, which is based

on another's, ad infinitum. Just as in Rorty's conversational model of truth, the reaction

to the mother's face is reached through shifting, unstable, negotiations.

This anxiety over the negotiated aspects of truth informs the story's main plot,

which involves legal problems that the narrator has faced as a result of his role in the

injury of a young boy. The injury was caused by a collection of dangerous spiders that

the narrator keeps in his garage. At some point, the boy fell through the roof of the garage

and into the area where the spiders were being held. Descriptions of this incident appear

sporadically, through the narrator's asides and non sequiturs, suggesting that he wants to

avoid talking about the injury but cannot stop thinking about it. He mounts unprovoked

defenses for his role in this incident, noting that he did not "have anything against the boy

in any way," and that "it is quite a stretch to say that an area of weakness in a twenty-

year-old garage roof equals failing to exercise due diligence or care" (184, 186). Just as

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[11] To take one example, Max's biography recounts an incident after the publication of his first novel in which Wallace asked a college friend "to plant the good news with their class agent for the Amherst newsletter, 'not, of course, letting her know that I requested or even endorsed your doing so'" (67). This description resonates with numerous incidents from Wallace's life and fiction, which often depicts characters who work extra hard to control the ways in which others interpret their communicative acts.

his mother is unable to convince anyone else (including herself) about the true nature of her emotions, so has the narrator found that he has been unable to make his interpretation of the spider incident convincing in court. While the narrator believes that his story reflects the reality of what happened to the boy, the story that holds up in court is negotiated through conversation in such a way as to implicate the narrator, who was "released in late 1996," presumably from jail (182). The image of the court system expresses a sense of anxiety of the possibility of being taken to task for a truth that has been publicly negotiated, and which directly contradicts one's own subjective sense of that truth.

The image of a woman with a fixed facial expression, so prominent in "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature," recurs in *Oblivion*, in the story "The Suffering Channel." "The Suffering Channel" follows a journalist named Skip Atwater, whose "best regarded piece ever so far" in his career is an article about a "little girl in Upland CA [who] had been born with an unpronounceable neurological condition whereby she could not form facial expressions" (300). While the image is not central to the plot of the story, Atwater's interest in the story does indicate his own repressed psychological makeup. The journalist is characterized as milquetoast in the extreme, a caricature of blandness who is "all but celibate," and, in his journalistic work, has "no innate sense of tragedy," is "all upbeat angle" (271, 270). This pent-up personality is a recurring type in *Oblivion*, and its persistent emergence further suggests Wallace's preoccupation with what he sees as the closed-off nature of human subjectivity.[12]

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[12] As Chad Harbach notes,

> Whereas much of Wallace's work has been marked by an exuberant willingness to adopt the accents and idiolects of culturally, racially, sexually, and economically diverse characters, it's

The character who best embodies this type, and who is most indicative of

Wallace's despair over subjectivity, is Terry Schmidt, corporate focus group facilitator

and lead character of "Mister Squishy." Schmidt, like Atwater, is a sort of generic

ineffectual American straight white male character type, one who is both competent (but

not necessarily stellar) at his job and incompetent in matters social and sexual. He is a

devoted professional whose adherence to corporate codes of conduct, in addition to his

own lack of self-assurance, renders him ineffectual, both in terms of his personality and

in terms of his ability to affect change in his surroundings. This type is part of a more

general, and generic, Wallace critique of the dehumanizing aspects of the American

corporate world. The story, originally published in 2000, is thematically similar to

Hollywood films of the same period such as *American Beauty* and *Fight Club*, offering a

formulaic satire of the white-collar workplace as a place of conformity and tedium. In

"Mister Squishy," this critique is directly related to Wallace's assumptions about the

separateness of individuals' minds. Schmidt is dehumanized and repressed because his

own thoughts and desires are so distinct from the public role that he plays as a corporate

drone.

Moreover, Schmidt's repression is portrayed as a product of the way that his mind

amplifies his inability to change the physical world. In Wallace's world, thoughts tend to

fester. Existing in a mind that perceives, yet is not entirely part of, the social world, these

thoughts take on a life of their own and overwhelm their owners. Schmidt internalizes his

surprisingly easy to construct a composite sketch of *Oblivion*'s several protagonists: he is a flabby, heterosexual male in his late thirties, with a midlevel corporate job, a beleaguered or nonexistent love life, a habit of curling scare-quotes around a few too many of his words, and a vocabulary that Wallace himself would no doubt describe as "literally incredible." He has probably been through therapy, and he may, beneath his guise of placid normalcy, be contemplating suicide or murder.

social failures until his thoughts about those failures take over and finally overwhelm his entire self-concept. Schmidt's social failure is made clear by his relationship to a co-worker named Darlene Lilley. He harbors recurring sexual fantasies about Lilley, and he dreams of "tak[ing] off his public mask and open[ing] his heart to her" (33). His social impotence, however, continuously causes him to put off calling his workplace crush. He remembers an incident in which he heard some co-workers making fun of Lilley's physical appearance, to which he had only been "outraged enough to have come very very close indeed to confronting [these co-workers] directly" (50). This sense of social impotence manifests in a fantasy of Schmidt's, in which he and Lilley "hav[e] high-impact intercourse on the firms' conference tables [while] Schmidt kept finding himself saying *Thank you, oh thank you* in rhythm to the undulatory thrusting motions of the coitus" (53-4, italics original). The fear being expressed here is that social failure is not simply situational, but is actually a more generalizable condition. In other words, Schmidt does not simply fail to initiate a relationship with Lilley; his failure is actually a part of his identity. For Wallace, social problems become more insidious when they are also psychological problems, as his sense of thoughts as self-perpetuating entities leads him to portray the mind as an amplifier of distress.

Schmidt's internalization of his own failure is made most clear in an extended description of his relationship to the story's title character. "Mister Squishy" is a corporate mascot of the snack cake manufacturer for whom Schmidt is currently working. The mascot becomes an avatar for Schmidt's self-concept, as the text notes that sometimes when shaving in the morning,

[Schmidt] would look at his face and at the faint lines and pouches that seemed to

grow a little more pronounced each quarter and would call himself, directly to his

mirrored face, *Mister Squishy*…when he thought of himself now it was as

something he called *Mister Squishy*, and his own face and the plump and wholly

innocuous icon's face tended to bleed in his mind into one face. (33-4, italics

original)

This passage brings together Wallace's dual aims in the story, of simultaneously

producing a critique of media and corporate culture while profiling the emasculated

American male. The intersection of Schmidt's mental state with the Mister Squishy

character demonstrates Wallace's sense of the transformative effects of the isolated mind

in the face of the global reach of mass culture. The false promises of marketers, cloaked

in the guises of friendly, innocuous characters, are transformed into indicators of

psychological failures. Schmidt's mind, cut off from social interaction (or at least from

the kind that occurs outside of the workplace), produces harrowing visions of its own

powerlessness.

A connection exists between Schmidt and the unnamed narrator of "Philosophy of

the Mirror of Nature." Both find that their inability to communicate their desires and their

visions of the world exacerbate their sense of isolation from other people. This isolation

causes them to develop subjective visions of reality that become personally harmful.

Schmidt's lack of self-confidence metastasizes into an all-consuming psychological

roadblock. The narrator of "Philosophy," by contrast, possesses an unrealistic confidence,

believing in his own vision of the truth even when it doesn't jibe with reality. In both

cases, Wallace casts his own sense of the incommunicability of mental states as a powerful force of social isolation.

Misperception

Characters in *Oblivion* not only find themselves unable to communicate thoughts and feelings to others; they also find themselves unable to accurately perceive important elements of the world around them, an inability that is tied to Wallace's conception of consciousness as isolated from the social and physical realms. Wallace's characters don't simply fail to notice their surroundings, but are trapped in their own minds, cut off from a meaningful understanding of their own realities. Wallace allegorizes this vision of consciousness in the story "The Soul Is not a Smithy," the text of which consists of its unnamed narrator's recollection of an incident that occurred when he was a student in a fourth grade civics class in 1960, in which a group of his peers flees a murderous substitute teacher.[13] The narrator is characterized primarily by his tendency to focus on information that is not particularly relevant to his immediate surroundings. For example, though he is unable to read, he is able, with savant-like acuity, to "supply a certain amount of specific quantitative information" about the printed words on a page, including the numbers of words per page and line, and even the numbers of occurrences of specific letters (72). Similarly, when he is sitting in class, he is unable to pay attention to his lessons, focusing instead on creating stories that he imagines being played out in the wire

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[13] The title is likely a reference to the penultimate line of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (224). I interpret Wallace's title as an acknowledgement that the story's narrator fails to encounter the reality of his own experience. Wallace named Joyce's novel as a favorite in an interview with Laura Miller (62).

frames of the classroom windows. He continues to do this even when his fellow students flee the classroom out of fear of their teacher.

The narrator thus remains deeply tethered to his personal, subjective, imaginative vision, even as chaos unfolds around him. Wallace conveys the narrator's sense of being lost in fantasy through two formal decisions. First, his narration deemphasizes the incident involving the substitute teacher, instead focusing mainly on a fantasy scenario occurring only in the narrator's mind, in which a young girl named Ruthie loses her dog. By focusing on this fantasy scenario in depth, Wallace conveys the story through his character's distracted mind, to the point where the actual events of the story are heavily obscured. Second, Wallace generally has his narrator phrase the facts of the story as second-hand, rather than directly experienced, pieces of information. The narration consists of statements that the narrator has either heard from somebody else or recalled reading in a newspaper after the incident occurred. By contrast, information about his fantasy scenarios is presented directly, firsthand. The second-hand quality of the narration amplifies the sense that the most significant events of the story occur outside of the narrator's direct conscious experience, and that the narrator is lost in a fantasy world.

This second-hand narration makes clear that the narrator's interpretations of the story's main events develop independently of the events themselves. He states, "Only much later would I understand that the incident at the chalkboard in Civics was likely to be the most dramatic and exciting event I would ever be involved in in my life," making clear that the event became meaningful only after the fact (69). The story's meaning develops through gradual accumulation in the narrator's consciousness, when the events themselves are only a memory, a fact accentuated by the narrator's statement that he

"received the full story so many times from classmates and authorities and the *Dispatch* [the local newspaper] that in memory it nearly feels as if I were present as a full witness from the beginning" (85). He actually gains a fuller sense of presence from these second-hand accounts than he did from being physically present at the event. He was so detached from the proceedings that these retellings feel more real than the event itself.

This sense of detachment from real-world events is an emotional register toward which Wallace consistently aims in *Oblivion*, especially in the story "Oblivion," which is narrated by a man named Randall who is embroiled in a fight with his wife, Hope. Hope alleges that Randall's snoring is keeping her awake at night, while Randall insists that Hope is only dreaming, and that he has not, in fact, been snoring at all. The scenario manifests Wallace's despair in individuals' lack of access to a reality outside of their subjective points of view, and the couple's disagreement becomes an intractable, increasingly bitter battle. Neither spouse is able to obtain an objective perspective on the situation, each remaining trapped in their individual perspectives. The dream imagery that permeates the story and forms the crux of its plot externalizes Wallace's anxieties about subjectivity, as dreams are, by nature, deeply subjective experiences. I argue that Wallace uses this story to draw connections between dreams and waking life, and that these connections derive from his assumption of the irreconcilability of subjectivity and reality. For Wallace, waking life is apparently akin to living in a dream world, closed off from the concrete facts of life, and "Oblivion" dramatizes this vision.

This closed-off quality of Wallace's vision of consciousness is most clearly demonstrated in a scene in which Randall, narrating the story, discusses his marital problems with a therapist. When the therapist continuously presses Randall to explain

why the sleeping issue is so important to him, Randall claims that the problem actually

has little to do with sleep. Instead, as he puts it,

> The real issue is that it's bizarre, surreal, an almost literal "waking nightmare."
>
> My wife is now no one I know. She's claiming to know better than I myself
>
> whether I'm even awake. It's less unfair than seemingly almost totally insane. I
>
> know whether I'm sitting here having these exchanges. I know I am not dreaming
>
> this. To doubt this is insane. But this, to all appearances, is what she's doing.
>
> (210)

Randall claims that his concern is his wife's persistent claims to objective interpretations

of facts, when in fact, she is relying on her own, subjective interpretation, unwilling "to

entertain at least the possibility" that her point of view is wrong (206). The irony is that

Randall is doing the very same thing of which he accuses Hope. He claims to know

exactly when he is sleeping and when he is awake.

