The New Humanists: Literary and Cinematic Reactions to the End of the

Postmodern Era

English Senior Honors Thesis

By Max Jaffe

Introduction

Over the past fifty years, Postmodernism has been one of the most prominent literary discourses in the United States. The ideas associated with Postmodernism have intertwined with our culture and shaped much of the contemporary literary landscape. The postmodern concepts of the absence of truth, the incapability of originality, fragmentation, and the literary techniques that have spawned from these ideas, such as circularity, self-reference, hopelessness, and irony have become staples of many current texts. From these works, we have learned of our utter unoriginality, the inability of the individual to view the world outside of their own, singular perspective, the lack of attainable truth, and the insurmountable gap between the subject and the object. But most of all, we have learned that there are no solutions to these problems.

Yet, there seems to have been an undeniable response in the current literary world to the dominant postmodern ethos. There has been an attempt by some authors and artists to pick up the pieces that Postmodernism has torn down, stand on top of the rubble and ask, "Where do we go from here?" They have accepted many of the theories of Postmodernism, but have decided to move forward beyond them, taking what they say into account, but recognizing that dwelling on the notion of the world as 'truthless' and hopeless is no longer productive or relevant, and that we must move forward from Postmodernism.

These authors and filmmakers have formed a new literary movement that I have termed, "The New Humanists." The New Humanists react to and look beyond the postmodern and into a new realm. Specifically, these authors and filmmakers

have four common themes that displace them outside the postmodern: the "common human experience," is the main concern of the text (as opposed to the questions of truth, reality, perception, inauthenticity etc.), empathy and sincerity are employed over irony, hope is expressed over hopelessness, and postmodern ideologies are encompassed and accepted to better understand human experience, but are used as a means to move forward, rather than as an ends in and of themselves.

Prominent novels of the past twenty to thirty years, such as *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen, and *Jesus' Son* by Denis Johnson, all exhibit the characteristics of The New Humanist, as well as the films *Elephant,* directed by Gus Van Sant, *Synecdoche, NY* directed by Charlie Kaufman, *Adaptation* directed by Spike Jonze, and Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.* Using the techniques listed above, these New Humanists look to build on top of Postmodernism, attempting through their works of art to find a positive philosophy to build upon, and to move forward beyond the postmodern "dead end" of hopelessness and disconnection.

Chapter 1

The Commonalities of Human Experience as the Main Concern of the Text

One of the defining characteristics of many postmodern literary texts has been a sense of fragmentation and separation. This fragmentation and separation can take many forms, whether it be personified through the use of isolated, disconnected protagonists (such as the infamous, serial killing lead in Brett Easton Ellis' "American Psycho", Patrick Bateman), through the use of non-linear narratives (think Christopher Nolan's "Memento"), or by exposing the subjectivity of individual perceptions that shape what we call "reality" (like the blurring of the line between "reality" and dreams, such as in David Lynch's "Mulholland Drive" or Alejandro Amenabar's "Abre Los Ojos"). From these texts and their use of disconnection and separation, we can take away some of the main "bullet points" of postmodern thought, such as the imprisonment of perception to only that of our vantage point, the inability of any individual to access "truth", etc.

From the perspective of the postmodernist, there are no resolutions to these fundamental human problems. In postmodern thought, humans are portrayed as distant and unable to connect with each other, locked in the "box" of their consciousness, only able to view the world from their own vantage point. Because we as human beings only have the singular perspective of our perceptions (i.e. we can only see through our eyes, hear through our own ears, etc., and cannot experience the world from the perspective of another individual) we have no "data", so to speak, to cross reference with our own perceptions. We must take on blind faith that how we perceive the world it how is actually exists.

This notion seems counterintuitive, though. Surely, we can communicate

with one another to describe our experiences and thus gain insight into the

consciousness of another human being in order to validate our own experiences and

understand them as "true". It is at this point that we must come to an understanding

of what is meant by the terms "truth" and "reality." For the postmodernist, there are

many aspects of "truth". One part of "truth" is the notion of an objective reality – the

idea that we each have the same understanding of what is going on in the world

around us. For the postmodernist, it is impossible for any human being to ever know

for certain that we all comprehend "reality" in the same objective way. As stated

earlier, for the postmodernist, since we each can only have the vantage point of our

own consciousness and cannot experience the world from any other perspective

besides our own, we cannot say with any certainty that we all comprehend reality in

the same way. A common example of this is the perception of color. The color green

for two different people may actually be two completely different colors, but since

each of these people has been trained since they were born to call that specific color

"green", there is no understanding that there is a difference in their perceptions. The

color that one of these people understands to be green might to the other person

look like orange, but the inability for each individual to gain a different perspective

outside of their own consciousness means that they will be forever locked into this

misunderstanding of a common color. The question then becomes, "what is the *true*

color of green?" Is it the color that the first person perceives it to be? Is it the color

that the second person perceives it to be? Is it neither? You see the conundrum that

arises. But this challenge need not be only applied to color. In fact, it can be applied

across everything that we perceive – every one of our senses is subject to our own perceptions. The lack of our ability to gain a perspective outside our own sensory perception leaves us disconnected from ever knowing the "truth."

At the heart of this issue, though, is the idea of language. Which leads us to our next aspect of truth: the ability to ever communicate a "true" statement. For the postmodernist, this is another impossibility. It seems that the two people in the previous example could overcome the obstacle of perception by simply describing what they perceive to be the color green and coming to a mutual understanding in order to determine what the "true" color green actually is. But, upon further investigation, this too becomes a skeptical option. For the postmodernist, we trust words because we believe them to be symbols of things in the "real world." The word "apple" is a verbal symbol that we as a society have come to agree represents a red (sometimes green) fruit that grows on a tree. But there is no direct correlation between the apple itself and the word "apple". There is no connection between the "signifier" and the "signified". What this means is that language itself has no connection with the "real world". Words are literally just sounds or symbols that we as humans ascribe meaning to, but in actuality, mean nothing. Because of this, there really is no possible "true" form of communication. Though a society may mutually agree that they shall call apples "apples", it does not follow that every member of that society then perceives apples in the exact same way.

Furthermore, it stands that we cannot really communicate *anything*, since what we are communicating to one another are merely symbols and not the actual object or idea itself. This problem is further exemplified when the conversation is

centered on abstract ideas or concepts, and not words that are "one to one" representations of hard objects like the word "apple", which clearly is a symbol for specific object. Just as an example, if two people were to talk about feeling angry, the signified, "anger" in this situation, would be entirely impossible to communicate using signifiers. Surely, one could attempt to describe the feelings they associate with anger, or what makes them angry, etc., but these words would not be the feeling of anger itself. Thus, it stands that each person may "feel" anger entirely differently from one another. Just as with the color green, there is no way to verify that we all "feel" anger the same way, and once again begs the question, what is truly "anger"?

It follows that this type of thinking leads to a kind of solipsistic isolation and self-absorption. If we can't communicate and can't share common perceptions, it ends up that all we are left with is the experience of our own perceptions. A common "truth" among all human beings may exist, but for the postmodernist, we will be forever disconnected from it given our inability to gain a perspective outside of our own consciousness. We are rendered isolated – we cannot "connect" with other humans, so to speak. We cannot know that others are experiencing anything similar to how we experience reality. We cannot gain any common understanding because we cannot trust the language with which we communicate (even if two people attempt to describe how they experience reality, they stand to gain no understanding given that the words they use have no correlation to "reality"). This lends itself to an obsession with the self - a deep, deep, solipsism - stemming from

the fact that the only aspect of experience that we can somewhat *know* is our own sensory perceptions.

