Pay attention! The war between concentration and distraction in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* and Adam Kalkin’s *Tennis Academy*

Text of the lecture given by Daniel Davis Wood, School of Culture and Communication, on 1 September 2011 as part of the Adam Kalkin Tennis Academy lunchtime lecture series at the Ian Potter Museum of Art.

In 1996, just after publishing his monumental novel *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace embarked on a book tour in the company of the journalist and novelist David Lipsky. Over the course of several days, the two men discussed a wide array of subjects related to *Infinite Jest*—sometimes directly, sometimes only tangentially—including two subjects that inform what I want to discuss here. The first is what Wallace hoped to achieve with such a self-consciously ‘difficult’ novel, what he wanted the novel to do:

Wallace: I’m talking about what it feels like to be alive. And how formal and structural stuff in avant-garde things I think can vibrate, can represent on a page, what it feels like to be alive right now. ... If your life makes linear sense to you, then you’re either very strange, or you might be just a neurologically healthy person—who’s automatically able to decoct, organize, do triage on the amount [stimuli] coming at you all the time. [...] There’s stuff that really good fiction can do that other forms of art can’t do as well. And the big thing, the big thing seems to be, sort of leapin’ over that wall of self, and portraying inner experience. And setting up ... a kind of intimate conversation between two consciences. And the trick is gonna be finding a way to do it at a time ... for a generation, whose relation to long sustained linear verbal communication is fundamentally different [i.e. weaker than that of earlier generations]. I mean, one of the reasons why the book is structured strangely is it’s at least an attempt to be mimetic, structurally, to a kind of inner experience.

The second subject is whether or not a work of art so conceived could ever be successfully adapted into other art forms:

Wallace: The stuff that I do, um, I’m used to, um, not making a whole lot of money on. If I make a whole lot of money on the foreign sales of this, I’ll be happy. Nobody’s given me that indication yet.

Lipsky: Film sale? Probably unfilmable ...

Wallace: Which maybe will make it rather easier to take money for it. Knowing that I will never have to see the artifact itself. Unless it’s like one of these forty-eight-hour Warholian, bring-a-catheter-to-the-theater experimental things.

Here, then, I want to build on Wallace’s comments in two ways. First, I want to explore in more detail what *Infinite Jest* does to its readers, what sort of reading experience it generates. Then I want to consider how that experience might possibly be translated into other art forms—which will eventually bring me to Adam Kalkin’s *Tennis Academy*.

*Infinite Jest* and the reading experience

*Infinite Jest* is a megalithic novel. Totalling some 1079 pages, its main narrative takes up 900-odd pages of small text in tight margins while its last 200 pages consist of more than 300 endnotes in even smaller text and tighter margins. As such, the first and most obvious thing to say about what it does to its readers is that it requires serious, prolonged effort to pay attention to it. ‘It can’t be read at a crowded café, or with a child on one’s lap,’ says Wallace’s fellow novelist, Dave Eggers, in his foreword to the tenth anniversary edition of the book. ‘I spent about a month of my young life [reading
it and] I did little else. And I can’t say it was always a barrel of monkeys. It was occasionally trying. It demands your full attention.’

I agree. You can’t devour it in a single sitting. You can try, but sooner or later your eyes will sting, your stomach will grumble, your body will crave sleep, your bladder will threaten to burst. You can try, but sooner or later you’ll need to get up and go places—to work, to the shops—or you’ll need to take a breather and listen to music or watch television, or you’ll need to make, change, or keep your plans to meet up with others, friends, colleagues, in the world beyond the novel’s pages. *Infinite Jest*, as a physical object, is so constituted as to compete for your attention with the demands of the body you inhabit and the stimuli of the world you occupy. Moreover, it competes with those things so strongly, and over such a length of time, that what it ends up calling to your attention is just how completely your attention is at the mercy of phenomena beyond your conscious control. At the core of *Infinite Jest*, then, is an issue that David Foster Wallace took, here and elsewhere, as the preeminent problem of human experience: what he calls in his recently-published posthumous novel, *The pale king*, ‘the terrible power of attention and what you pay attention to’.