At one point, the therapist even questions him on this very matter, asking "How

can you even know for certain whether you snore or not? If you are snoring, then by

definition you're asleep" (208). Randall eventually responds by once again insisting that

he is not asleep during Hope's accusations. Wallace uses the therapist as an audience

cypher, hinting at the inconsistencies that litter Randall's accounts of the facts. The

therapist continues to deflate Randall's recollections, asking whether he may be

"stubborn or blind" about the sleeping issue and pointing out that Randall is

"getting…upset" (209, 208). Randall's continuous denials, his stubbornness, and his

escalating temper all suggest that he is becoming increasingly set in his worldview,

digging in his heels in an effort to defend his position and win the argument against his

wife. His defensiveness signals a further irony in his behavior, mirroring his own earlier statements that Hope demonstrated "a further entrenchment or 'hardening' in her own position—the essence of her position being that I myself was being irrationally 'stubborn' and 'untrusting' of what she could plainly hear with her own two ears" (203).

Randall's narration suggests that both he and Hope are becoming more and more deeply enmeshed in their subjective points of view, evoking Wallace's vision of subjectivity as an isolating trap. The dream imagery further evokes the depths of this subjectivity. Hope and Randall each claim that the other's perception of reality is only a dream. Each claims, in other words, that the other is presenting an entirely subjective vision of the truth with no basis in fact. The intractability of their perspectives leads the couple to have their sleep patterns studied at a sleep center, at which point the center's doctors reveal that both have, in fact, been sleeping. Wallace resolves the couple's dispute by further suggesting that his characters' subjective visions have no hope of reconciliation, and that each is doomed to exist in their own mental world.

As in "The Soul Is not a Smithy," Wallace chooses to enact this sense of isolating subjectivity through limited first-person narration. Just as readers are given access, in "The Soul," to the narrator's personal fantasies as they obscure his teacher's threats, so are they given access to Randall's version of events at the expense of Hope's. In "Oblivion," the limited perspective encourages us to mistrust Randall and to recognize the ways in which he is becoming increasingly tethered to his own, biased perspective. Such mistrust is suggested by his scenes with the therapist. Thus, even though Hope and Randall share a blindness to each other's point of view, Wallace clearly wants readers to bring a higher level of scrutiny to Randall's perspective. Wallace believes, after all, that

one's subjective perspective is inherently misleading, and he casts his most critical eye on the characters whose subjectivity is rendered in the most detail.

The story's ending deepens the sense of unreliability and uncertainty surrounding the story's portrayal of subjectivity. In something of a plot twist cliché, Wallace suddenly interrupts the story's main narrative with the following dialogue:

> "*up*. Wake up, for the love of."
>
> "God. My God I was having."
>
> "Wake up."
>
> "Having the worst dream."
>
> "I should certainly say you were."
>
> "It was awful. It just went on and on."
>
> "I shook you and shook you and." (237)

The dialogue proceeds for about a page, with the first speaker eventually referring to the second as "Hope," making clear that the entire story has actually been Hope's dream. The ending thus recasts all of Randall's narration as figments of Hope's subconscious mind. Interpreters read this ending in various ways. Wyatt Mason suggests that Hope's dream expresses "worries over going to a sleep clinic, turmoil over whether she is dreaming or waking," and states that, "the husband she inhabited in her dream, whom her mind painted as vile, whose true nature we will never know, is here now by her bedside, trying to soothe her."

The truth of the story is less clear, however, and the story itself suggests the possibility that Hope is experiencing something much more serious than anxieties about sleep. Greg Carlisle points out that the story strongly hints at the possibility that Randall

has raped Hope's daughter (who is, of course, also his own stepdaughter), Audrey, and

that, furthermore, Hope has been sexually abused by her own father.[14] Carlisle also notes

that the person next to whom Hope wakes up may, in fact, not even be Randall at all, and

may even be Hope's father. This possibility is suggested by some of the story's final

lines, which begin with Hope as she speaks with the unnamed person sharing her bed:

> "Wait—am I even married?"

> "Please don't start all this again."

> "And who's this Audrey?"

> "Just go on back to sleep now."

> "And what's that—Daddy?" (237)

Of course, these lines may also suggest that Hope is simply disoriented upon waking up

from her dream. Ultimately, Carlisle argues that Hope's dream expresses the trauma she

has experienced due to her father's abuse, as well as her denial of that trauma and her

desire to repress it.

I would not say that Carlisle is necessarily wrong about this story, but I do argue

that the reality of Hope's situation is fairly unimportant to the story, subordinated as it is

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[14] Such hints are numerous, and they become more prevalent as the story progresses, suggesting that thoughts of abuse gradually intrude into Hope's dream world. Randall experiences a "momentary, hallucinatory 'flash' or vision of our Audrey supine in a beached canoe and myself [*sic*] straining piston-like above her" (212). He mentions that after she left for college, "Audrey was no longer at home to 'preoccupy' me or serve as the 'focus of [my] affections'" (225). At the very least, the Randall featured in the story's dream world lusts after Audrey. He mentions driving to her college to stare into her dorm room (223-4). When he recalls giving Audrey driving lessons, he focuses on "the noisome sound of her breathing and shapes of her leg" (231). Randall also hints at Hope's father's relationship to his own daughters, Hope and Vivian, recalling that during one conversation,

> in his pale eyes was what sometimes looked or appeared to be the terrible stepfatherly knowledge of what our Audrey could have been to me, perhaps as Hope—as well as Vivian…—had once served as or been to himself; and it was not at all difficult to conceive almost at will a low angle image or vision or nightmarish 'shot' of his prone face just above, engorged and straining, one well freckled right hand clamped tight over Hope or Vivian…beneath him's [*sic*] open mouth, and his crushing weight thoroughly and terribly adult. (214)

to the emotional imagery of her dream scenario. As in "The Soul Is not a Smithy,"

Wallace's intent is to render what he sees as the isolated world of individual

consciousness. He wants his readers to experience Hope's feelings, not her real life.

Whether or not Hope has actually been abused, the abuse scenarios alluded to in her

dreams clearly express a sense of fear and marginalization. I want to suggest the

possibility that Wallace intended the abuse hinted at in "Oblivion" as not necessarily

(though possibly) indicative of real-life abuse, but certainly indicative of some deep-

seated anxiety related to Hope's interpersonal relationships.[15]

One indication that Hope's concerns may, in fact, be with matters less life-altering

than sexual abuse is that her dream frequently fixates on her own aging and loss of

physical attractiveness. Within the dream world, Randall refers to "Hope's dry, dark,

narrow, increasingly haggard face" (205). In an extended description of changes in

Hope's appearance, he notes that "recent years had not been...'kind' with respect to

Hope's gynecic or womanly charms or appeal," describing her as having undergone a

"'weazening' or desiccation, her skin toughening and becoming in places leathery in

appearance" (217-8). Hope's dream clearly expresses concerns about her own aging and

appearance. While the story leaves open the possibility that Hope has been abused by her

father, it also leaves open the possibility that Randall's abuse, as described in the dreams,

is simply an expression of deep-seated anxiety over her own desirability, that she

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[15] The story is, in this regard, remarkably similar to David Lynch's film *Mulholland Drive*. In Lynch's film, the main narrative is revealed to be a character's dream, recasting the majority of the film as expressions of that character's subconscious. Wallace was an acknowledged Lynch fan, and he published an article on Lynch in *Premiere* magazine in 1996 (The article was later reprinted in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*). *Mulholland Drive* was released in 2001, a few years before "Oblivion" was first published. It is therefore quite likely that Wallace was writing under the influence of the film when he composed "Oblivion."

imagines the worst possible way in which her husband could leave her for a younger woman.

The dream also contains a great deal of language that emasculates Randall, suggesting that the dream expresses Hope's deep, long-repressed anger against her spouse/partner (who may or may not be Randall; again, Hope's real-world bedside partner is unnamed). Randall is portrayed as sensitive and emotionally soft, in contrast with the hard, strong-willed Hope. After fighting with Hope, his "hands sometimes literally trembled or shook with frustration and fatigue related disorientation" (205-6). Dream-world Randall also notes that "conflict or argument was more difficult or 'harder' on myself than on either Hope…or Audrey" (222). While Hope's dream never truly resolves the conflict between herself and Randall, it does suggest that on an emotional level, the dream-world Hope is stronger than the dream-world Randall. Her dream also highlights the fact that Randall, "as a child…had evidently sucked or 'nursed' at [his] own thumb" (216). Randall, for all his stubbornness and anger, is still a small, petty child at heart.

Ultimately, the Hope-Randall conflict, as dreamed by Hope herself, evokes deep personal feelings of anger and insecurity. Wallace's goal in "Oblivion," as in "The Soul Is not a Smithy," is to immerse readers in the character's subjective experience, loading these characters' perspectives with hyper-emotional language while shutting out the rest of the fictional world. This shutting out of reality demonstrates Wallace's conception of consciousness as utterly distinct from its surroundings. His stories isolate consciousness from material and social worlds to an extreme degree, demonstrating deep anxiety over

the possibility that this isolation renders people unable to accurately perceive the very worlds in which they live.

Self-Consciousness in *Oblivion*

This sense of the mind's isolation, so prevalent throughout Wallace's work, exists in a mutually amplifying relationship with his interest in self-consciousness. Wallace's sense of consciousness as isolated from the surrounding world leads him to depict self-consciousness as a debilitating psychological problem, as the prevalence and intensity of his characters' self-consciousness heightens their feelings of isolation from society and culture, an effect that runs throughout the stories of *Oblivion*. Wallace, who publicly endorsed what he saw as the virtues of banality and sincere, "single-entendre values," was ambivalent about engaging in self-knowledge or self-questioning, and this ambivalence manifests in his characters' debilitating senses of self-consciousness ("E Pluribus," 192-3). His generally bourgeoisie, highly educated protagonists are intelligent enough to question themselves and to gain high levels of awareness of their own minds, but it is this intelligence that renders them depressed and socially impotent. Marshall Boswell addresses the role of self-consciousness in Wallace's fiction when he notes that several of his stories deal with "doubling self-consciousness, what 'David Wallace' describes…as 'line[s] of thought' that turn into paralyzing 'inbent spiral[s]'" ("The Constant Monologue" 157).[16] What Boswell describes here is the process through which Wallace's characters' thoughts turn in on themselves, as those characters focus attention on their own minds at the expense of attention to the outside world. In other words, these

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[16] Boswell places the name "David Wallace" in quotation marks, because he is quoting the fictionalized version of Wallace that appears in the novel *The Pale King*.

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characters think so much about their own thoughts that they begin to shut out what is happening around them, leading to what Boswell describes as "paralysis." My analysis of *Oblivion* connects this paralysis with Wallace's broader conceptual separation of mind and world. The book's depictions of paralyzing self-consciousness derive from this separation, as well as heighten it.

While Wallace portrayed self-consciousness as particularly endemic to highly educated people, his fiction also suggests that he viewed it as a problem inherent to human thought in general. This is made clear in the *Oblivion* story "Another Pioneer," which essentially allegorizes Wallace's views on the prehistoric development of human consciousness. The story's main narrative concerns an ancient village of an unspecified time and place, into which is born a child prodigy who, even at a young age, possesses advanced knowledge and wisdom.[17] The villagers treat the child as a kind of oracle, setting him up on a dais in a hut, where they gather at regular monthly sessions to ask him questions. The child at first provides simple, straightforward answers to his fellow villagers' questions, but eventually, he develops a "more humanistic and less mechanical kind of intelligence" and begins "responding to a villager's question with questions of his own" (132). As the narrator puts it, it is as if the child "now understands his answers as part of a much larger network or system of questions and answers and further questions instead of being merely discrete self-contained units of information" (131). The child develops a systematic, complex mode of thought more consistent with a contemporary,

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[17] The story also contains at least two levels of framing narrative, as it is related by an unnamed narrator, who notes that he heard it told from "an acquaintance of a close friend," who overhead the story being shared between two other people on an airline flight (117). My analysis here is concerned primarily with the story's main narrative thread, but it is worth noting that the framing narratives introduce a degree of uncertainty into the main narrative, since the story has been retold multiple times. This sense of uncertainty is emphasized by the fact that the narrator explicitly notes areas where the narrative breaks into multiple "variants" or versions.

educated mind than with the straightforward, literal mode of thinking of his fellow villagers.