The attempt of these postmodern texts, then, is not to show the reader/viewer an exit from the trap of their consciousness, but rather to in fact expose the very nature of consciousness as nothing more than a cage or a blind spot to reality, by "looking awry" at one's own consciousness. Many postmodern authors attempt to get the viewer/reader to "look awry", in order to, as Slovak Zizek says in his essay "From Reality to the Real", "render visible aspects that would otherwise remain unnoticed."(Zizek, 1991) By looking awry, the reader/viewer only stands to gain an understanding of their separation from truth and reality, and their own endless isolation from other human beings.

So, what can be done after one has "looked awry"? Once an individual realizes that their consciousness and perceptions leave them disconnected from reality and truth, he or she has hit a kind of dead end. But it is precisely this "dead end" that the films and novels of the New Humanists seek to overcome. Rather than continue to spread the postmodern word of separation, fragmentation and isolation, the New Humanists look for a way out of the postmodern conundrum.

For the New Humanists, there is no way out of the isolation and cage-like trap of the consciousness. The postmodernists have recognized an inescapable aspect of human existence: our consciousness precludes us from perceiving the world from the perspective of another individual. But, instead of continuing to follow the lead of postmodernists and presenting a logical or linguistic rebuttal to react against the concept that we are all isolated within our own heads, the New

Humanists accept the posits of Postmodernism, but attempt to move on from them.

And the way in which the New Humanists attempt to progress is through an

understanding of the commonalities of human experience. There is a certain

recognition among New Humanist authors and filmmakers that there is no logical

way out, so to speak, of the postmodern idiom that we will be forever disconnected

from truth, ultimately leading to isolation and solitude. These authors and

filmmakers use these postmodern positionings in an attempt to move forward, or, in

other words, create a 'positive' ethos that recognizes that although there may not be

any steadfast, stone-carved Truths(or at least that we can have absolutely no

possibility of ever knowing them, if there are any to be known in the first place),

each human being has similarities in the way which they experience the world

around them. Though we may not be able to ever decipher what the true color of

green is, for example, each of us experiences that inability to be able to know the

true color of green. In other words, we all experience the disconnection from truth

that Postmodernism has so clearly laid out, and it is from this commonality that the

New Humanists build off and make the main concern of the text. As David Foster

Wallace, author of *Infinite Jest*, said, fiction should be about "what it's like to be a...

human being." (Max, 2009) This could effectively be the slogan of the New

Humanists.

       Though we cannot know for sure whether what we are experiencing as

human beings is the world "as it actually exists", or if there is such a thing as a world

"as it actually exists"(for the sake of brevity I will call this concept of 'the world as it

actually exists', "reality"), what we can know is that humans, disconnected from

reality or not, *do* share many common similarities, drives, emotions, responses to stimuli, etc. From this, New Humanists seek to understand not what being a human *is,* but rather what being a human is *like*. The New Humanists are not concerned with finding or disproving truth or reality, but with understanding why many humans act and feel certain ways. New Humanists do not seek to find a higher truth or lack thereof, but instead take experience at face value, and try to begin to comprehend it.

Infinite Jest is a shining example of the ideologies and techniques of New Humanist texts, specifically the concern with the commonalities of human emotion and experience. Postmodernism, with its bottomless pit of questioning of existence and reality and truth, seems to be concerned with just the opposite: not the common experience of the collective, but the lone experience of the *individual.* The individual is doubtlessly the main concern of the postmodern text, and the questioning and negation that Postmodernism posits seems to only push the experience of the individual further within themselves, solely focusing on and question *their own* experience, *their own* disconnection, and *their own* endless isolation. The end result of this line of thinking usually concludes in an existential, somewhat solipsistic worldview.

In D.T. Max's biography of David Foster Wallace, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*, Max writes that the solipsistic "'loss of the whole external world,' as Wallace put it...frightened him...deeply." (Max, pg. 44) His fear of the postmodern trend toward solipsism and his reaction against it seeps through into the pages of *Infinite Jest*. In fact, Wallace's fear of solipsism is apparent in the novel's opening scene. In

the scene, Wallace expresses the horrors of the inability to connect with other humans, the terrifying prospect of what would happen if, in the postmodern sense, one would be truly isolated. The scene, which takes place at a University of Arizona administration office, shows Hal Incandenza being interviewed by university athletic administrators as he attempts to be accepted into the university to play tennis. During the interview process, Hal suddenly is unable to communicate. Hal, unaware of the fact that gurgling and animalistic noises escape from his mouth when he tries to speak, continues to try and talk and answer questions, only to get a response of horrified looks and exclamations such as "what's *wrong?*" and "Get help!" (pg. 12) The scene ends with Hal getting sent to the emergency room. It's a declarative, strongly metaphorical opening scene, shocking and scary, intent on shaking the reader, and showing him/her the perils of the postmodern fall into literal solipsism. Wallace seems to be showing us a mirror, describing our own fate to us if we continue on the postmodern path that we are currently on.

Later in the novel, a wraith, the ghost of James Incandenza, visits Don Gately in the hospital while he is recovering from gunshot wounds. While there, James Incandenza, who, while alive, was an avant garde filmmaker, describes the goal of art: to stop his son, Hal Incandenza, and those like his son, from falling down the postmodern 'solipsistic hole':

"The wraith feels along his long jaw and says he spent the whole sober last ninety days of his animate life working tirelessly to contrive a medium via which he and the muted son could simply *converse*. To concoct something the gifted boy couldn't simply master and move on from to a new plateau. Something the boy

would love enough to induce him to open his mouth and come *out* -- even if it was only to ask for more. Games hadn't done it, professionals hadn't done it, impersonation of professionals hadn't done it. His last resort: entertainment. Make something so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism, anhedonia, death in life." (pg. 839)

This paragraph can be viewed as essentially the thesis statement of *Infinite Jest*. *Infinite Jest* is itself the entertainment that is "so bloody compelling it would reverse thrust on a young self's fall into the womb of solipsism...." Not coincidentally, the "entertainment" that James Incandenza created to "reverse thrust" on the fall into solipsism is itself a movie called *Infinite Jest*. Importantly, though, in this paragraph, Wallace puts emphasis on the importance of conversing and coming "out" of oneself. Rebelling against the postmodern solipsistic mode and attempting to connect with other human beings. It is the *shared* experience among humans that Wallace is interested in, in this passage - the experience of connection rather than isolation, of interface rather than solitude. Wallace is clearly trying to employ a means or a spark for an outward, communal experience. The experience of "what it's like to be a...human being." (D.T. Max, 2009)

Wallace further described his attempt at injecting humanity back into fiction when in an interview with the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* he said, "we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is? In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that's still live and glows

despite the times' darkness." (Max, 214) Importantly here, Wallace states that the vital organs that need the application of CPR are the "human" elements. For Wallace, the way out of the solipsistic trap of Postmodernism was the commonality of human experience - the shared feelings and emotions of each individual, collectively understanding each other and through this understanding and appreciation of the common feelings and emotions of a fellow human being, reversing the cycle of postmodern solipsism. This need for human interface and understanding of the commonalities of human beings is expressed by Hal Incandenza, late in the opening scene of the novel, when he discusses his academic credentials to the administrators interviewing him, stating," I study and read. I bet I've read everything you've read. Don't think I haven't. I wear out spines and CD ROMS. I do things like get in a taxi and say 'To the library and step on it.' My instincts concerning syntax and mechanics are better than your own, I can tell, with due respect. But it transcends the mechanics. I'm not a machine. I feel and believe. I have opinions. Some of them are interesting. I could, if you'd let me, talk and talk. Let's talk about anything." (pg. 12) Here we see, once again, a reaction against postmodern isolation. Hal, somewhat of a symbol of Postmodernism given his decent into solipsism throughout the novel, here expresses his desperation for human connection. Hal is declaring that what is needed is not a further rehashing of our eternal loneliness and isolation, or the academic theorizing of postmodernists, but rather communication about what makes us all alike, what makes us human. We have to get outside the page, get outside of theories and academic posturing, and push the focus off of ourselves and onto interaction with other human beings and what it means to be human,

otherwise we run the risk of 'falling into ourselves' as Hal himself does in the novel's opening scene.