But there’s much more to *Infinite Jest* than that. At the same time that the physical process of reading the novel foregrounds the problem of paying attention, the content of the novel—the narrative, the characters, the prose—exacerbates that problem and, yes, draws attention to it. It does this primarily through its five major narrative strands which range from spellbinding sensationalism to mind-numbing tedium and thus attract, test, and compete for your attention. Set in a post-apocalyptic America under a sort of dictatorship, the novel’s broadest narrative strand tells the story of the cataclysm that has rendered the American northeast uninhabitable and resulted in the installation of a Presidential demagogue. Roaming across this dystopian North America is a secretive cadre of wheelchair-bound assassins, and so a slightly narrower narrative strand follows them as they canvass the continent in search of a weapon with which to launch a terrorist attack. A third narrative strand focuses on the novel’s absent centre, the film director James Incandenza. Before he committed suicide some years prior to the narrative action, he supposedly created a film so absorbing, so engrossing, that anyone who sits down to watch it will never stand up again, will be so captivated by it that they feel compelled to watch it on an endless loop until their bodies give way and they expire. Then, tucked away in a corner of Boston, Massachusetts, right on the inhabitable edge of the United States, there is a halfway house for recovering drug addicts whose torturous stories are also told in *Infinite Jest*; and finally, next door to the halfway house, there is a Tennis Academy for dozens of young athletes whose exceptional sporting abilities are matched only by their unbelievable psychological difficulties.

Far from remaining disconnected, however, these five narrative strands are bound together in various outlandish ways. The American dictatorship has annexed Canada as a *de facto* American state. The terrorists in search of a weapon are Quebecois separatists intent on attacking the American public in order to achieve independence for Quebec. The weapon they seek is the master copy of Incandenza’s fatal film, which they plan to broadcast nationwide to decimate the population. The problem is that they don’t know where to find the master copy. Maybe it is hidden at the halfway house, where its lead actress—once Incandenza’s creative muse—has just checked herself in. Or maybe it is located at the Tennis Academy, which was actually founded by Incandenza and is now run by his widow and attended by his sons.

Ultimately, though, these narrative connections seem to me almost irrelevant—essential to the novel’s plot, perhaps, but distractions from its performance, from what it does—because the narrative as a whole remains unresolved, inconclusive, and thus leaves such connections to form a sort of closed circuit that ends up ending nowhere. Then, in addition to these directionless connections, the narrative is bloated with scores of parenthetical asides and long philosophical ruminations made up of sentences that unspool for hundreds of words at a stretch, and it is broken up by hundreds of endnotes that repeatedly drag you out of the main text, pull you ahead to the book’s final pages, and then leave you struggling to find where you left off and slip back into the story; and some of those endnotes even refer to earlier or later endnotes which you either have already read or have yet to read. Bottom line: *Infinite Jest* persistently disrupts its own flow with bursts of seemingly aimless prose
and narrative distractions that toy with the attention of its readers. Concentration and distraction are at war with one another in the act of reading *Infinite jest* as well as in the events described in its pages. As you read it, you are alternately forced and enticed to look back over the ground you have covered or to glance ahead to unexplored territory, in each case diverting your attention from what is right before your eyes.

When this happens, and when this is how the novel competes for your attention with bodily impulses and worldly stimuli, you share in the same fundamental experience as the characters introduced in *Infinite jest*. At some stage or another, almost every character falls victim to paying attention to something that distracts them from answering their more immediate needs. Here is a film so engrossing that its viewers neglect to honour their obligations to themselves and the world around them. Here is a motley crew of drug addicts who detail the minutiae of life in a halfway house in order to distract themselves from the ready availability of drugs around them and from the cravings they feel in their veins. Here is James Incandenza committing suicide—he sticks his head in a microwave and cooks himself to death; his scalp splits open under the pressure and his brains leak onto the floor—and and now here is his son, Hal, returning home from tennis practice to discover his father’s remains, stepping inside the house and thinking to himself, purely reflexively, ‘That something smelled delicious! ... That it’d been four hours plus since lunchtime and I’d worked hard and played hard and I was starved. That the saliva had started the minute I came through the door. That golly something smells delicious was my first reaction!'