The story, which begins as something of a philosophical allegory, becomes by the end an expression of Wallace's anxiety about self-consciousness. The child, in developing advanced intelligence, gains a level of self-awareness that his fellow villagers lack, and it is precisely this self-awareness that causes his downfall. As time passes, his answers to villagers' questions become more and more hostile, and he eventually responds to these questions with only a "rebuke or complaint" (135). The child is, in effect, a snob; his knowledge causes him to resent those whom he believes less intelligent than himself. The other villagers, of course, grow tired of the child and stop showing up to the weekly meetings. The child's high level of awareness and knowledge is, in the end, what isolates and distances him from his peers.

The story's ending emphasizes the role of self-consciousness in the child's journey. A rival village's shaman asks the child, "Is it possible that you have not realized the extent to which these primitive villagers have exaggerated your gifts, have transformed you into something you know too well you are not?...How long before they, too, see what you have seen when gazing deep inside yourself?" (138) Wallace takes care to emphasize this moment of self-realization, which suggests that the child is becoming increasingly self-aware, realizing his own inessential nature and his true fallibility. Wallace frequently depicts characters whose self-knowledge leads to anomie and despair, and in the case of "Another Pioneer," he applies this sense of anomie to an allegorical figure, one who represents Wallace's view of the overall development of human

intelligence, the separation of systematic intelligence from the old-world knowledge of tribal society.

Wallace renders his view of the deadening effects of self-consciousness in a more mundane context in "Mister Squishy," in which Terry Schmidt's inability to effect change in his life and his surroundings is, at least in part, an effect of his growing self-awareness. Wallace portrays Schmidt as a once-idealistic young man who gave up on his professional dreams as he entered adulthood. The story's narrator describes Schmidt's youthful fantasies, in which he used "the sheer force of his personality and command of the facts to persuade tablesful of hard-eyed corporate officers that legitimate concern for consumer wellbeing was both emotionally and economically Good Business" (29). Young Schmidt is abetted, in these fantasies, by the "solid reputation for both caginess and integrity of T.E. Schmidt & Associates," apparently an imaginary business that Schmidt envisioned himself one day founding (29). While this fantasy is clearly naïve, it demonstrates young Schmidt's belief in himself and his ideals.

Later in life, however, these ideals fall by the wayside, driven by Schmidt's accumulated life experience and self-knowledge. According to the text, when he

> thinks of the starry-eyed puerility and narcissism of these fantasies…, a rough
> decade later, [he] experiences a kind of full-frame internal wince, that type of
> embarrassment-before-self that makes our most mortifying memories objects of
> fascination and repulsion at once, though in Terry Schmidt's case a certain
> amount of introspection and psychotherapy…had enabled him to understand that
> his professional fantasies were not in the main all that unique. (30)

Wallace makes clear that Schmidt has expanded his overall sense of awareness of both himself and his society. He realizes that he is one of many who harbor youthful fantasies, and that those fantasies in and of themselves do not make him any different than others of his generation. Wallace suggests that Schmidt's developing awareness leads to pain, as well as to both physical and psychological paralysis. Furthermore, Schmidt's self-awareness is connected to his own social and professional impotence. I have already discussed his inability to express his emotions or form relationships. Wallace also makes clear that Schmidt has settled into a sense of professional resignation, accepting his role as a corporate cog doing unsatisfying work. He experiences "private fears and thoughts of failure and impotence and terrible and thoroughgoing *smallness* within a grinding professional machine [he] can't believe [he] once had the temerity to think [he] could help change or make a difference or ever be more than a tiny faceless cog in" (31-2, italics original). Wallace's descriptions of Schmidt suggest that the author connects this feeling of helplessness not just with getting older, but with accumulating self-knowledge.[18]

While Schmidt embodies Wallace's view of the way self-consciousness operates in a fairly mundane context, Wallace's most pointed, and also most unconventional, depiction of self-consciousness in *Oblivion* appears in the story "Good Old Neon." While Terry Schmidt is portrayed as something of an ineffectual sub-everyman, Neal, the protagonist of "Good Old Neon," is Schmidt's opposite: cool and likable, successful in both his social and professional lives. However, he feels a gnawing sense of personal, quasi-spiritual emptiness. As he puts it, "My whole life I've been a fraud. I'm not

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[18] The story makes clear that Schmidt has injected poison into the snack cakes that he is testing. The implication is that Schmidt can make a difference, but only by far exceeding the norms of mainstream culture in a way that will destroy the lives of himself and others.

exaggerating. Pretty much all I've ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people" (141). Neal's feelings of "fraudulence" mean that he is constantly unhappy, despite attaining so many outward markers of success.[19] Even with such an outwardly successful character, however, Wallace still diagnoses self-consciousness and mental isolation as causes of spiritual anomie. For Wallace, these properties of mind lead not only to external, but internal despair.

The role of self-consciousness in determining Neal's misery is made clear in his descriptions of his condition. Throughout his life, he has, in his own words, "tr[ied] to create a certain impression of [himself] in other people." (141). Such efforts have, according to Neal,

> …made me work really hard, so I'd always do well and end up getting what I wanted. But then, once I got the best grade or made All City or got Angela Mead to let me put my hand on her breast, I wouldn't feel much of anything except maybe fear that I wouldn't be able to get it again. The next time or next thing I wanted. I remember being down in the rec room in Angela Mead's basement on the couch and having her let me get my hand up under her blouse and not even really feeling the soft aliveness or whatever of her breast because all I was doing was thinking, "Now I'm the guy that Mead let get to second with her." Later that seemed so sad. (141)

Neal's problem has nothing to do with what he does, but with the way he conceptualizes his actions. He interprets events not just according to what they are, but in terms of what they say about him and his identity. In other words, he doesn't just touch a breast, he

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[19] He is quite similar in this regard to the protagonists of films such as *The Truman Show*, *American Beauty*, and *Fight Club*, all of which were released around the same time as the publication of "Good Old Neon."

becomes "the guy" who touched that breast. His awareness of himself as this particular guy drains the satisfaction from the experience. This awareness also accentuates Wallace's belief in the deadly significance of the separateness of individual consciousness from its physical surroundings. Neal internalizes an individualized idea of what his action means for his identity, and this idea drowns out and nullifies the physical sensation of the action.

The notion that human consciousness interprets events according to some meaning or significance is, of course, generalizable. It is, in other words, inherent to the very nature of consciousness for all people, not just for a fictional character like Neal. Wallace often treats his characters as cyphers for general properties of human experience, as befits his role as a moralistic writer. He is interested not simply in depicting character, but in making character stand for what he sees as widespread human conditions. In the case of Neal, Wallace produces an exaggeration of a general human drive to make experiences meaningful. Neal thinks about his experiences in terms of what they say about him as a person, and he allows his awareness of this meaning to overwhelm the experience itself.

In fact, Neal becomes so preoccupied with concerns about image that he is at times even completely blinded to his own internal feelings. He experiences emotional responses to events and to other people, but he comes to believe that such experiences are not genuine, or that they somehow fail to count as "real" emotional experiences. This is made clear in his description of a time in his life where he joined a church in order "to try to wake up spiritually" (156). According to Neal, he joined the church with pure motives, but eventually became "anxious to impress the congregation with how devoted and active

[he] was" (157). Neal draws a clear conceptual distinction between his actions and his intentions. He works extremely hard as a member of the church, volunteering, studying, and serving on committees (157). He believes, however, that these actions fail to count as genuine service to the church, because they are driven in part by his inner motivation to impress the congregation. Neal, crucially, draws the same sharp distinction between mind and external world that Wallace does; he is anxious because his mind's intentions never quite seem to match up to his physical actions.

This becomes even clearer when Neal describes an incident in church in which he started "pretending to speak in tongues" (157). In the process, he found that, "in a kind of fever of excitement I was able to hoodwink even myself into thinking that I really had the Spirit moving through me and was speaking in tongues when in reality I was just shouting 'Dugga muggle ergle dergle' over and over" (157). Neal demonstrates a fallacy in his thinking about his fraudulence: namely, that he selectively deems certain of his actions to be genuinely motivated, while others are assumed to be "fake" or "pretend." Neal makes clear that he really felt, at the time of the incident, to be having a spiritual experience. It is only after the fact that he describes this experience as an example of him "hoodwinking" himself. Neal, however, never makes clear what qualifies something as a "genuine", as opposed to fake, experience, or why he makes distinctions between these two categories.

Neal's descriptions do suggest that he tends to be suspicious of actions motivated by others' interests. He distrusts his motivations for all of his volunteer work and spiritual study, driven as these activities were by his desire to ingratiate himself to other people. This is despite the fact that such work apparently caused Neal to have a deep feeling of

spirituality during worship. This is also despite the fact that Neal implies a certain level of community feeling that he experienced during his time in church, making note as he does of all of the collaborative work he performed with other church members. Neal is thus revealed to be not so much fraudulent as self-centered. He believes that actions undertaken for personal gain are genuinely motivated, while actions motivated by others' interests are undertaken under false pretenses.

This is because Neal remains largely blind to the emotions of others, even when he acts with good intentions toward them. He laments that when a pastor blessed him, he was "not *genuinely* being struck down by the Spirit like the other people on either side of me" (157, emphasis added). Regarding his volunteer work in the church, he notes that he "was really only saying and doing these things because all the *real* parishioners were doing them and I wanted everyone to think I was sincere" (158, emphasis added). In addition to assuming that his own actions fail to count as "genuine," he assumes that others' actions do count in this way. This is despite the fact that Neal has no apparent reason for this assumption. In other words, these other parishioners may, much like himself, be motivated by their desire to ingratiate themselves to the church community and impress others, but Neal gives no indication that he even considers this possibility. He simply assumes a certain purity of intention on the part of others.

Such assumptions are further evidence that Neal is a narcissist more so than a fraud. He is obsessed with parsing his own motivations for his actions, but he rarely, if ever, gives a thought to the motivations of others. He thus doubts himself continuously, to the point where he essentially manufactures his own "spiritual crisis." In fact, there may be no better indication of Neal's self-obsession than that he treats his feelings of

"fraudulence" as a serious problem while treating his community work as a deceptive charade. Neal is one of the defining protagonists of Wallace's career, because he exemplifies Wallace's conceptual distinction between mind and world, living almost entirely in his own head while discounting the significance of material and social action. Wallace, in "Good Old Neon," follows the focus on self-consciousness that defines stories like "Another Pioneer" and "Mister Squishy" (as well as numerous other works in his oeuvre) and amplifies it, to the point where his protagonist becomes blind not just to his others' feelings, but to his own as well.

These characters exemplify Wallace's tendency, especially prevalent in his late fiction, to use protagonists to generalize about the state of human consciousness. In Wallace's fictional worlds, this generalized view of consciousness is usually pessimistic, emphasizing what the author sees as the mind's isolation from its surroundings. This isolation is sometimes a generational condition, sometimes a national one, and sometimes simply, in Wallace's view, an inherent quality of human thought. In all cases, though, it is central to the moral and emotional content of his work. *Oblivion* is notable for placing particular emphasis on this isolation, and the book's bleak tone results from its author's conviction that humans are doomed to lives of isolation. For Wallace, people's efforts to communicate, to understand one another, and to attain self-awareness are all fated to failure, a failure that defines his fictional themes.