As Postmodernism wonders further and further "down the rabbit hole," losing touch with reality and along with it, all sense of what 'is' and what 'isn't' (lending itself to a certain nihilistic attitude), Wallace takes the exact opposite approach, trading in the convoluted, dense, abstract ideas and theories of Postmodernism if favor of the obvious and abundantly apparent. For example, Wallace, throughout *Infinite Jest,* continuously harps upon the deep truths embedded in clichés. Don Gately, a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, as well as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, revolves his life around living by the clichés that are offered up to him at AA meetings by veteran members of AA, clichés such as "one day at a time", or "Ask For Help." Gately and other AA members find, "…that the clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually *do.* To try and live by instead of just say."(pg. 273) Importantly, Gately is one of the few 'success stories' of the novel. A character who is able to overcome a rough and abusive childhood, drug and alcohol addiction, among other obstacles, eventually culminating in an incredibly heroic scene where Gately is shot outside of the rehab facility he works at, trying to protect the tenants of the recovery house from French Canadian thugs. But Gately's success, as he admits himself, comes from his attempt to live by AA's clichés. This is not insignificant, from the perspective of the New Humanists. The obsession with clichés and the noble attempts of Gately to live by these numerous clichés lends itself well to a deeper construct, that being the idea of opposing Postmodernism by looking to the surface, by taking the most simple aspects of

humanity and intensely examining them, rather than delving deeper and deeper into unanswerable, unknowable, abstract concepts and questions. Instead, Wallace looks to the surface, dissecting seemingly obvious and a priori aspects of the human condition, because, as Don Gately says, clichés "[turn] out to be more than [clichés]"(pg. 204). Many of the clichés, such as "other people can often see things about you that you cannot see yourself"(pg. 204), often revolve around understanding simply how to exist as a human being. Each cliché, though perhaps focused on the individual and actions the individual can take to better themselves, are at their core, centered on the common human experience of confusion, uncertainty, and the difficulties of life. They are about *how to live your life*, and rely on the fact that the human experience is hard and confusing, and every single person feels, at least, some sort of derivative of those same emotions at some point in their lives. The clichés apply to absolutely everybody, and in that way, in their broadness and applicability, clichés themselves represent a kind of connection and understanding between humans. An understanding that life *is* hard, but we all experience it, and we experience it together.

Finally, the multiplicity of characters in *Infinite Jest*, ranging in personalities, ages, genders, sexual orientations etc., and the singular, all-knowable, omnipresent narration style that Wallace uses, simultaneously voicing the thoughts of each character while also maintaining a third person perspective, lends itself well to the idea of a common human experience. Wallace's unmistakable narration style takes us into the minds of a teenaged tennis prospect, a deceased avant garde film maker, a homeless transvestite, disabled French-Canadians, to the minds of drug addicts

and alcoholics. This incredible, vast array of characters, and the ability of the reader to gain insight into each and every one of these characters' inner-dialogue, thoughts, and motives creates a certain sympathy and connection with every character. The reader gains an understanding of the particular actions of each individual, and, regardless of the heinousness of the actions of the individual, such as Poor Tony, a homeless transvestite that lives in a public bathroom, or Randy Lenz, a recovering addict that likes to kill stray cats, we have access to a human *reasoning* behind all of these actions. We come to understand the troubled relationship between Poor Tony and his father, the drug use that stemmed from his poor family ties and sexual orientation, and eventually, the safety and shelter that a public bathroom allowed compared to living on the street. By the end of the explanation of Poor Tony's life, it almost seems to be logical that he lives in a public bathroom.

But this is not limited to Poor Tony. There are many other characters, such as Joelle Van Dyne, who attempts suicide by an intentional cocaine overdose in the bathroom of a friends apartment, and Orin Incandenza, a serial womanizer, that appear to, on the surface, commit terrible actions. But upon gaining an understanding of their personal past experiences, it becomes easy to understand the reasoning behind their actions. Through intense description, we are able to eventually realize that Joelle may have suffered brutal, disfiguring facial burns from an acid spill in her father's basement, or that Orin may have been sexually abused by his mother as a child. A concrete example of Wallace's technique is his use of the character Kate Gompert, a depressive marijuana addict who has attempted to commit suicide and failed. While she is in the hospital recovering from her suicide

attempt, she explains what it is like to be suffering from depression, "The so called 'psychotically depressed' person who tried to kill herself doesn't do so out of quote 'hopelessness' or any abstract conviction that life's assets and debits to not square. And surely not because death seems suddenly appealing. The person in whom *Its* invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable level will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise. Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows. Their terror of falling form a great height is just as great as it would be for you or me standing speculatively at the same window just checking out the view; i.e the fear of falling remains constant. The variable here is the other terror; the fire's flames: when the flame gets close enough, falling to death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors. It's not desiring the fall, it's terror of the flames." (pg. 696)

Though many of the readers of *Infinite Jest* may have never contemplated or attempted suicide, and to those same people the act may itself seem egregious, but after hearing Kate Gompert's description, her attempted suicide seems *logical*. There in lies the essence of the New Humanist attempt at portraying the commonalities of human experience. We are able to understand the reasoning of characters that seem completely foreign to us. We come to recognize their actions as completely and distinctly human. Personal characteristics that have separated people in the past, such as race, religion, gender, etc., all become secondary to the human element that doubtlessly fills every single human being. Though we are given a multiplicity of characters from many different backgrounds, from the vast, over-arching descriptions of the lives of these characters, we are able to recognize the

reasoning behind each of their seemingly strange or foreign actions. There is a distinct element about each character that we can connect to, so to speak. We are able to look from behind the eyes of each character and get a sense of their worldview. The similar characteristics, such as addictions, reasons for those addictions, loneliness etc., between seemingly polar opposite characters are striking. By using the narrative style Wallace does, he is able to create a somewhat singular, communal outlook on the world through a plethora of characters. It hammers home the point of the *common* human experience, and the similarities of each person's day-to-day life.

More specifically, the commonality here with Kate Gompert is that had we, the readers, been placed in the same situation as her, we may have reacted in the exact same way. It seems that we, as humans, would certainly choose death by jumping from a great height rather than being burned alive. And because of this, we can infer that there is a doubtless similarity between human beings. Because humans react similarly in similar situations, there seems to be an undeniable *connection*, no matter how vague that connection may be, that holds us together. The process of human emotion and the similarities with which we feel these emotions when subject to similar stimuli binds us as the human race. Though we may not be able to pinpoint what it is exactly that binds us, we are bound together in spite of our ability to break free of our consciousness and perceptions. Though Postmodernism may show us the futility of attempting to seek truth or communicate with others, New Humanism shows us the innate nature that inexplicably ties together any human being to another.