Hal Incandenza offers an extreme example of what I am trying to identify here, as a series of bodily impulses are triggered by the worldly stimuli of a grotesque sort of well-cooked meat. Still, what Hal remembers, what he pays attention to after the fact when he discusses his discovery with the people around him, is not the horror of what he discovered but rather how he himself behaved in the moment of the discovery. Hal lives as if he is always watching himself perform in the movie of his own life. He cannot be here, now, living in the present moment; he sees himself as a spectacle observed by spectators, as a source of distraction who captures the attention of others engaged in their own struggle with bodily impulses and worldly stimuli. And, for David Foster Wallace, this sort of infinite regress of paying attention, this phenomenon in which one finds one’s attention drawn to the fact that the attention of others has been drawn to oneself, is, at one and the same time, the ultimate horror, the ultimate thrill, and the ultimate joke. He literalises it in *Infinite jest* when he describes one of Incandenza’s films in which a camera located inside a cinema runs a live feed straight up to the screen, so the film consists of the audience watching itself watch itself *ad infinitum* and ends only when the irate audience storms out. And, perhaps most memorably, he pursues it to an overwhelming extreme when he describes an incredible game played by the athletes at the Tennis Academy ...

The game is called Eschaton. You take a tennis court and broadcast a map of the world on it. Players form small teams and position themselves on the map in order to claim a particular territory. Then, using tennis balls to stand in for thermonuclear weapons, they launch strikes at the territory of opposing teams. The aim of the game is to annihilate as much enemy territory as possible while also defending your own territory from annihilation; but, in *Infinite jest*, David Foster Wallace doesn’t just describe the game as an observer looking in at it from outside. Instead, he crawls inside the heads of the players in order to detail their anxieties, their strategies, their confusions, their frustrations—their distractions—as they wage war on one another, as they launch defences against incoming strikes, as they target enemy territory; and as they deal with bodily injuries that impede their playing, as they consider whether their opponents can tell that they are exhausted or on drugs, and as they too attempt to crawl inside the heads of the people around them—to figure out how they themselves are seen by their opponents, to consider how their opponents will accordingly alter their playing styles—all the while also attempting to just hit the damn balls. So bodies ache, balls zoom past, territories are lost and gained, strategies based on past games are devised and guesses at future developments in this game are made, and through it all the reader struggles to discern the broader scenario from the overabundance of details. Eschaton, then, becomes something like a microcosm of the whole of *Infinite jest*, alive with energy, almost vibrating, unleashing so much attention-grabbing activity that one does not know where to look—and, in attempting to gain some sort of focus despite the novel's
efforts to resist it, one finds one’s attention folding back from the book onto oneself, onto the extent to which one’s capacity to pay attention is beyond conscious control.

I would not say that it is an easy feat for an author to write a novel that generates this sort of reading experience. David Foster Wallace devoted years of labour and agony to *Infinite jest*. But I would say that if someone like Wallace wanted to generate this sort of experience for another person, then the novel would be his art form of choice. Written words possess an inherent ambiguity which requires a reader to concentrate, to pay attention, in order to generate an experience from them, in order to make the words more meaningful than scrawls of ink on a page; and so an artwork comprised of written words is perhaps best able to generate for its readers the sort of experience that Wallace wanted to offer. But, of course, this raises an intriguing question. Is it possible to adapt *Infinite jest* into another art form in a way that replicates, or at least is true to, how the novel plays with the attention of its readers?

**The Tennis Academy and experiential adaptation**

There have been several attempts at adapting certain aspects of *Infinite jest* into other art forms. For instance, in January and February 2009, the LeRoy Neiman Gallery at Columbia University opened an exhibition entitled *A failed entertainment: selections from the filmography of James O Incandenza.* Comprised of various cinematic works by MFA students at Columbia, the exhibition offered some very literal adaptations of one of the most overpowering passages in *Infinite jest*. Early in the novel, readers are directed to an eight-page endnote that spells out the ‘Complete Filmography of James Incandenza’, ‘a detailed list of over 70 industrial, documentary, conceptual, advertorial, technical, parodic, dramatic, non-commercial, and non-dramatic commercial works’. The LeRoy Neiman Gallery ‘commissioned artists and filmmakers to re-create seminal works from Incandenza’s filmography’—excluding, of course, the fatal film. Their aims, I think, were fairly easily accomplished, since that endnote spells out the finest details of what each film was about, what sort of film stock was used, and so on. But that didn’t make the exhibition any less successful, and it continues to tour the United States today.