Chapter Five: *The Truman Show***: A Mind on an Island**

David Markson, David Foster Wallace, and Nicholson Baker all confront, through their fiction, the possibilities and ramifications of mental isolation, creating characters whose extreme inward psychological focus cuts them off from the world outside of their mind and portraying, to varying degrees, individual, subjective mental experience as detached from its physical and/or social surroundings. Such writers use the medium of fiction to express their respective senses of what this isolation *feels* like, examining its implications for qualitative, conscious experience. These authors use their fictional work not only to tell stories, but to explore what are, for them, real-world aspects of this kind of isolated subjective experience. This is especially true in the cases of Wallace, whose characters exemplify his belief in the deterministic inevitability of solipsism, and of Baker, whose characters conversely experience the type of joy that their creator takes in his own mental isolation, an isolation that allows him to develop personalized obsessions and individually curated histories of the peculiar objects that make up the texture of his daily life. For these writers, fiction is a means by which to depict isolated elements of conscious experience as directly as possible.

Fiction also allows these writers to use narrative techniques which are particular to the medium of prose in order to depict mental isolation in their work. Prose fiction lends itself to a close focus on and in-depth description of first-person mental experience

in ways that elude some other narrative media. Markson, Wallace, and Baker all employ the form of the first-person monologue as a way to enhance the sense of mental isolation that permeates their work, filtering their narratives through the perspective of single characters. The first-person perspective, as used by these writers, requires readers to internalize the fictional world of a piece of writing exclusively as it is presented by the narrating character, without the sense of objectivity that can be imparted through omniscient third-person narration. Such narrative "filtering" is precisely why, for example, Wallace is able to render the truth of Randall and Hope's disagreement ambiguous in "Oblivion"; since he only presents Randall's point of view, readers are granted access to the objective facts outside of his mind only indirectly.

The medium of film, however, makes this kind of perspectival isolation more difficult, since film, by its very nature, presents its viewers with a myriad of information beyond that which is presented directly by its characters. While a novel may present its story in mediated form, told to readers though a single character's words and point of view, film is much less able to perform this kind of trick. Even a point-of-view shot, used to simulate an isolated visual perspective, inevitably contains a plethora of visual information, including props, sets, actors, and other elements of mise-en-scéne, that, if not entirely unmediated, is at least less mediated than the narration of a story like "Oblivion." Film allows audiences a measure of control not present in conventional fiction, since they are free to focus on any information that appears in the frame, rather than be led by the whims of a specific narrative persona.

For this reason, film, in order to convey a sense of isolated mental experience, often relies less on formal elements than on narrative premises. One film whose premise

allows it to depict this kind of experience is 1998's *The Truman Show*, directed by Peter Weir. *The Truman Show* follows a man named Truman Burbank who has unwittingly lived his entire life as the subject of a large-scale reality television program. Truman lives inside of a massive studio, in which a veritable army of actors portray his friends, family, and work associates. All of the events that take place around Truman, right down to weather patterns, are controlled by the producers of "The Truman Show," who reside in a control booth embedded in the studio's ceiling. The film's premise entails that Truman is to some degree isolated, at the level of his conscious experience, from literally everybody he knows. His perspective is individualized, as he is the only character in the film who truly and completely believes (at least at beginning of the film) in the reality of the simulated environment of "The Truman Show." Truman's friends, both close and casual, interact with him with a full awareness that they are actors playing parts in a simulated fantasy world, while Truman, because he has never been exposed to the world outside of the show, treats these interactions as unimpeachably real, or least as more real than his associates treat them. Where Truman's thoughts, actions, and statements are sincere, those of everyone he knows are knowing put-ons, leaving Truman, so to speak, "out of the loop." In this chapter, I analyze the implications of this sense of mental isolation on the film's portrayal of Truman's conscious experience.

When I describe Truman as mentally isolated, I am not suggesting that Truman is some kind of "brain in a vat," existing completely apart from any sort of cultural, physical, or social context. I am arguing, however, that the premise of *The Truman Show* presents an observable instance in which, even given the physical and social contexts that he shares with his friends and family, Truman's mental experiences are clearly unique

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from those of his associates. I also do not want to suggest that the notion that a film's portrayal of its protagonist's mental experiences as unique from those of other characters is anything new. After all, any film (or novel, or play) that contains multiple characters will generally try to suggest to its audience that each of these characters has a distinct personality and worldview. I do argue, however, that *The Truman Show* foregrounds Truman's mental uniqueness and isolation in such a way that it becomes the film's primary motivator of dramatic tension and plot development. Truman isn't simply different from other characters; he views the nature of his own reality in a completely distinct way, since he interprets as a real world what other characters see as a fake TV studio, and the ways in which he copes with this difference between himself and others comprise his character arc.

The unique worldview and mental isolation that Truman experiences are, to a large degree, direct products of the influence of mass media as portrayed in the film. The role of mass media has certainly played a major role of critical discussions of the film, with many critics reading *The Truman Show* as a critique and/or satire of reality television.[20] This "media critique" angle of criticism certainly informs Simone Knox's argument that the film reflects Baudrillard's philosophical ideas about "simulacra" by depicting a world in which the boundary separating reality from televisual fantasy becomes obscured. Indeed, the role of this blurred boundary in creating the film's emotional conflicts can hardly be denied. I argue here, however, that *The Truman Show* cannot be entirely reduced to a parable on mass media, and that the film, in addition to

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[20] Such critics include Bishop and Cardullo. The film's cast also address, in the DVD's "making of" feature, *The Truman Show*'s anticipation of the popularity that the reality TV genre would achieve in the years immediately following the film's release.

making arguments about mass media, is making arguments about its characters' psychology.

This "media critique" angle also informs one of the central philosophical questions posed by the film (and stated most succinctly by Christof, the creator of "The Truman Show," at the end of the film's climactic scene): is Truman better off staying in a fake, media-controlled world that will make him happy or venturing out into the world outside of the show, where he does not know what will happen to him but where he will be able to break out of the show's contrived environment? One way to frame Truman's choice in answering this question is to state it in terms of a true/false binary: Truman can either accept the media-saturated falsehood of his life in Seahaven (the town that comprises the entirety of the set of "The Truman Show"), living his life in a state of ignorant bliss, or he can seek the truth. This true/false binary is the type of frame that critics often apply to the film's plot, including Knox, in her Baudrillard-inspired reading, and Randall Verarde, who argues that Truman's ability to dream of a world beyond Seahaven makes him an "authentic" character. Both Knox and Verarde see the central conflict of the film as one between truth and falsehood. In my argument, however, I frame Truman's choice in more relativistic terms. I argue that Truman isn't choosing between truth and falsehood as much as he is choosing between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Consequently, I read the film as an exploration not of the blurry line between truth and fiction, but of one person's quest to pass through different states of consciousness, and Truman's movement from the familiar to the unfamiliar carries with it what the film wants its audience to see as a movement toward new possibilities of raw, unchecked emotion. This movement into raw emotion is an important part of not only

Truman's experiences, but those of the film's other characters as well, particularly Hannah, the actor who plays Truman's wife.

The distinction I make here, between the theme of truth and the theme of emotional unfamiliarity, can be further explained by comparing *The Truman Show* to *The Matrix*, another film released in the late 1990s that distilled boilerplate philosophizing and a science fiction-inspired premise into a commercially successful mainstream movie. In *The Matrix*, Neo, the main character, discovers that the world around him has largely been simulated by a giant computer system known as "The Matrix." He meets several other individuals who share this discovery, each of whom is able to move inside and outside of The Matrix, even as the rest of the unknowing mass of humanity remains caught, unaware, in its simulated world. The key point that I want to emphasize here is that in *The Matrix*, the computer program is a *mass* phenomenon, shared by the bulk of the general population. Humanity is thus under the spell of a collective delusion, and it is up to the film's heroes to bring the truth of reality to light. In *The Truman Show*, however, the world of Seahaven is, for most of the cast and crew of "The Truman Show" program, merely a job; only for Truman does Seahaven constitute, at least at the beginning of the film, an actual world. This individualization of delusion is what renders Truman, at the mental level, so different from everyone else he knows, in terms of how he interprets his surroundings. The individualized nature of Truman's condition is one of the key plot elements that allows the film to focus so closely on the psychological implications of Truman's story, and the film, according to my argument, is less about Truman discovering the truth than it is about him breaking out of one set of beliefs and into another.

The film is ultimately less interested in whether or not Truman's beliefs are true and more interested in how these beliefs change Truman, even telegraphing this theme when Christof tells Truman, as Truman is about to leave Seahaven, "There is no more truth out there than there is in the world I created for you." While much of what Christof and the other crew members of "The Truman Show" say is to be taken with a grain of salt, motivated as it is by their desire to keep the show running, this statement, regardless of Christof's intentions, actually sums up the film's worldview quite well. In the world of *The Truman Show*, there is no real distinction between truth and fiction; rather, the truth is simply constructed in a lot of different ways, in a lot of different contexts, by a lot of different people. The world that Christof created is just one kind of truth, and the world outside of Seahaven that Truman is going to enter into is another kind. The idea that truth is constructed and relativistic is, of course, typically postmodern, but not in the same way as Knox's Baudrillardian view of truth, in which Truman is cut off from his "authentic" self by the media simulation perpetuated by Christof and his cohorts.

I argue that while Truman's discovery of the truth of his situation is clearly important to the film, a more important motivator for him is his desire not so much to find truth, but simply to have experiences that are unfamiliar or different to him than anything else he has done before. Truman wants to push against the limits of his experience and his consciousness in order to escape from the routines for which his relationships and friendships provide a psychological and social context. The film emphasizes this desire to simply "get away" from his current life in part through Truman's stated (but unfulfilled) desire to travel to Fiji, which he tells his friend Marlon (played, within the film, by an actor named Louis) he wants to visit because of its

location on the complete opposite side of the world from Seahaven. As he says to Marlon, "You can't get any further away before you start coming back." Truman is attracted to Fiji not because of anything he actually knows about its culture, people, or geography, but simply because it is as far away as he can possibly get from his current life. Truman talks about his desire to get away even though the film, up to that point, gives its audience little to no indication that he is particularly unhappy with his current lifestyle. Truman is not escaping from anything other than the familiar, and while he discusses his planned escape in spatial terms, it turns out to also be psychological, a move from one state of mind to a different, less familiar, and perhaps more frightening one. Truman repeats the implication that he is seeking unfamiliarity for its own sake when he spontaneously suggests to Meryl, his TV wife, that they go to Atlantic City "because I never have [been there]. That's why people go places, isn't it?" Ultimately, Truman isn't looking for truth; he is looking for new experience, for an expansion of the horizons of his consciousness.

Ultimately, *The Truman Show* is able to demonstrate this expansion precisely because its premise externalizes its protagonist's psychology. The film makes clear precisely what the limits of Truman's mind are by providing visual and spatial analogues both for the entirety of what Truman knows (the show's set) and the entirety of what he doesn't know (the world outside of the set). Truman's movement from Seahaven to the outside world is a movement past the outer limits of his own knowledge, away from the contained, isolated perspective he has at the film's beginning. *The Truman Show* expresses the belief that Truman is naturally drawn to this kind of psychological disruption, choosing to leave behind mental isolation for an unknown world. His mental

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isolation goes hand-in-hand with the familiar, routine social context of the television set where he has lived his entire life, and the film documents his journey away from this world, a journey that he hopes will take him not only into new social contexts, but away from the lonely island that is his consciousness.

Dual Identities: Inside and Outside "The Truman Show"

The film initiates Truman's movement from the familiar Seahaven to the unfamiliar outside world by establishing a stark duality between these locations, a duality that is not simply physical and locational, but, more importantly, psychological. From the very beginning, the film establishes two psychological perspectives that a character can embody within its fictional world. Truman, at least at the beginning of the film, inhabits a perspective all his own, since he believes in the reality of the fictional world of "The Truman Show," and since he is generally unaware that a world exists outside of Seahaven. Characters who occupy the world outside of the show, such as Christof, embody the opposite perspective, since they are fully aware of both the world that exists outside of Seahaven and the contrived nature of Truman's televised, mostly fictional environment. Some characters, however, truly embody the duality at the heart of the film, a duality that encompasses both of the aforementioned psychological perspectives. These characters include, most notably, two actors: Hannah, who plays Truman's wife Meryl, and Louis, who plays Truman's best friend Marlon. These characters are caught between both perspectives, because they must remain aware of the show's contrivances, which are designed to keep Truman an active participant in the show, while simultaneously taking seriously Truman's beliefs in the show's reality. Hannah and Louis's respective mindsets

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are key to understanding the film's psychological themes, since they create a template for Truman's journey, embodying the cognitive duality that Truman is trying to achieve. Whereas Hannah and Louis are able to move, psychologically, between the world of the show and the outside world, Truman is in the process of trying to affect this movement for himself by attaining the kind of perspective that would allow him to see Seahaven from an outsider's point of view.