Similarly to Wallace, Jonathan Franzen concerns himself with the commonalities of human experience in his novel, *The Corrections.* By employing a similar narrative style to Wallace's *Infinite Jest,* Franzen is able to give the reader the point of view and thought process of each member of the Lambert family. As the family feuds about various topics and repeatedly gets on each others' nerves, we, the reader, are able to take in the action from each respective participant. The effect is similar to that of Wallace in *Infinite Jest.* It's hard to build particular allegiances to any single character and simultaneously extremely difficult to despise any character because we gain an *understanding* of each of them. We understand the frustrations and depressions of Gary Lambert, for example, and the difficulties he faces in his family life, and how those factors influence his relationships with his siblings and parents. But, at the same time, we are able to see how Gary's actions affect his siblings and parents first hand. We, the reader, are able to gain full perspective of the proceeding events, and with the power of that full perspective, we are able to see the strings that tug each character, how each one of them is selfish at times and selfless at others. What is important here again is the large, general *similarities* of each character that are actually similarities of human experience. Regardless of one's views on Postmodernism, or to the degree that we understand 'truth' or 'reality', human beings experience selfishness, selflessness, loneliness, joy, lust etc. As Franzen makes abundantly clear, these emotions have direct correlations to our relationships and how we as human beings act. No one is immune to this fact. It is an aspect that is particular to the human condition.

The absence of a narrator, and the silent, documentary-esque cinematography in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* holds a similar purpose to the narrators is *The Corrections* and *Infinite Jest*. Throughout the film, the camera unobtrusively follows (literally) several high school kids around on the day of a mass shooting at the school. The movie draws heavily from the Columbine massacre of 1999, and the media swarm surrounding Columbine after the shooting took place. But, with Van Sant's use of cinematography, following the students, often looking over their shoulder, or looking on from the backseat of a car while the students drive to school, we are present with a hyper-realistic representation of a massacre, drained of media spin. Like Wallace and Franzen, there is no single character that Van Sant chooses to tell the story through. We gain a multitude of perspectives, some more prominent than other, but without ever pinpointing a main protagonist. *Everybody's* experience is important to Van Sant, from the shooters to the recipients of the shots. It is the *collective* experience that Van Sant tries to draw from the event, not the singular individual anecdote that may be the subject of a news story. Thus, we lose the sense of the individual. It is, as Wallace states, a "reverse thrust" on the postmodern solipsism. Instead of sinking deep into ourselves we are in fact pushed *out* of ourselves, viewing the event like a floating, invisible body above the action, able to see and interpret all events that transpire. We are pushed to a more global viewpoint, instead of a blindingly individual one. The collective experience of the shooting and the importance of *each* individual to gaining some sort of understanding of perspective on that event is what Van Sant concerns himself with in *Elephant*.

Chapter 2

"Everyone is everyone": The Use of Empathy and Sincerity over Irony

Irony is one of the quintessential stylistic traits of the postmodern text. Through the use of irony, postmodern authors are able to reveal the invalidity of any claims of "truth." An ironic statement or situation necessarily creates an absence of truth or meaning at the center of the statement. For example, imagine the classic, ironic paradox in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. In the novel, pilots who are mentally stable and rational must keep flying combat missions, but continuing to put themselves in danger and fly more combat missions is itself crazy. But if they were to ask to be grounded, they would then prove themselves as being sane and rational for not wanting to fly more combat missions and thus have to continue to fly more combat missions. As the narrator explains in the novel, "[one] would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if [they] didn't, but if [they] were sane [they] had to fly them." (Heller, p. 56)

What is essential here is the endless, circular "truthlessness" that lies at the center of this paradoxical catch-22. In fact, this catch-22 is ironic precisely because of this "truthlessness". By truthlessness, I mean that, in this catch-22, there is no difference between sane and insane. The pilots in *Catch-22* become both sane and insane by definition, because both sanity and insanity lead to the same outcome: flying more combat missions. Sanity and insanity, though opposites by definition, become one in the same: just words with no meaning or connection with the "true" mental states that they are supposed to represent. The words become empty and meaningless symbols that signify nothing.

Though this is a specific example, the same can be said for all ironic statements. The circularity of irony and the "truthlessness" that is necessarily created by the use of an ironic statement makes it an ideal stylistic tool for the postmodernist. Irony (ironically) is a microcosmic representation of a general postmodern ethos; it represents the idea that language's communicative purpose undermines itself. In other words, as noted previously, language and communication are systems of symbols that we, as a society, take to represent physical objects in the real world. We take these symbols at face value, without recognizing that there is in fact no correlation between the symbol and what it represents; there is a disconnect between the "signifier" and the "signified". Irony conveys this "glitch" in language, a hole in the logic that we presuppose exists in language so that we can trust and understand what is being said to us. Irony is one way of using language to expose that communication through language is, if not impossible, highly suspicious. One cannot trust anything an ironic person says because, obviously, they may be saying it ironically. Irony shows instances in which two opposing situations that cannot, by definition, exist at the same time (such as someone being sane and insane) somehow *do* exist at the same time. It creates a mistrust in language and linguistic symbols and exposes the gap between how language represents our world and "how the world actually is." Even the fact that it is ironic that irony is a representation of the idea that nothing can be completely accurately represented by language, that there is no connection between signifier and the signified, is itself an example of the postmodern attitude. Irony in this instance is both a symbol of Postmodernism *and* simultaneously symbolizing the fact that words are not accurate symbols. These are

two opposite ideas that seemingly cannot exist at the same time, yet *do* exist at the same time, thus creating doubt in our own trust of the system of using symbols as language itself.

As irony exemplifies well, postmodern novels and films are often concerned with exposing the reader/viewer to that which they were previously blind to. More specifically, postmodern texts seek to pull back the metaphorical curtain and reveal all that cannot be explained and reasoned and understood. Yet, what can be done after the curtain has been pulled back, after all has been deemed an illusion and that we cannot know anything with any certainty? As David Foster Wallace stated, "Sarcasm, parody, absurdism and irony are great ways to strip off stuff's mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it. The problem is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, then what do we do? Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone." (McCaffery, 1993)

Irony's widespread use, in a sense, makes its continued use less urgent or necessary. Many postmodern novels and films were extremely successful at allowing the viewer to look with a skewed eye and deeply examine many things that they had previously taken at face value. But with sarcasm and irony becoming dominant literary tactics with the rise of Postmodernism, there developed "…a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem." (McCaffery, 1993)

It is this attempt to "redeem" that concerns the New Humanist. The New Humanist is not as concerned with exposing truthlessness, "debunking illusions", or "diagnosing unpleasant realities", but rather is concerned with ways in which these "illusions" or "unpleasant realities" can be rectified. The texts of the New Humanists attempt to cure the problems that Postmodernism has diagnosed. That's not to say that the New Humanist does not believe in the postmodern ideologies of "thruthlessness", the inability to trust logic or reason, disconnection from reality etc., and this also does not preclude a New Humanist author from using any irony whatsoever. But rather, since the New Humanist seeks to gain an understanding of the effects of these posits on humanity, and find ways in which humans can lead their lives without falling into the ennui and existentialism of Postmodernism, literary devices such as empathy and sincerity become much more useful than irony. We must empathize and understand the characters, the choices they make, and the effects these choices have on their lives and their psyche. In order to do this, the New Humanist must also create sincere, generally unironic characters. In the attempt to understand the human experience and bridge the gaps created by Postmodernism, sincere, humanistic characters are essential.