As time went on, *A failed entertainment* turned out to be the first in what is now a series of efforts to honour *Infinite jest* via artistic adaptation after the death of David Foster Wallace in 2008. At about the same time, in early 2009, the photographer Tim Bean noted down every single real-world location mentioned in the novel and took a snapshot of each one, then he uploaded his pictures to the Internet and geo-tagged them to generate an online map that leads viewers through a sort of virtual tour of the novel. Then, in mid-2010, the German designer ‘Jonny’ took a stab at creating a character map of *Infinite jest*, charting, connecting, and attempting to depict the interactions of and relationships between the novel’s characters. That might not sound like an especially artistic undertaking, but Jonny tapped into the emerging ‘information is beautiful’ movement—a movement in which statistics, demographics, and other mathematical data are transformed into graphs and flowcharts which are in turn aestheticised and beautified—and although the first result was a little rough around the edges, it provided the American designer Sam Potts with inspiration to improve on it. The result of his labour is, I think, a stunning reinvention of the original character map which evokes, for me, the night sky—the pinpoints of stars and constellations, and satellites orbiting larger celestial bodies—in order to visually represent the movements of characters who collectively form what reviews of *Infinite jest* often describe as a galaxy or a universe of listless, freewheeling souls.

More recently, earlier this year, the graphic designer Chris Ayers began producing what is an ongoing series of promotional material, magazine spreads, and so on, for the corporations, events, products, and places in *Infinite jest*. His work includes posters for the films of James Incandenza and advertising material for tennis tournaments like the Southwest Junior Invitational sponsored by the fictional fast food chain Whataburger. And, just last month, the film and television director Michael Schur—a longstanding and outspoken admirer of *Infinite jest*—paired up with the band The Decemberists to create a music video in which actors staged a real-life game of Eschaton. Unfortunately I’m not technically adept enough to embed the video here, but the *New York Times*
website has it in full. It doesn’t quite work for me in conveying the ferocity of the game as described by David Foster Wallace, although it’s a good first attempt at visual adaptation.

None of these works, however, manage to replicate or honour the attention-grabbing and attention-challenging project of their source material—and this brings me to Adam Kalkin’s Tennis Academy, which seems to me to succeed where its predecessors do not.

The Tennis Academy isn’t just, or isn’t quite, something drawn from the novel and brought into the real world. It doesn’t just represent an aspect of the novel’s contents, and so it doesn’t position itself entirely outside the novel. It engages with the novel’s purpose, it sympathises with what the novel tries to do, and it attempts to translate the experience that the novel generates for its readers into another art form by incorporating spectacle and spectatorship into the experience it generates. You can see this the more you stop just looking at it and begin moving around and through it. Approaching the tennis court from outside, and looking at whoever might be standing or playing inside it, you’ll find your attention drawn to a human subject that will sooner or later find its own attention drawn back to you. Then, stepping inside to reposition yourself as the spectatorial subject—faced with bodily demands as you rush around the court, overburdened by worldly stimuli as the compressed space of the half-size court brings the boundaries of the experiential world ever closer to you—you’ll find your own attention competing with your body and with the world around you as your attention is drawn outside the court to the spectators who are paying attention to you and then folds back in on itself so that you, as a subject deemed worthy of attention by others, begin to pay attention to your own attention-worthiness.

The Tennis Academy may represent only one tiny aspect of Wallace’s titanic novel, and it may even be the only static work of art to be inspired by a novel that fetishizes perpetual motion. But even so, it opens up a certain space for those who approach it and it generates a certain experience for those who choose to occupy that space, and the experience it generates replicates the experience that Wallace’s novel generates as it opens up a similar space to be occupied by its readers. In that sense, The Tennis Academy strips away a lot of the poetic embroidery of Infinite Jest to re-create just one aspect of it, one location from one of its major narrative strands; but fill up the Tennis Academy with human beings, use it as a venue for human interaction, and it does real justice to David Foster Wallace and his work: it echoes what the novel does to its readers across 1079 pages but distils it all down into one single, shocking jolt.

Notes

2. http://www.flickr.com/photos/25383051@N05/sets/72157612365092520/map

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