The filmmakers' goal of establishing this kind of psychological duality for Hannah and Louis is exemplified in "How's It Going to End?," a behind-the-scenes documentary included in the 2005 DVD release of the film, featuring interviews with the cast and crew, who explain their approach to demarcating the dividing line between the film's two worlds. The subjects of the DVD's interviews include actors Laura Linney and Noah Emmerich, who play, respectively, Hannah and Louis. Linney and Emmerich discuss the process of playing characters who are themselves in character, relating to the interviewer their actor characters' elaborate backstories. According to Linney and Emmerich, the process of preparing for the film entailed creating their characters' biographies, biographies which include their characters' motivations for appearing on "The Truman Show" in the first place. Linney imagines Hannah as a ruthless careerist, driven by money and power to achieve stardom on the show's unconventional, yet far-reaching media platform. Emmerich, on the other hand, imagines Louis as being pushed into show business as a child actor by his controlling stage parents. Emmerich describes Louis as a conflicted character, one whose friendship with Truman has come to feel genuine, even though Louis is, in fact, only "acting" as Truman's friend, pushed into the friendship by the demands of the television show.

The psychological duality attributed to these characters is, for the most part, only implied by the film itself, rather than presented explicitly, as Louis and Hannah rarely appear out of character, shown breaking only during short on-camera interview clips, or instances where something goes terribly wrong on "The Truman Show," such as when Hannah feels physically threatened by Truman or when Louis realizes that Truman has escaped the unceasing gaze of the many cameras filming the show. The paucity of such incidents suggests that Emmerich and Linney should have little need to envision such elaborate backstories for their characters. Even in tense moments, Louis and Hannah reveal little to nothing about their personal lives outside of the show, and the film never depicts them in any context other than that of the show's controlled environment. The backstories explicated by Linney and Emmerich thus function primarily as extra-diegetic elements of the film, influencing the actors' performances without ever being made explicit to the viewing audience or to other characters in the film. The fact that these actors were so invested in backstories that never make it directly to the screen demonstrates the sense of importance (a sense that appears to extend to the rest of the film's cast and crew) with which they invest the preservation of the duality of the world of *The Truman Show*. Linney and Emmerich were committed to the idea that, within the world of the film, they were both inside and outside of the "Truman Show" program. Hannah and Louis had lives and identities apart from the show, even though the film almost exclusively depicts the parts of their lives spent in character, on the show's set.[21]

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[21] This duality is reflected in the film's credits, which list Linney as playing "Hannah Gill/Meryl Burbank" and Emmerich as playing "Louis Coltrane/Marlon." Natascha McElhone, who also plays a cast member of "The Truman Show," is similarly listed as playing two characters ("Lauren/Sylvia"). The actors who play characters that exist only within the show (such as lead actor Jim Carrey, who plays Truman) or who play characters that only exist outside of the word of the show (such as Ed Harris, who plays Christof, the creator of "The Truman Show") are listed as playing a single character each.

The fact that these backstories, despite their invisibility to the audience, were so important to Linney and Emmerich suggests that the duality experienced by Louis and Hannah is meant to be perceived as a largely psychological condition; since we never actually see either character outside of the show, we can only ever infer instances in which these characters *feel* their status as liminal people who exist both inside and outside of the show. Simone Knox poses an argument that suggests that these characters are sliding away from this dualistic sense when she writes,

> Hannah/Meryl and Louis/Marlon both emphatically insist on the authenticity and sincerity of the show. As Louis/Marlon puts it: "It's all true, it's all real. Nothing here is fake, nothing you see on this show is fake... it's merely controlled." This obviously works as part of the film's ironic commentary, but, given that Louis/Marlon has been on the show for nearly as long as Truman, it also suggests the possibility that these "actors" may have lost the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is simulated. They have begun, as Jean Baudrillard discusses in relation to illness, to "simulate" rather than to "feign." (3)

Knox sees the film as a philosophical parallel to Baudrillard's critique of contemporary mass media, presenting characters who lose the ability to distinguish between truth and fantasy, thus experiencing a Baudrillardian "simulacrum." However, I argue that both the actors' comments and the film itself suggest that far from losing the ability to, in Knox's words, "distinguish between what is real and what is simulated," Louis and Hannah are instead defined largely by their liminal status, existing as they do both within and without the show's simulated environment.

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Hannah, in a clip from an on-camera interview that appears in the brief montage that opens the film, appears, at first glance, to confirm Knox's argument about the film's simulated reality, noting of her role in "The Truman Show," "Well, for me, there is no difference between a private life and a public life. My life is my life [*sic*] is 'The Truman Show.' 'The Truman Show' is...a lifestyle, it's a noble life, it is...a truly blessed life." While Hannah suggests here that the show is, for her, not just a show but a "lifestyle," her character's actions throughout the rest of the film suggest the opposite: that Hannah is acutely aware of her status as an actor playing a role in a simulated world. Her comments in this interview, like so many of her other actions in the film, are part of a concerted effort to maintain the illusion that the show is, indeed, real, an illusion that obviously benefits her, providing as it does a platform to develop her celebrity status. The film hints at this by immediately cutting from Hannah's interview to a shot of Truman, in the middle of a pretend monologue about getting lost on a mountain-climbing expedition, saying "Yeah, tell me something I don't know. All right; promise me one thing, though: if I die before I reach the summit, you'll use me as an alternative source of food." The playful editing here implies a predatory element to Hannah's preservation of the show's sense of realism. Hannah doesn't actually believe in the show's authenticity so much as she uses the sense of authenticity that it presents as a means to exploit Truman for her own, personal gain.

The film establishes Hannah's continuous awareness of the distinction between "The Truman Show" and the outside world by having her, at several junctures, turn toward the diegetic camera filming the show to pitch a product to the viewing audience. Hannah, in the middle of her interactions with Truman, frequently poses while facing the

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camera in order to display such products, shilling for them while simultaneously trying to integrate her pitches into her conversations with Truman. Linney, in her documentary interview, cites these product placements as evidence of Hannah's ambitiousness and unyielding drive to profit from the show, and indeed, Hannah is so intent on delivering these sales pitches that at one point, when Truman, distressed by his growing sense of paranoia and clearly sensing that "Meryl" is not who she appears to be, tells his TV wife, "You can't stand me," to which Hannah, in her "Meryl" role, responds, "That's not true…Why don't you let me fix you some of this new MoCocoa drink? All natural cocoa beans from the upper slopes of Mt. Nicaragua! No artificial sweeteners!" Even in this stressful situation, when Truman is beginning to break down the barrier that divides the show from the outside world, Hannah remains very much aware of this borderline. As she pitches the cocoa mix, the camera zooms in on her blandly smiling face, emphasizing the advertisement while deemphasizing Hannah's surrounding environment, making it clear that Hannah has, mentally, removed herself from her argument with her TV husband in order to step into her role as an advertiser.

Hannah's product placements serve in part as a satire on consumerism and advertising, a recurring motif in *The Truman Show*.[22] Her dialogue in such scenes is so clearly contrived, based as it is on advertisements that would have been several decades out of date at the time of *The Truman Show*'s release. Hannah's clothing and gestures, as Linney notes in her DVD interview, are based on advertisements of the 1950's, and the dated appearance of her sales pitches highlights their artificial nature. The artificial nature

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[22] This motif is also present during a series of scenes in which a pair of Truman's acquaintances manipulate him into contrived positions in order to leave him standing in view of an advertisement, thereby allowing the camera filming "The Truman Show" to capture the ad in order to present it to the film's diegetic viewing audience.

of these pitches also demonstrates Hannah's continuous awareness that she is, in fact, starring in a television show, and that she is not just having conversations with Truman but is also performing for the viewing audience. Such scenes impact the film's overall presentation of Hannah as Truman's wife by establishing her as only partially engaged in her married life, realizing as she does that she is both Meryl and Hannah, both Truman's wife and a person with an autonomous identity outside of the cloistered world of the reality show.

Louis's case is somewhat more complicated, since, as Emmerich suggests in his interview, Louis feels more affected by his relationship to Truman than does Hannah. Emmerich notes that even though Louis is only "acting" as Truman's friend, he has, due to his almost-lifelong involvement with the show, spent most of his life, in the guise of Marlon, as Truman's actual best friend. According to Emmerich, Louis "feels really guilty about deceiving Truman," since he feels such a close friendship with Truman after all of the years that they have spent on the show together. Louis thus retains his awareness of the distinction between the world of "The Truman Show" and the outside world, yet still becomes emotionally invested in Truman's fate. While Hannah is able to maintain a sense of separation between these worlds through most of the film, treating the show's simulated world as a mere means to monetary gain while generally maintaining her emotional distance from Truman, Louis, in spite of his awareness of his dual identity, feels conflicted about its moral consequences, conceiving of it as a "deception" of Truman. The fact that he sees his actions as deceiving Truman certainly suggests that Louis, even as he recognizes the distinction between the worlds inside and outside of the show, does not necessarily privilege one or the other as more real or more authentic.

While the film posits the world of "The Truman Show" as a simulated environment, Louis recognizes that it is very real to Truman, and that his own assumed identity within that world may constitute a real breach of trust, even in a relationship that began as a mere acting gig.

The film demonstrates Louis's sense of duality during a confrontation with Truman about the nature of the show's reality. After Truman's heated argument with Hannah/Meryl, Louis/Marlon rushes to the Burbank house to diffuse the situation. Immediately afterwards, the film cuts to a shot of Louis/Marlon and Truman sitting on the edge of a partially built bridge, discussing Truman's fears. Truman tells Louis/Marlon, "I don't know what to think, Marlon. Maybe I'm going out of my mind, but I get the feeling that the world revolves around me somehow." Louis/Marlon responds by attempting to quell Truman's fears, telling him, "It's a lot of world for one man. You sure that's not wishful thinking, you wishing you'd made something more of yourself? Christ, Truman, who hasn't sat on the Jon and had an imaginary interview on 'Seahaven Tonight?' Who hasn't wanted to be somebody?" Louis/Marlon's response here is notable in that it evokes both Louis's sincere investment in his relationship with Truman and his calculated performance in the role of Marlon. His appeal to Truman's "wishful thinking" demonstrates his familiarity with Truman's psychology, as the film has already established that Truman has a tendency to harbor unfulfilled dreams, the most notable of which is his perpetually quelled ambition to travel to Fiji. However, Louis also tries to manipulate Truman in his evocation of a "Seahaven Tonight" ("Seahaven Tonight" being an apparently popular local talk show) interview as a paradigmatic example of what it means to "be somebody." This evocation is part of a series of calculated gestures from

the cast and crew of "The Truman Show" to reinforce Truman's sense of provincialism by referencing local phenomena as paradigms of excellence, and Marlon's allusion to "Seahaven Tonight" demonstrates that even as he shares this intimate moment with his friend, he is still Louis, remaining aware of the world outside the show and of the need to maintain order within the artificial confines of Truman's world.[23]

The film emphasizes Louis/Marlon's conflicting motives through editing choices, as he continues by reminiscing about the two friends' shared experiences, telling Truman,

> I've been your best friend since we were seven years old, Truman. The only way you and I ever made it through high school was cheating off each other's test papers. Jesus, they were identical. But I always felt safe knowing that, because whatever the answer was, we were right together and we were wrong together.