But what constitutes "sincerity" and "empathy"? What is meant by "humanistic"? With the New Humanists' concern to accurately depict how humans experience everyday life (i.e. the complicated and conflicting emotions certain events can make one feel, the reasoning and motivation behind each character's every action), it becomes very important for the reader to be able to "put themselves in the shoes" of a text's characters, so to speak. Charlie Kaufman, in the introduction

to the published version of the shooting script of *Synecdoche, New York*, writes that, "There is no periphery, it seems. Periphery is an illusion of individual consciousness. Each of us in our own mind is the center of the universe, and everything falls off in direct relation to its proximity or importance to us. But if you move the periphery of your own existence, you find it to be the center of someone else's. Now I feel a responsibility to [other people]. I can't dismiss [them] anymore. I'm not sure I like that. Maybe it's easier to see people as peripheral. Maybe that's why we do it. It's a weird and daunting experience to let other people in their fullness into our minds. It is so much easier to see them as serving a purpose in our own lives." (Kaufman, 2008)

Here, Kaufman attempts to deemphasize the individual. In a reaction against the human, organic sense of the individual, Kaufman challenges his audience to see beyond the parameters of their consciousness. This is a profound contrast with the message of many postmodernists, who consistently reiterate the futility of an attempt to get beyond one's individual perception. Importantly though, one must ask "how?" How is it possible for an individual to "move…the periphery" as Kaufman suggests, especially when many critical postmodern thinkers and authors have gone into great detail of the inability of one to get outside of their own consciousness? One answer, it seems, is that Kaufman is actually not in direct conflict with the postmodern position that the consciousness is an inescapable prison. Kaufman actually never implies that one must move *outside* of their consciousness, but rather suggests that one expands their outlook. Kaufman instead offers us a profound insight into a common human illusion – "Each of us in our own mind is the center of

the universe, and everything falls off in direct relation to its proximity or importance to us. But if you move to the periphery of your own existence, you find it to be the center of someone else's". We are asked by Kaufman not to get *outside* of our own heads, but to realize that our wants and desires, on the most macro of macro scales, have absolutely no more importance than anyone else's wants and desires. It is a plea to really understand the old adage that we, as individuals, are not the center of the universe, though it appears that way from our vantage point. We cannot exit each of our own individual vantage points, but we can realize and attempt to overcome the delusions that come with only having access to one vantage point.

With this in mind, irony and sarcasm become less useful tools because they are both a means of what Kaufman calls "dismissal". They are both tools that take a position of superiority and nudge and critique those around them, exposing their flaws, and often times dismissing them as stupid. They are tools for "debunking", as stated earlier. Kaufman, and other New Humanists, no longer wish to dismiss or debunk. Instead, there is an attempt to break free from the limits of individualism and reach for a more global view. This is the purpose of empathy. Empathy is the attempt to understand the perspective of others. To break the idea of "periphery", as Kaufman explains, removing yourself from the center of the universe, and attempting to put the emphasis of existence not on just yourself but on every single individual. The New Humanists attempt to remove the illusion that the self is the most important entity in the world, and in doing so, push the reader to empathize with characters often times unlike themselves. The author allows the reader or viewer to understand the motives, past experiences, fears, pleasures, drives,

discomforts etc. that cause and inform every action that a character makes. The reader or viewer must look beyond their consciousness and understand the perspective of another character, leading the reader or viewer to empathize with and understand not just how characters act and respond to situations, but *why* they act or react in the particular and unique ways that they do.

To do this, New Humanist author will often use a god-like, omniscient narrator, notably used by both Franzen and Wallace in *The Corrections* and *Infinite Jest* respectively, as explained in the previous chapter. Wallace and Franzen are able to weave in and out of many individual's consciousnesses and thought processes in order to form a more global view for the reader. Yet, there are certain pitfalls that come with the use of an omniscient narrator. For example, by what standards can you judge a bad omniscient narrator – a narrator that makes outrageous, erroneous assumptions and inaccurate judgments – from a "good" omniscient narrator? For the postmodernist, there is no way for one to do this. For a postmodernist, we only see the world from our own perspective, so it only makes sense to write from the perspective of one individual, mirroring the limited nature of our consciousness. Yet, Wallace and Franzen, importantly, use somewhat of a "double-voicing" technique to address this problem. Although, the narrator of both *The Corrections* and *Infinite Jest* may not be constricted to the perspective of a single character, there are clearly 'delineated' sections of each novel that are devoted to perspective of certain individuals. There are distinctive "Hal", "Don Gately", "Joelle Van Dyne", "Orin", "Mario", etc. chapters in *Infinite Jest*, in which we only are able to access the perspective of that individual. The same is true for *The Corrections* and the members

of the Lambert family. Although the narrator is able to enter the consciousness of multiple people, it never is able to access more than one consciousness at a time. In this way, the narrator never takes on its own entity. We are given a "global" perspective without the problem of trusting the perspective of narrator, because the narrator literally has no personal perspective, but instead reiterates the perspective of individual characters. This narration creates omniscience, but only in the sense that we are not confined to the perspective of a single individual. Instead, we occupy the perspectives of many individuals without the narrator ever creating his/her own identity. In this sense, our "periphery" is expanded, showing the reader the perspective of multiple people, and deemphasizing the importance of the wants, needs, etc. of any single character.

Closely connected, though not the same is the concept of sincerity. Sincerity is the attempt to accurately depict human emotions such as pain, loneliness, joy, sadness, etc. In order for a reader to empathize with the decisions, actions, or emotions of a character, the character must have believable, realistic, human qualities. The New Humanist attempts to create hyper-realistic characters. Characters that are intricately detailed and complete with information about their personal lives, their past experiences etc. The author must sincerely attempt to create a "real" person, complete with good qualities and flaws, likes and dislikes. Sincerity appeals to an honest and accurate representation of day-to-day human life. Where Postmodernism attempted to abstract, The New Humanists attempt to clarify.

David Foster Wallace, in his essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction", accurately describes the attempts of a new age of authors who prescribe to the concepts of sympathy and empathy. He states that, "The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how banal.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law." (Wallace, 1993)

Of importance here is Wallace's treatment of an "anti-irony" as "soft" or "clearly repressed." Wallace acknowledges a certain vulnerability that necessarily accompanies this attempt at a new literary "rebellion." While Wallace notes that postmodernists risked "shock, disgust, outrage, censorship," etc., these risks do not seem to coalesce with vulnerability on the part of the author. With these

postmodern risks there is a certain "hardness" – the author is, in a sense, the aggressor, and the audience and/or society is the recipient of his/her attacks and critiques. With the risks associated with the "rebellion" of the New Humanists, the author does not put his or herself in the position of the attacker, but rather, opens his or herself up to be attacked or critiqued. In attempting to understand and portray "plain old human troubles and emotions", by "[backing] away from ironic watching", the author aligns themselves with and attempts to embody the same audience and members of society that the postmodernists before them attacked. Instead of perching atop of society and looking down, ironically critiquing what they see below like postmodern authors, the New Humanist positions him/herself among those "on the ground", so to speak, placing themselves at risk for that very same critique. In this sense, there is a "softness" about the New Humanists – they are easily penetrable, easily ridiculed, at risk for critique. The New Humanists accept the risks associated with this "softness", moving beyond the fear of vulnerability in an attempt to sympathize with, empathize with, and understand humanity.

In his now-famous commencement speech at Kenyon College, titled "This is Water", David Foster Wallace gives a look into techniques that these "new rebels" use to actually go about taking these "risks" by asking the listener to partake in an exercise of empathy. Wallace gives the listener somewhat of a step-by-step guide on how to empathize, and through this lesson in empathy attempts to give the reader the "redemption" that he claims Postmodernism lacks. Wallace sets up the scene by placing us in an all to familiar situation. We are asked to imagine ourselves coming home from a long, tiring day of work, only to find that our fridge is empty and we

must go grocery shopping. On our way to the grocery store we get stuck in traffic, and when we actually arrive at the grocery store, it's crowded and uncomfortable, and generally frustrating and annoying. Wallace continues, "The point is that petty, frustrating crap like this is exactly where the work of choosing is gonna come in. Because the traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm gonna be pissed and miserable every time I have to shop. Because my natural default setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all 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*.