Here, the film is edited to invest the repeated word "together" with the sense of dual meaning that I argue is so important to the film's portrayal of its characters' dual psychologies. As Louis/Marlon speaks, the film cuts away from his warmly upturned face to Truman's pensive, downturned face, highlighting the fact that Truman is mouthing the words "we were right together and we were wrong together" along with Louis/Marlon. Truman clearly has enough of a shared history with Marlon that he knows exactly what his friend will say here, and he is clearly emotionally affected by Louis/Marlon's words to the point that he tearfully, and almost unconsciously, repeats them. Coming from Truman at this moment, the word "together" signifies his and Marlon's shared experience

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[23] The most significant example, in terms of the film's plot, of the crew of "The Truman Show" influencing Truman's attitude to keep him from escaping, is the planned (simulated) death of Truman's father by drowning, a death that leaves Truman with a lifelong fear of large bodies of water. Another notable example occurs when Truman enters a travel agency, only to see a poster featuring an image of an airplane getting hit by lightning, along with the caption, "IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU!" Truman's experience in the travel agency is one of several moments in which the film pushes the crew's efforts to keep Truman on the island to comic levels of absurd obviousness.

of friendship. Coming from Louis/Marlon, however, the word suggests Louis's desire to keep Truman not only believing in the fantasy world of the show, but also remaining together, in spirit and belief, with his fictional friend.

The most important moment in this scene, both in terms of expressing the theme of Louis/Marlon's dual identity and in terms of pushing forward the film's narrative momentum, is the point at which the film begins to cut between, on one hand, the friends' conversation on the bridge and, on the other hand, Christof's production studio. Louis/Marlon tells Truman, "You're the closest thing I ever had to a brother, Truman. I know things haven't worked out for either of us like we used to dream they would. I know that feeling when it's like everything's slipping away and you don't want to believe it so you look for answers someplace else. But, well…" At this point, the film cuts away to Christof, who speaks into a headset, saying, "I would gladly step in front of traffic for you," a line that Marlon immediately repeats. Christof's appearance is immediately conspicuous, because not only has he not appeared in this scene up until this moment; he hasn't appeared in the film at all, other than a few short clips of exposition during the film's overture-like opening montage. The film thus undercuts the emotional peak of Truman's conversation with Marlon with this sudden reveal that Marlon's apparently sincere words are only being fed to him off-camera. Given the sense of duality built into the character of Louis/Marlon, a line like "You're the closest thing I ever had to a brother" takes on a conflicted meaning, since on one hand, it can be read as simply another attempt on the part of Louis to manipulate Truman's emotions in order to keep him on the island, and on the other hand, it can be seen as a sincere declaration of deep friendship.

The filmmakers' decision to leave Christof out of the scene until after

Louis/Marlon delivers this line certainly allows for a level of ambiguity over its intention,

or at least suggests an intention on the part of the filmmakers to suspend the audience's

disbelief that Louis/Marlon is being sincere. The scene itself emphasizes Louis/Marlon's

sincerity, and Emmerich's acting shows the results of his decisions to prepare to play the

character as conflicted between the dual desires of both keeping the show going and

being a good friend to Truman. As he readies himself to declare his friendship to Truman,

Louis/Marlon looks down toward the sea, blinks a couple of times as though preparing to

deliver a difficult-to-articulate truth, then looks directly and unblinkingly at Truman,

declaring his feelings of brotherhood. The camera places Emmerich's eyes in almost the

exact center of the frame, emphasizing Louis/Marlon's direct and empathetic eye

contact.[24]

The film's editing thus expresses the dual nature not only of Louis/Marlon, but of

the world of the film itself. On one hand, Louis, in the role of Marlon, expresses what is,

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[24] Acclaimed film editor Walter Murch, in his book-length essay *In the Blink of an Eye*, espouses a theory of film editing that compares film cuts to the blinking of a human eye. Murch writes,

> So it seems to me that our rate of blinking is somehow geared more to our emotional state and to the nature and frequency of our thoughts than to the atmospheric environment we happen to find ourselves in. Even if there is no head movement…, the blink is either *something that helps an internal separation of thought to take place*, or it is *an involuntary reflex accompanying the mental separation that is taking place anyway…*[The blink of a person engaged in a conversation] *will occur where a cut could have happened, had the conversation been filmed*. Not a frame earlier or later. (62, italics original)

Whether or not Murch's theories have any scientific validity (He cites "experimental work" published by Dr. John Stern), they are, interestingly, reflected in this scene from *The Truman Show*, both at the diegetic and non-diegetic levels. At the diegetic level, Louis/Marlon blinks before telling Truman about his feelings of brotherhood, suggesting that at this moment, he is sorting through his conflicting thoughts and feelings about his relationship with Truman. When he actually delivers the line, however, he is unblinking, suggesting a sense of directness, sincerity, and clarity of thought to his feelings. At the non-diegetic level, the film's cuts between Truman and Marlon on the bridge and Christof in the production studio evoke the kind of separation of thought that Murch discusses, both for Louis/Marlon, who is negotiating his dual identity, and for the film's audience, who must necessarily keep track of the distinction between the worlds inside and outside of the "Truman Show" program.

for him, a sincere sense of love and brotherhood for Truman, while on the other hand, the film's cuts to Christof demonstrate both Louis's emotional manipulation of Truman and his continued awareness of the existence of the world outside of the set of "The Truman Show." The film ironizes this position by having Christof feed Louis the line, "And the last thing I'd ever do is lie to you," having Marlon avow his desire not to lie in a statement that is, if not an outright lie, at least made under false pretenses. This scene, along with Hannah's advertisements, expresses the dual identity and dual sensibility that Louis/Marlon and Hanna/Meryl negotiate in their positions as both Truman's closest confidants and the two actors most responsible for deceiving Truman. This duality is central both to these particular characters, and to the film at large, which takes place both inside and outside of the constructed world of the TV program "The Truman Show."

Louis/Marlon and Hannah/Meryl are such important characters to the film, not only because they are the characters with whom Truman shares his closest relationships, but because they most clearly embody a sense of duality that is essential to both the film's overall premise and to its psychological themes. One of the premises of my argument is that the film documents Truman's psychological progression from a singular point of view, in which he unknowingly internalizes Seahaven as his actual place of birth and residence, to the kind of dualistic view embodied by his wife and best friend, in which he comes to see Seahaven for what we know it to be: both Truman's actual living environment *and* a constructed world that exists inside of the "real world" outside of the show's set. While the film wastes no time puncturing Truman's illusions (A satellite TV camera falls out of the sky in the film's fourth minute and hits the ground directly in front of Truman), and while it explicitly and consistently acknowledges Truman's desire to

leave Seahaven (Truman frequently mentions his desire to go to Fiji), it also clearly demonstrates that whatever suspicions he may harbor about the nature of his hometown, Truman maintains a personal, emotional attachment to his surroundings that, for him, is quite sincere.

The film emphasizes this sincerity in Truman's bridge-side conversation with Marlon. Just as Weir uses Emmerich's eyes to suggest both the devotion and the psychological conflictedness he feels in lying to Truman, so does he use the eyes of Jim Carrey, in the part of Truman, to suggest not only Truman's suspicion that something is wrong with his world, but his emotional connection to his best friend, as well. When Truman confesses his suspicions to Marlon, telling his friend "Everybody seems to be in on it," he looks intently at Marlon, who looks back, after which Truman looks off into the distance, still intently. Truman's eyes appear near the center of the frame, and the camera lingers silently on his distant stare, his eyes focused, but not on any one thing, suggesting his pensive uncertainty about his current situation. However, as Marlon begins to reminisce about cheating in school and camping in the woods, the film cuts back and forth between the two friends, using Truman's image to emphasize his softening emotions, as Carrey, his eyes still furrowed in an intense glare, lets out a mild chuckle, then, after further reminiscence, unfurrows his eyes by raising his brows slightly, letting the audience know that Truman's memories of the times he has shared with Marlon affect him enough, on an emotional level, to cause him to at least momentarily forget his suspicions.

This scene exemplifies the film's particular use of Marlon as a means for Truman to connect to his childhood past, as even with Louis's awareness of his deception of

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Truman, the two men have a shared history that lends them a natural, unfeigned camaraderie. However, while Truman's relationship with Marlon appears quite natural, his relationship with Meryl is much more complicated, as we never directly see the couple experiencing any happy moments together. In fact, the first time Hannah/Meryl appears onscreen with Truman, she stops to talk to him mainly to hawk a product to the show's audience ("The Chef's Pal: It's a dicer, grater, peeler, all in one!") and to tell Truman, who is in the middle of gardening, "You missed a spot." The film does, however, establish a distinction between the couple's strained present and happy past in a scene where Meryl, Truman, and Truman's mother look through a photo book. In this scene, the film cuts back and forth between Truman's real-time reactions, which are marked by a series of forced smiles and attempts to get away from the interaction (He tells his mother, "We should be getting home"), and his wedding photos, in which he sports a wide, gaping grin, a look which rarely appears on his face in the film's real-time chronology. The scene serves as the film's effort to establish a plausible background for Truman and Meryl's relationship, even as that relationship appears, in the present time, quite unhappy for both characters.[25]

In addition to his relationships with Marlon and Meryl, Truman's relationship to the town of Seahaven plays an important role in establishing his emotional rootedness in the life from which he eventually escapes. Even as his skepticism towards Seahaven's residents grows, Truman retains a degree of implicit trust in the ability of the town's social and political structures to protect him. In one of the key turning points in Truman's

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[25] It is worth noting that any positive emotions generated by this scene are undercut by another of the film's comic displays of the obvious falsity of Truman's world, as Truman, after Meryl and his mother leave him alone, looks through the photo book to find that Meryl was crossing her fingers in the moment when the couple were married.

turn towards skepticism, he runs into an office building and pushes an elevator button, only to see the elevator door open to reveal, instead of the expected elevator, a room that appears to be part of a TV studio lot. As security guards proceed to pull Truman away from the scene, Truman yells, "If you don't tell me what's happening, I'll report you!" Even as the building's official personnel make what are obviously weak attempts to cover up the scenario, telling Truman that what he saw behind the elevator doors was "nothing" and that the building's staff is "remodeling," Truman, despite his growing incredulousness, retains his trust that there is someone or something to whom he can report the strange behavior he is witnessing. Truman's trust is further demonstrated when, in the following scene, he seeks the advice of Marlon, telling his friend, "I'm definitely being followed." When Marlon asks "Who?" Truman replies, "It's hard to tell. They look just like regular people." Just as Truman believes that there is still a power structure in Seahaven that will protect his safety, so does he believe that a distinction can be made, within Seahaven, between the "regular people" and those who are "in on" whatever it is that he thinks is happening to him.

In addition to establishing Truman's trust in Marlon, the film also makes it clear that, however distant Meryl may be, Truman still trusts his wife in his moments of uncertainty. After speaking to Marlon about his concerns, Truman's next move is to confront Meryl with news of some of the strange things he's begun to notice happening around Seahaven. The film uses Truman's scenes with Marlon and Meryl to establish Truman's psychologically grounded story arc, in which he gradually transitions from a trusting relationship with his world to a sense of questioning skepticism. Such scenes

portray moments when Truman is, psychologically, "on the fence," willing to both question the nature of his world and to express his trust in it.

Experiencing *The Truman Show*

Having established the sense of duality that runs through *The Truman Show*, both in the film's fictional world and in the characters of Louis, Hannah, and Truman, I now turn to a discussion of the way in which this duality determines the film's portrayal of these characters' qualitative experiences. For both Truman and Hannah, moving from the controlled context of the show to the less-familiar outside world entails an emotional intensity that is generally unavailable in Seahaven. Hannah effectively illustrates this intensity, as she undergoes a particularly sudden transition from her "TV personality" to her "real-life personality." As I've already noted, Hannah's television presence is defined largely by her relationship to the film's diegetic audience, the watchers of "The Truman Show" program. Even as she engages in tense, heated conversation with her TV husband, she constantly strives to maintain her awareness of the viewing audience, posing and pitching products to them. Hannah's composed product-pitching demonstrates not only her awareness of that audience, but her psychological distance from the constructed world of the program. She remains emotionally undeterred to the point that she can disengage from her interactions, at least to the point of being able to break the fourth wall of "The Truman Show" just enough to make her pitches. This quality of Hannah's supports Linney's discussion of her character as a cold, calculating, money-driven actor who views her role on "The Truman Show" as a career stepping-stone.