He goes on, "Thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic that it doesn't *have* to be a choice. It is my natural default setting. It's the automatic way that I experience the boring, frustrating, crowded parts of adult life when I'm operating on the automatic, unconscious belief that I am the center of the world, and that my immediate needs and feelings are what should determine the world's priorities.

The thing is that, of course, there are totally different ways to think about these kinds of situations. In this traffic, all these vehicles stopped and idling in my way, it's not impossible that some of these people in SUV's have been in horrible auto accidents in the past, and now find driving so terrifying that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive. Or that the Hummer that just cut me off is maybe being driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he's trying to get this kid to the

hospital, and he's in a bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am: it is actually I who am in *his* way.

Or I can choose to force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people probably have harder, more tedious and painful lives than I do."

Much like Kaufman, Wallace attempts to move the emphasis away from individuality and onto a more global perspective. Also like Kaufman, Wallace does not ask the individual to ever "escape" their consciousness. Instead, Wallace offers an exercise in removing oneself from the center of the universe, much like Kaufman's plea for each individual to "expand their periphery." To achieve this, one does not have to actually inhabit the vantage point of another individual, but instead, react against the natural human tendency to focus on the importance of one's own desires over those of everybody else's. Wallace asks that we attempt to accomplish the difficult task of recognizing that the self-centered nature of our perception is an illusion.

This hard-thinking, difficult attempt to empathize with others and broaden one's worldview beyond that of just the self is a staple of New Humanists literature and film. It is a tool that is strategically implemented into the sprawling characters that dominate *The Corrections* and *Infinite Jest*, as well as Charlie Kaufman's film, *Synecdoche, New York*. Through trying to teach the reader a lesson in empathy/sincerity, the author attempts to give the reader the redemptive quality lacking in many postmodern texts. Take for example, Jonathan Franzen's *The*

Corrections, which follows the lives of the Lambert family in intricate, pain-staking detail. Although each member of the Lambert family is different and disconnected from their other family members in some way, what all of the Lamberts seem to have in common is that each has their own unique, glaring, indisputably unlikeable characteristics. But Franzen cleverly uses the non-linear narrative structure in *The Corrections* to retroactively force the reader to empathize with these seemingly unlikable characters and make readers reevaluate their first impressions of each character.

Take, for example, a scene early in the novel in which Chip is interacting with his mother, Enid. Enid, out of the blue asks, "Does anybody smell fish, though?" and then goes on to grab Chip's jacket and say, "No, it's you…Your jacket smells *strongly* of fish." (pg. 19) As Stephen J. Burn explains, "When the reader first encounters this scene, it seems designed to provide little more than local color…Enid is immediately sketched as an overpowering, meddling, maternal figure. Seventy-five pages later, however, it becomes clear that there is more to this smell of fish, when Franzen reveals that the previous day Chip stole a filet of salmon by sliding it under his sweater and into his pants."(Burn, 103) Upon reading that Chip stole a salmon filet the reader learns that Chip not only smelled like fish but also that he then, in fact, *deserved* to be reprimanded for smelling like fish. The complete reversal of blame and sympathy is startling to the reader, and makes the reader withhold judgment until many details are gathered. But, furthermore, it forces the reader to reflect on *themselves*. When one recognizes that they have mistakenly or hastily judged a character's personality without all the proper evidence, it can cause the reader to

feel a sense of guilt, to reevaluate how they view each character, and that perhaps they (the reader) should attempt to withhold their views on each character until the novel is completed. This reevaluation of the reader's judgment is a form of "de-centering": it moves the reader out of the center of their universe, so to speak, and expands the readers periphery, to use Charlie Kaufman's analogy, to include others outside of the reader themselves; in this particular example, Enid. Importantly, if a reader decides to withhold judgment because of past experiences in which those judgments have been proven wrong, the reader is essentially putting that character before himself or herself. The reader is placing the character in the position of their own consciousness in order to see things from the character's point of view. This is ultimately an attempt at empathizing with that particular character. Understanding or recognizing that there may be ulterior motives or outstanding circumstances that cause a character to react in a particular manner is an exercise in placing others before yourself - an exercise in empathy.

Likewise, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* uses narrative form and structure to append and rework reader's initial conceptions of characters. A clear example of this is the development of the relationship between the characters Orin Incandenza and his mother, Avril Incandenza. Because of the non-linear narrative structure of *Infinite Jest*, we are introduced into a relationship with the character Orin much like one would be in real life with another human being that we have just met. We meet him and process his present actions before learning anything about his past or personal life, just as would happen when you meet an actual human being. Only through a growing relationship and an established friendship can you

began to learn more about a person's past and begin to understand their personality and what makes them who they are. Similarly, the reader is first introduced to Orin in his 'present' form, as a punter for the Arizona Cardinals, but is not immediately introduced to anything about Orin's past besides what we can gather from scenes regarding other members of his family. Our initial impressions of Orin are grim. We learn of Orin's misogynistic sexual escapades, including the fact that he never refers to the women he sleeps with by name but rather calls them "Subjects." Furthermore, Orin seems dreadfully self-obsessed, evidenced not only by his serial womanizing but also by his self-centered, one-way phone conversations with his little brother Hal, or his obsession with watching game tapes of himself punting. We also learn early on in the novel through Orin's incessant complaining about his mother that he and Avril have all but cut off complete contact from one another. The initial dislike of Orin and the display of his gross and overt sexism make the reader believe that this is in fact Orin's "fault", the complete disconnect from his mother. His dislike for his mother seems to fall in line with his general treatment of the female gender.

Yet, as the novel progresses and we begin to learn more and more about Orin's upbringing and his relationship with his mother, the reader is forced to reconsider their initial reaction to Orin. Although Orin's actions are not ever necessarily resolved, which is to say that we never grow to *like* Orin more as a person or forgive his misogyny, we are given reasons to sympathize with his position and not simply write him off as an unlikeable character. As the reader's relationship develops with Orin, we become aware of Avril Incandenza's own sexual transgressions. It is continuously hinted at that Avril has had an affair with current

Enfield Tennis Academy Headmaster Charles Tavis. Furthermore, multiple incidents lead the reader to suspect or at least question whether or not Orin was sexually abused as a child. Avril Incandenza is found having a sexual encounter with a student at the Enfield Tennis Academy named John Wayne who, during the encounter, is dressed in a football helmet, shoulder pads, and a jock strap. This can be easily correlated to Orin, who is a professional football player. Also, Molly Notkin, while being interrogated by an Unspecified Service agents, says that Avril "was engaging in sexual enmeshments with just about everything with a Y-chromosome, and had been for what sounded like years, including possibly with [James Incandenza's] son…" (pg.791).

Although there is not "hard" evidence to make it absolutely unquestionable that Avril did in fact sexually abuse Orin, the little bit of doubt is all Wallace needs to get his point across. As we come to understand Orin and his upbringing, as well as the possibility that he was sexually abused by his mother, we are forced to reevaluate where our sympathies lie. We can no longer hate Orin Incandenza. We must broaden our perspective at the circumstances and conditions surrounding his upbringing. Much like the interaction described above between Chip and Enid in *The Corrections,* the reader must retract previous judgments that they took to be self-evident. One must push their own judgments aside and put themselves in the position of Orin, recognizing that his own sexual transgressions and womanizing tendencies are not necessarily indicative of Orin's personality, but could in fact be reactions to childhood traumas and sexual transgressions taken upon Orin himself.

The end result is that the reader is forced to empathize with someone they normally would find unappealing or even repulsive, in this case, a serial womanizer.

Maybe the ultimate exercise in sincerity and the reader or viewer's ability to empathize is Gus Van Sant's *Elephant.* Although *Elephant* does not use the same delineated narrative structure that *The Corrections* and *Infinite Jest* do, *Elephant* does try to achieve the same end goal as both of these novels by asking the viewer to reconsider their preconceived notions, set aside judgment, and empathize with unlikable characters. In fact, *Elephant* takes somewhat of the opposite approach as *Infinite Jest* and *The Corrections.* What is both shocking and unique about Van Sant's *Elephant*, is the lack of excitement and insight into characters that shrouds the film. This may seem to run contrary to *Infinite Jest* and *The Corrections*, which attempt to completely encapsulate and explain with hyper-detail the thought and conscious of every character. But in actuality, they are opposite routes to the same destination. In *Elephant*, Van Sant depicts a Columbine-like high school massacre, yet completely drains the event of its excitement and intensity. There are very few conversations between students of any substance. There is little insight into the personal lives of any particular character. Scenes depict every day events and are not necessarily connected at all. There is no narrative arc. There is no plot or character development (to the point that it is difficult to remember which names go with which characters), just a looking glass into an unfiltered and undramatized daily life of a couple of teenaged high school students. Ultimately, a few students embark on a shooting spree in the high school, and the violence is drained of Hollywood-esque adrenaline and glorification. The scenes of students getting shot are brutal and

hyper realistic, disturbing even. It is as if you are watching a documentary of the event. It is an attempt to sincerely and accurately depict mass death, void of all media infringement, spin, vilification, or glorification.

Again, this seems like a film that would run counter to the beliefs of the New Humanists. The absence of character development would seem to be a huge flaw in the viewer's ability to empathize with anyone. But, nonetheless, there is a slow, somewhat disturbing empathy that creeps up on the viewer. This empathy comes from the fact that the killers are so much like the other students. There are almost no differences between the killers and the students that are being killed. In fact, almost any of the high school characters shown could be replaced as one of the killers with little effect on the film. Even early on in the film, before the shooting takes place, there is a sense a wonder as to which of the high schoolers will actually turn out to be the murderers because it is left almost entirely ambiguous which characters will ultimately commit the acts. Because the killers are not represented as villainous psychopaths, the film takes on an extra tragic, empathetic element. Because the killers are represented as "normal" kids, devoid of any outstanding characteristics pre-shooting, the viewer loses the ability to truly despise the shooters. There is an uncomfortable inability for the viewer to simply brush the shooters off as evil. It's important to note that this not an apologetic empathy, disconnecting the killers from all blame for their actions. The raw, blunt violence of the shooting makes it impossible for the viewer to "forgive" the shooters, as well. But, at the same time, the viewer is forced to reconsider how they view these teenagers - because that is how they are depicted: simply as teenagers. Terms like

"monster" or "villain" don't necessarily seem to fit. They are too human for those terms. And as a result, because of the lack of "answers" given, as well as the films depiction of the killers as everyday high school students, the viewer is forced into the uncomfortable position of attempting to understand the killers' perspectives. There are no simple answers given, such as the classic arguments that violent video games, or violent films etc. are to blame. There are no scapegoats. And thus, if the viewer seeks to answer the lingering question of "why?", they have no other option than to try and push aside their own consciousness and take the view point of the killers themselves.

Unlike *Infinite Jest, The Corrections,* and *Elephant*, Charlie Kaufman's film *Synecdoche, New York* does not push the reader as strongly into empathizing with unlikeable characters, but rather depicts characters undergoing this empathetic transformation themselves. In *Synecdoche, New York,* we follow protagonist Caden Cotard through the trials and tribulations of his middle-aged life up until his death. Caden is depicted throughout the film as overtly self-obsessed and narcissistic. Almost every single scene of the movie involves some interaction with him. He is obsessed with the theatrical productions he directs, so much so that he is entirely estranged from the wants, needs, and emotions of his wife and child, who both eventually leave him. His fear of his own death permeates numerous scenes - we see Caden at the doctor's office multiple times, we see him suffering from seizures, breaking out in boils, unable to salivate, checking for blood in his stool, among many other instances of paranoia. Kaufman's narrative technique of blending fantasy with reality makes us unsure of which of these events are actually taking place or are just

dream-like depictions of Caden's fears, but nonetheless, we understand Caden's

obsession. His fear of death seems to say that he is so obsessed with himself, so

wholly narcissistic, that the absolute worst thing he could ever imagine happening is

his own death. Though Caden does suffer terrible losses that one might suppose

would actually cause more pain, grief, and sadness then his own death, including the

death of his mother, father, daughter, and a divorce from his wife, these events all

take a back seat to his enormous paranoia of mortality.

  As the narrative moves along and Caden falls into a deeper and deeper

obsession with his own work and death, Caden attempts to build a theatre set

within a warehouse in New York City. The warehouse grows and grows as Caden

attempts to write a play and build a world that exactly replicates the "real" world,

reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges' short story of the cartographers that build a map

exactly proportional the landscape so that the map itself covers the entire area that

it is supposed to mapping, entitled "On Exactitude in Science". This story is famously

used as an allegory in Jean Baudrillard's quintessential postmodern philosophical

work, *Simulacra and Simulation.* This allusion is not lost on Kaufman. Caden's self-

obsession, artistic frustration, and unhappiness seem to grow proportionally with

the postmodern world around him. Skyscrapers emerge within the warehouse, as

do streets, and blimps and neighborhoods, until an exact replica of New York City is

contained within its walls. Yet, despite all this effort, there is no advancement. There

is motion but no movement. Caden can't get his play quite right, and the play never

opens for the public to see. Inside this postmodern world, Caden is unable to

"redeem" himself or make any progress whatsoever. He is only able to negate, much

like postmodern theory, evidenced by his directing style in which he constantly tells actors, stage producers, extras etc. that what they are doing is wrong. At one point, Caden even tells an actor whose part is strictly made up of walking the streets that he is walking wrong, but gives him no advice as to how to correct it.

Eventually, Caden becomes so obsessed with his "pretend" world that we no longer see him interacting outside of it. Others come and go freely from this world, such as one of Caden's lovers, Claire, who one day decides she is fed up and leaves the warehouse and doesn't return, but Caden never leaves, becoming an actor in his own play. Caught in the postmodern trap, time passes with no consequence until Caden is the only one left in his created world, as everyone else has either left or died.

In the movie's final scene, Caden wonders the streets of his warehouse, which are now littered with corpses and trash. As he walks, a voiceover is heard and speaks to Caden, "You recognize you are not special. You have struggled into existence, and are now slipping silently out of it. This is everyone's experience. Every. Single. One. The specifics hardly matter. Everyone is everyone…It's time for you to understand this." These redemptive lines resonate with the message of the New Humanists. One must try to push themselves beyond the trap of their consciousness. It's easy to view the world from the selfish perspective that Caden takes, but this worldview leads you only to treasure *yourself*. This way of thinking makes one's own life each individual's most prized possession, and it leads to a lonely, reclusive existence, such as Caden's. Redemption lies outside of the self and personal accomplishment. It lies within empathy. One can only start to live and

progress once they have recognized the empathetic, all-inclusive notion that

"everyone is everyone." The title of the film itself is representative of this idea.