However, the film creates opportunities for Hannah to lose her sense of emotional distance, and it is at these moments that we see other, more visceral aspects of her personality emerge. This transition from cold and composed to impulsively emotional occurs most clearly after Truman first confronts Hannah about his suspicions that something is not right in his world. Given that the film shows Christof relaying directions to Louis/Marlon during the latter's bridge-side conversation with Truman, we can assume that even before she confronts her TV husband, Hannah has already been made aware of his growing suspicions about his world's partially fictional nature. The scene thus presents Hannah with a situation in which maintaining her dual awareness is especially difficult, since she must act, toward Truman, as if nothing out of the ordinary is going on while simultaneously maintaining a full awareness that her job is to keep Truman believing in the fantasy world of Seahaven. Linney embodies this duality in her performance. As the scene begins, the camera pans right until Hannah, who is riding her bicycle home from work, has her face almost directly in the center of the frame. Linney adopts a steely-eyed, tight-lipped glare, subtly but clearly distinct from Hannah's usual forced smile, and for a moment, she affords the audience a brief glimpse of Hannah's personality before adopting the persona of Meryl. The film marks the boundary between Hannah and Meryl, between the outside world and the constructed world of Seahaven, by switching camera styles, from the non-diegetic camera that films Hannah to the diegetic camera filming "The Truman Show."[26] Immediately after this shift occurs, Hannah enters

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[26] The film marks the distinction between the non-diegetic and diegetic cameras by placing black, blurry marks in the corners of the frame to signal instances when the audience is viewing the film through the diegetic television cameras. Simone Knox addresses the film's use of such techniques to mark the boundary between the world of the show and the outside world in her essay, "Reading the Truman Show Inside Out." Director Peter Weir also briefly alludes to the technical aspects of this process in the "making-of" feature included in the film's DVD release ("Faux Finishing").

the frame wearing her "Meryl face," peeking into Truman's car with a wide-eyed yet concerned grin to check on Truman, who is waiting in the car's driver seat.

As Truman tells her to get into the car, Linney looks down and blinks unsteadily a few times, indicating a momentary break in the "Meryl" façade, but she quickly composes herself to try to allay Truman's suspicions. From here, Linney almost wordlessly conveys Hannah's struggle to stay in "performance mode," pasting Meryl's wide grin across her face, only to pull the corners of her mouth in to a purse-lipped look of rapt concern when Truman, intent on proving to her that something strange is afoot, becomes increasingly manic. She leans toward Truman, breathing heavily to convey Hannah's increasing anxiety, until she suddenly switches gears by getting back into character as Meryl, playfully and unsuccessfully admonishing Truman by uttering his name in a sing-song voice. As Truman continues to drive his point home, the best that Hannah can do to try to maintain normalcy is to meekly, desperately tell Truman, apropos of nothing that has occurred in the conversation so far, "You know, I invited Rita and Marlon for a barbeque on Sunday…" The statement's obvious contrivance demonstrates Hannah's inability to address, in any coherent way, Truman's psychological break from the world of the show.

Truman elects to disrupt the situation by spontaneously pulling the car into the road and driving wildly around town. As he and Hannah/Meryl drive over the bridge that leads out of town, Hannah becomes absolutely panicked, screaming at Truman to stop, her eyes gaping widely. I argue that, given the context established by the film, the raw emotion that Hannah displays here is not only an emotional response to danger, but a psychological break. Just as the world of "The Truman Show" is calculated, so is Meryl's

persona. As Truman begins to break apart from the constructed reality of the show, he brings Meryl along with him, and consequently, the calculating psychological mechanisms that allow Hannah to render Meryl's persona are short-circuited, leaving Hannah emotionally exposed in a way that the film implies has rarely or never happened in her past interactions with Truman. Hannah's reactions come about in response not only to danger, but, more generally, to the raw emotions set off in her in the process of this psychological break. Even when Truman and Hannah/Meryl safely make it over the bridge, the smile that covers Hannah's face is much different from the one she typically adopts in her "Meryl" persona. Linney affects an open, gaping grin, rather than the tightly locked, upturned smile that typically crosses Hannah's face when she is "in character."

Hannah's reactions convey what I am arguing is a specific perspective that the film takes on the relationship between psychology and social context. The role of social context is crucial here. Hannah/Meryl and Truman share a specific context for their relationship that has been honed and developed over time: each knows, or can at least reasonably guess at, how the other will react to certain situations. This is confirmed in the film when, as the couple approaches the bridge and Truman stares tensely at the water, Hannah says, "Oh Truman…You knew this would happen. You know you can't drive over water." Hannah knows about Truman's fear of water, and her knowledge of her TV husband's psychology informs her reactions to him. In other, more serene moments in their relationship, this shared context allows Hannah a sense of safety, as well as a measure of control and emotional distance. This is why she is able to step back from her interactions with Truman in order to deliver product pitches. When Truman begins to break from this shared context, however, it forces Hannah to break out as well, losing, in

the process, her emotional distance. Her fervor comes about at least partly as a result of this loss of emotional distance and control.

While this loss of control is, for Hannah, frightening, it is exactly what Truman is seeking in his quest to escape from his televised environment. The film explicates both the inter-personal context shared by Truman and Hannah/Meryl and Truman's persistent desire to escape this particular social context in an extended flashback scene embedded in the "Truman Show" program. The flashback begins with Truman and Marlon, as college students, dressed in marching band uniforms. As Marlon tries to get Truman's attention by playing a trumpet into his ear, Truman's glance is arrested by a young woman, who turns out to be Sylvia playing the part of "Lauren" in the show, sitting cross-legged under a tree, the camera performing a slow zoom to suggest Truman's growing interest. As Truman and Sylvia/Lauren exchange glances, Hannah/Meryl, dressed in a cheerleader's uniform, stumbles into Truman, blurting out, "Excuse me! Hi! I'm so sorry I fell on you like that! I've just been such a klutz all day!" It is clear from her greeting (She tells Truman, "I'm Meryl.") that this is the first time that Hannah/Meryl and Truman have met (and we can assume, based on the contrivances we've seen the show's crew pull off so far, that Hannah has been instructed to run into Truman like this), and yet even at this germinal stage in their relationship, the film emphasizes the couple's conventional familiarity. The school uniforms that Truman, Louis/Marlon, and Hannah/Meryl wear emphasize the characters' adherence to prescribed routines, particularly since both marching band and cheerleading are activities that require tightly scripted choreography. The uniforms' style is almost garishly conventional, especially in the case of Hannah/Meryl, who wears a sweater top in a faded tan color that appears straight out of

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somebody's stereotype of a 1950s sitcom. The camera noticeably avoids focusing on Hannah/Meryl's face, taking a distanced perspective on her and Truman's interactions, while simultaneously reverting to close-ups of both Sylvia's face and Truman's face when he is staring at Sylvia. At these moments, Carrey looks in the direction of the camera with a deep, piercing glare, one that contrasts noticeably with the wide-grinned mugging he brings to the performance during Truman's routine, day-to-day interactions. This scene emphasizes Sylvia's role in the film as an embodiment of a potential world of experience for Truman outside of his conventional life. The emphasis placed on Truman's (and Sylvia's) eyes suggests a raw, deep feeling that is absent from Truman's comparatively mechanical flirting with Meryl, which Carrey even performs with a slight eye roll, in order to suggest Truman's lack of engagement.

Sylvia, as the outsider who makes it into the world of "The Truman Show," bumps up against Truman's limited perspective while simultaneously drawing him out of it. When, in the flashback scene, she does meet Truman face-to-face in the college library, the pair's interaction initially emphasizes Truman's psychological status as an individual caught up in and attached, emotionally, to Seahaven, the world that has been constructed for him. Noticing Sylvia's books, he mentions that she is studying Japanese and that her name (the name that we can assume has been given to her by the show's producers) is "Lauren," facts that Sylvia hesitates before confirming. It is clear here that Sylvia, uninterested in maintaining the illusions of "The Truman Show," invests these so-called "facts" with little valence, but that to Truman, such information is very real. Sylvia's dual identity, as both Lauren and Sylvia, lends her a detachment from Truman's world and mindset, much as in the case of Hannah/Meryl, the difference here being, of

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course, that Sylvia is trying to draw Truman out of the world of Seahaven, while Hannah attempts to keep him confined there.

More importantly, Truman and Sylvia's discussion illustrates the way in which the psychological context provided for Truman by his upbringing in Seahaven shapes his experience. When Sylvia tells Truman, "I'm not allowed to talk you," Truman playfully replies, "Yeah, well, I can understand; I'm a pretty dangerous character." He then proceeds to try to ask Sylvia on a date, assuming that her reluctance to talk to him was simply a way of playing hard-to-get. Carrey, in this scene, adopts the wide-eyed look of a placative animal, emphasizing Truman's boyish, rapt fascination with Sylvia. She clearly represents to him a world apart from his own, but his ignorance of this world renders him utterly fascinated by this mysterious young woman. He treats the conversation, accordingly, as an occasion for light-hearted flirting. Sylvia, on the other hand, with her sharp, piercing eyes, is clearly engaged in the conversation at another level, fascinated by Truman, but fascinated only from her position as somebody who knows who he is and what he is up against. Where Truman, because of his cognitive limitations, is left in an enrapturing fog of mystery, Sylvia, precisely because of what she *does* know, responds to Truman's fascination with empathy, acting on a romantic, yet detached and almost maternal desire to save Truman from forces which he doesn't even know exist.

Truman eventually notices that Sylvia is wearing a pin emblazoned with the question: "HOW'S IT GOING TO END?" He comments, "I like your pin. I was wondering that myself." The pin is an apt embodiment of the pair's feelings. Both Truman and Sylvia know that the pronoun "it" refers to "The Truman Show"; the difference is that Sylvia knows that the show is a constructed world within a larger one,

whereas for Truman, the show is *the* world, the only thing he has known up to this point in his life. The scene in the library ends with Sylvia telling Truman, "If we don't go now, it won't happen. So what do you want to do?" She leaves the referent of "it" vague, further adding to Truman's sense of mystery. As she completes this line, the camera performs an extreme close-up shot that emphasizes Sylvia's eyes while cutting the rest of her face out of the frame. The shot simultaneously conveys Sylvia's intensity while implying Truman's intense, focused glare, suggesting that this question, and this moment, represent a key turning point for Truman.

Memories of Truman

It is clear that Truman's vision of Sylvia's eyes persists in his memory, for when the extended flashback ends, the film cuts back to a scene of Truman, alone in his basement, staring wistfully at Sylvia's sweater, which he has apparently held onto even though he has not seen Sylvia for years. He looks closely at her "HOW'S IT GOING TO END?" button, which is still pinned to the old sweater, then pulls out a framed picture of Hannah/Meryl, which he turns around and pulls the backing out of, revealing a different picture of a woman's face. This picture is composed of various parts of fashion magazines that Truman has cut out and pasted together. Truman pulls out several images of eyes that he has cut from magazines, putting them onto the composite image of the woman's face, muttering "Close, but no cigar," until he finds a pair of eyes with which he appears satisfied. The juxtaposition of this scene with the flashback to Truman's interaction with Sylvia (particularly the camera's close focus on Sylvia's eyes) makes it clear that Truman is trying to recreate Sylvia's image. Significantly, he hides the picture

of the recreated Sylvia on the other side of Meryl's picture. Whereas Meryl appears on the front side of the picture frame, smiling and composed in the midst of the frame's decorative appearance, Sylvia appears on the opposite side, in a secret compartment, represented only through Truman's imaginative recreation. The picture frame acts as a visual metaphor for the emerging duality of Truman's psychology; he is caught in the contrived, pre-fabricated world of his life with Meryl, the world that is made visible to him, but he seeks the hidden world outside of this life, a world embodied, both for him and for the film's viewers, by Sylvia.

The metaphorical significance of Truman's magazine composite also operates on a more psychologically revealing level. Truman composes the image in order to visually represent Sylvia, who exists, for him, only as an ineffable memory, eternally present as an abstract idea yet perpetually absent to Truman in any physical sense. All that Truman can do to represent Sylvia, who is outside of Seahaven for the entirety of the film's real-time chronology, is to compile scraps and fragments of images that he has obtained from within Seahaven. Based on the context established by the film, and given the amount of control that the producers of "The Truman Show" exercise over Truman's world, we can presume that the magazines that Truman uses to recreate Sylvia's image are ones that have been allowed on to the set by those same producers.[27] Just as he wants to represent Sylvia on the page, Truman wants to obtain a mental image of the world beyond the limitations of the show's set. He can only try to imagine this world, however, by observing what goes on inside the cloistered setting of Seahaven.

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[27] For more detailed analyses of the significance of the producers' control and surveillance of Truman, see Dusty Lavoie, "Escaping the Panopticon: Utopia, Hegemony, and Performance in Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*" and J. MacGregor Wise, "Mapping the Culture of Control: Seeing Through *The Truman Show*."

It is important to keep in mind here that Truman is aware, throughout nearly the entirety of the film, that something is not quite right in his world, as indicated by the satellite camera that comes crashing to Earth in front of Truman early in the film's runtime. In fact, Truman's extended flashback scene with Sylvia suggests that even before the film's real-time chronology has begun, he has been suspicious about the nature of Seahaven, haunted by the mystery of who Lauren Garland is and what lies beyond the frothy ocean. Whatever his suspicions, however, Truman is only aware that *something* is wrong, unaware of precisely what the problem is, as evidenced by his vague explanation to Marlon that "the world revolves around me *somehow*," or the fact that he maintains at least enough trust in Meryl to confront her with his suspicions (emphasis added). Truman's awareness is so limited precisely because he is able to piece together his vision of the true nature of Seahaven only through clues gathered from within that world, such as the lines of traffic that spontaneously appear when he tries to drive out of town, or the car that drives by his house on a repeating loop.

Dusty Lavoie, writing on the film's representation of media misrepresentation, writes that "the film's diegetic audience is essentially encouraged to misread Truman's unknowingness as a utopian ideal: ignorance is bliss" (55). Certainly, the show's audience members, as depicted in the film, actively root for and identify with Truman, pulling for him to succeed in a series of cut-away shots that display their rapt attention to the program. I want to emphasize, however, that although the producers of "The Truman Show" want the program's audience to believe in the image of Truman's happy life, that audience actually roots for Truman, during the film's climactic ending scenes, to get out of Seahaven and discover the outside world, not to accept the blissful ignorance of his

televised lifestyle. More importantly, Truman is only partially ignorant. Even though he isn't sure exactly what is wrong with his world, he does realize that something is amiss, and it is this partial knowledge that fills him with so much suspicion and paranoia. Rather than ignorance being bliss, Truman finds that partial knowledge is a cause of anxiety. I point this out in order to emphasize evidence for my argument that the film is less interested in portraying Truman's story as a search for truth than it is in depicting the changes in conscious experience that accompany his movement from one version of the truth to another. Truman is beset with anxiety the more he feels that other people know something that he doesn't, or that there is some way of thinking about the world, embodied by the mysterious Sylvia, that is inaccessible to him.

This sense of the relativity of truth is accentuated in the film's ending scenes, which support a reading of the film that sees Truman's story not so much as a quest for some kind of truth beyond the appearances that make up everyday life as one for personal growth, a journey away from the routine and familiar and into the unfamiliar. One of the most striking aspects of the film's ending is how un-dramatic it is, at least from Truman's perspective, and how much the ending's lack of dramatic climax undercuts the desires of the producers of "The Truman Show" to effect a big "TV moment" for their program's finale. The main action of the ending scenes consists of Truman getting on to a boat and sailing out to sea, apparently uncertain of precisely what he will find, but driven to seek what lies beyond his home. As Truman rides out to sea, Christof instructs his crew to have the TV cameras get a shot of Truman's face, remarking "That's our hero shot." Clearly, he is interested in mining Truman's escape for dramatic potential and turning the story into a television drama, with Truman in the lead part. Christof is apparently

successful in this goal, as multiple cut-away shots show fans of "The Truman Show" watching the program at home and in a bar, hanging on Truman's every move.

However, while the show's production team engages the viewing audience so effectively by molding Truman's actions into a narrative arc (as they have apparently been doing for the entire thirty-year duration of Truman's life), Truman's actual encounter with the edge of Seahaven is rendered, at the non-diegetic level, far more anti-climactic. As Truman's boat approaches the edge of the ocean, the film shows him, in what is clearly (based on the black edging around the frame) a shot from one of the film's diegetic television cameras, staring purposefully out to sea, in a shot clearly reminiscent of Christof's "hero shot." A dramatic soundtrack continues to play as the film cuts to a non-diegetic camera filming Truman's boat while it continues to sail. The non-diegetic camera remains notably still, not even following the boat, creating a sense of distance from the onscreen action. This sense of distance is accentuated when the boat, reaching its destination, crashes into the wall of the "Truman Show" set (which is painted to look like the sky). Rather than portray this as a dramatic moment, the film's non-diegetic crew renders it simply and naturalistically. The soundtrack comes to a sudden halt, while the bow of the ship creates a small hole in the set wall. While Truman's successful journey to the edge of Seaheaven is, for the audience of "The Truman Show," a major triumph, it appears, for Truman himself, as a simpler, more fundamental turning point in his life.

This simplicity persists in Truman's final farewell to Seahaven and to the TV audience watching him at home. As Truman prepares to walk through a door in the wall of the show's set, Christof interrupts him by telling him, presumably through a gigantic loudspeaker contained on-set, "Truman, you can speak. We can hear you." As Christof

speaks, the film cuts to a shot of a sunny, slightly cloudy sky, suggesting that Christof's voice is being projected from the heavens and furthering what several critics have pointed out are obvious signs that Christof is meant to function as a God-figure to Truman.[28] Christof chummily implores Truman, "Say something, goddammit! You're on television," once again emphasizing Truman's role in the television broadcast over his personal experience. Truman replies, "In case I don't see ya', good afternoon, good evening, and goodnight." Viewers should recognize this line from one of the film's very first scenes, as Truman uses it to greet his next-door neighbors before heading to work one morning. Carrey even punctuates both readings of the line with similar movements, affecting a big, contrived-looking grin and tilting his head to the side after delivering it. Truman's repetition of this line encourages viewers to treat his exit as a self-aware gesture of playful defiance, as he is clearly playing with Christof's expectations, uttering the same line with which he has probably opened his day for about the last decade or so, even as Christof clearly expects him to produce some kind of grand exit or gesture that will provide a fitting coda to the thirty-year run time of "The Truman Show."

The simplicity of Truman's gesture emphasizes the lack of any "grand truth" to be found in the show's ending and suggests that both "The Truman Show" program and *The Truman Show* film are not large-scale philosophical statements so much as depictions of one character's changing conscious experience, his movement from mental isolation and familiar social contexts to something less familiar and less known. The film emphasizes the unimportance of the "true" nature of Truman's world by conspicuously avoiding any shots of his life outside of Seahaven, instead ending with Truman walking through the door, followed by shots of the audience of "The Truman Show" celebrating its hero's

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[28] Most notably, Verarde reads the film as a "Gnostic fairy tale."

apparent triumph before two audience members end the film by changing the television channel. The actual content of Truman's experience outside of Seahaven is unimportant to the story that the film wants to tell; what matters is the personal, psychological journey that Truman has gone through, from mental stability to destabilizing anxiety and, finally, acceptance as he moves through the door, knowing that he won't know what is on the other side until he gets there.

The film is able to foreground this psychological journey by externalizing Truman's psychology. By turning the entire town of Seahaven and the entire set of "The Truman Show" into visual and spatial analogues for the limits of Truman's consciousness, the film is able to present his psychological transformation in physical form, rendering this rocky journey from staid familiarity to the raw emotion that he feels in the midst of the crashing sea waves. As Truman's experience on the waves mirrors the tumultuous disruptions overtaking his consciousness, the walls of the film's massive television set reflect his mental isolation, that singular set of cognitive limitations that Truman, and no other person in the film, is beset by. While it can be easy to read the set of "The Truman Show" as a fake world against which to contrast the "real world" outside, it more accurately represents, as I've argued here, the particular, individualized social and psychological contexts that define Truman as a character. By journeying outside of these contexts, Truman is escaping not only Seahaven, but his own, outmoded mind.

Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that one unique, and prevalent, conception of consciousness in contemporary literature is a model of the mind as operating with a high degree of independence and isolation from social and physical surroundings. The four works that I have analyzed each portray their protagonist's consciousness as having just this kind of autonomy. Consequently, consciousness becomes, in these works, its own private world, distinctly individualized to extreme degrees. This is not to suggest that these novels portray consciousness as somehow completely separate from the world. After all, all conscious thought must be about something or some things, and those things must necessarily exist in the world. These works do, however, suggest a degree of independence for character consciousness that exceeds common novelistic conventions. While the mind and its surroundings are clearly symbiotic, they are also conceptually separate, with the mind able to process information freely and independently, leaving characters in mental worlds of their own making.

These works each suggest similar, yet crucially distinct points of view on their characters' cognitive independence. David Markson's novels develop the most balanced presentation of this conceptual separation. His unique prose forms enact a mind/world distinction through their typographical presentation, as his late novels are, I argue, divided into separate sections for the abstract world of fictional consciousness and the concrete world of non-fictional environments. Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*

develops the most optimistic outlook for mind/world separation, portraying the idiosyncrasy of its protagonist's thoughts as a means to develop a personalized vision of the world that celebrates the quotidian objects populating everyday life in an American office. David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion*, on the other hand, reads as a dark shadow version of *The Mezzanine*, portraying its characters' cognitive independence as means of alienating them not only from their peers, but from any deeper sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. Finally, *The Truman Show* demonstrates how this cognitive independence can function in film form, using mise-en-scène, acting, and plot elements to portray its protagonist's mental separateness from his friends, family, and acquaintances. The film portrays Truman's separateness as a mode of paranoia, and his mental isolation leaves him wondering whom, if anyone, he can truly trust.

In each of these works, characters' cognitive independence leads to different results. In *The Mezzanine*, Howie's mental flights of fancy lead him towards the view that he can mechanize, or automate, his own consciousness. For Markson, the separateness of consciousness and history actually accentuate their symbiosis, and his novels' plots (such as they are) are built on the ways in which individual lives intertwine with, and are in fact inseparable from, historical milieu. Wallace views the mind as something of a prison, inherently isolated from all else. His fiction and his own public statements demonstrate his commitment to portraying solipsism as an inescapable facet of human mental life. Finally, *The Truman Show*'s portrayal of paranoia ends on an optimistic note, as the film becomes a story that is, I argue, less about discovering truth than it is about its protagonist's capacity to transform his own conscious experience from rote routine to raw

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emotionality. In the film, as in all of the works I have analyzed, it is the vision of consciousness as a distinct entity that makes this transformation possible.

One of the limitations of this study is its close focus on contemporary American fiction. Other time periods and cultures are likely to provide fruitful areas of inquiry in the study of fictional conceptions of the mind/world relationship. For example, modernist fiction's close focus on consciousness would make it ideal subject for the approach I have used here. I would argue, however, that major modernist works do present a different take on the mind/world division that I analyze here. For example, Joyce's *Ulysses* famously incorporates a multitude of voices and registers, evoking the melding of multiple conscious agents, as opposed to the sustained focus on individual consciousness found in the works of Baker and Wallace. Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, to take another example, focuses closely on individual minds, but does so in the process of alternating between various characters' perspectives, emphasizing the connections between minds, rather than the separateness of the mind and the social world that exists in Wallace's stories. Such distinctions would make these modernist works worth studying for the unique properties they bring to the art of depicting mind/world relationships.

It is important to remember, of course, that the works of Baker, Wallace, and Markson are parts of a historical continuum of writers who experiment with the structure and form of fiction in order to emphasize particular elements of conscious experience. As I have argued, the specific element that these writers emphasize is the mind's capacity to process experience with some degree of independence from its surroundings. Such emphases evoke a model of the mind as not only abstract (as it is in much other literature), but independent and/or isolated. These writers tell a particular story of the

mind, one which, as compelling as it is, has its own limitations and inconsistencies. Whatever these limitations may be, however, we can rest assured that stories about minds will continue to proliferate in the American canon. This project presents one way to narrate the American mind, but it is far from the final word.

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