Synecdoche-a part representing a whole. Caden is simply a part of a much larger,

unifying entity, but his self-obsession and short-citedness trap him in his own world.

Chapter 3

Hope Instead of Hopelessness

Just as postmodern novels or films often employ irony as a tool to construct the posits and ideologies of Postmodernism, the New Humanists similarly use the tools of sincerity and empathy as means to build toward a larger message, not as an ends in and of themselves. This message that the New Humanists are building toward with the help of sincerity and empathy is a message of the possibility of growth and hope.

It can be said, and has been said many times already in this essay, that many postmodern texts can be characterized as 'hopeless' in the sense that they portray a trapped existence. A recurring example that I've used is this 'solipsistic' idea of Postmodernism. As explained earlier, this notion is that we are trapped in our consciousness, hindered by our ability to only see from our own singular perspective, and therefore can only know things as we perceive them, and not necessarily as they actually are. Thus, we remain disconnected from knowing truths with any certainty. I don't think many would disagree that this is a "hopeless" idea. There is no possibility of escape from our consciousness or our perspective, and thus no hope that we will ever know truth. Though this is just one example, the same can be said for many postmodern theories.

But for the New Humanists, accepting the ideas of Postmodernism does not necessarily preclude hope. The New Humanist attempts to redefine hope and hopelessness, not in terms of what we cannot do like Postmodernism, but what we *can* do with the understanding of Postmodernism. For example, the texts of the New Humanists tend to be future oriented. Postmodernists, like the modernists before

them that wished to break the world down into its minimalistic, basic blocks, tend to view the world in order of fixed entities – our consciousness is "fixed", our perceptions are "fixed" to our vantage points, truth is necessarily unattainable – defining our existence through what we can concretely negate. New Humanists, to the contrary, look beyond the "concrete" that modernists and postmodernists attempted to find, define, or negate. The hope, for the New Humanist, comes from the unknown or the "unfixed", most notably, the future. For the future to be "the future" as we understand it, an infinite upcoming temporal period with an infinite number of possibilities, it must be necessarily "unfixed", meaning that it must have none of the constraints, barriers, etc. that define the past and present, and subsequently Postmodernism. Although we may be confined to the constraints of Postmodernism in the present, the future, given it's unknown and unfixed nature offers the *possibility* for any sort of progress, whatever that progress may be. With this understanding, New Humanism provides the human with hope. Thus, for the New Humanist, hope can be defined as the *possibility* that we can attain some form of human connection or communication, and that there is the *possibility* of progressing towards a happier, more satisfied existence. The idea of possibility and progress is what brings about hope.

Spike Jonzes' *Adaptation* offers a glimpse into this hope of possibility of progress. The narrative 'layering' used by screenwriter Charlie Kaufman and director Spike Jonze in *Adaptation* offers the viewer an array of lenses through which to view the film. On a surface level, *Adaptation* works on a prototypical postmodern plane. As *Adaptation* twists and unwinds, a large, arching,

metanarrative unravels with the plot. The viewer watches as the protagonist,

Charlie Kaufman[1], struggles to write an adapted screenplay of Susan Orlean's book,

The Orchid Thief. We witness as Charlie Kaufman starts to uncover a way in which

to adapt *The Orchid Thief* to the screen, and as he begins to break his writers block

and put words on the page, we begin to notice that the film we are watching is

actually the script that Charlie is writing in the film. The scenes that we watch

Charlie write have already occurred earlier in the film. This blurring of the lines of

fiction and reality, such as a character who (who shares the same name as the films

screenwriter) is, in the film, writing the movie that we are currently watching,

creates an endlessly circular, moebius strip of a narrative that resonates well with

Postmodernism. We become 'trapped', so to speak, in the head of Charlie Kaufman.

We lose the ability to distinguish what is fact from what is fiction – is this film a

quasi-documentary of Charlie Kaufman's writing experience? Is this character an

accurate representation of the 'real' Charlie Kaufman? The audience is unable to

determine where the narrative begins and the 'real world' starts.

This technique places a strong emphasis on questioning what is 'real' and

what is not, drawing strong allegories to the postmodern disconnection, such as

Jacques Lacan's famous theory of 'The Real', in which the human is forever

disconnected from the external world outside of his/her body through the entrance

into language. Lacan theorized that as neo-natal children, humans do not distinguish

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[1] The significance of the "Charlie Kaufman" protagonist sharing the same

name as Charlie Kaufman the screenwriter will be discussed later in this chapter.

a separation between themselves, others, and the external world. According to

Lacan, we only learn to do so through the acquisition of language, but, as a result,

are forever separated from the completeness of being that is 'the real'. Similarly,

Adaptation simulates this detachment from 'the real'. The viewer enters a confusing,

alternate tier of reality, leaving behind comfort and familiarity when they enter the

movie theater. Once the viewer has entered the realm of the narrative, they are

forced to undergo a disconnection similar to the separation of the child from 'the

real'. While watching the film, the separation between fiction and reality *appears* to

be self-evident. Clearly, Nicolas Cage, who portrays the character Charlie Kaufman in

the film, is not actually Charlie Kaufman, the screenwriter and similarly, Meryl

Streep is not Susan Orlean, the author of *The Orchid Thief*. Yet, nonetheless, the

entangling of real-life personalities and events with fictional ones leaves the viewer

to question where the 'truth' actually lies or where boundaries can be drawn. Since

Charlie Kaufman and Susan Orlean are both 'real' people, there is a fundamental

core of 'reality' inside these characters, yet the characters themselves are clearly not

'real'.

But, not only does *Adaptation* blur the line between fiction and reality inside

the narrative structure, it also doubles back again and informs our perceptions in

'the real world.' Once again, since the characters in *Adaptation* share the names with

actual human beings, the perceptions of these people that we gain from watching

their fictitious counterparts undoubtedly informs our conceptions of them outside

of the context of the film. After one views the film, part of one's personal conception

of who Charlie Kaufman, the screenwriter, 'is', is informed by the knowledge that we

gain or infer about him from Nic Cage's portrayal of 'Charlie Kaufman', the fictitious

character in *Adaptation*. The same can be said for Susan Orlean. Though we visually

see a distinction between Nic Cage and Charlie Kaufman, as well as Meryl Streep and

Susan Orlean, our perceptions of Susan Orlean or Charlie Kaufman are nonetheless

influenced by the fictitious portrayal of them in *Adaptation*. So, as in Lacan's theory

of 'The Real", the viewer's perception leaves them separated from 'reality'. By seeing

the film, the viewer realizes that their understanding of people such as Charlie

Kaufman or Susan Orlean are tainted by outside influences, yet the film itself is one

of these influences shaping the viewer's perception of these very people, just as

Lacan posits that only through language does one recognize their separation from

'the real', yet the entry into language is what separates one from 'the real' in the first

place, thus preventing a complete immersion back into 'the real'. In both *Adaptation*

and Lacan's theory, for each individual, 'reality' is hopelessly lost and muddled

among external forces and language[2].

But by examining the film's conclusion, we can begin to see hope of a thrust

against the 'rabbit hole' of Postmodernism. In the film, Charlie's writer's block

returns as he attempts to find a way to end his script. He seeks out many means to

help him resolve his screenplay, including attending a screenwriting workshop

(earlier in the film, Charlie makes his distaste for screenwriting workshops and the

content they produce abundantly clear) and consulting his twin brother, Donald, a

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[2] Interestingly, in the film's credits, the *Adaptation* screenplay is attributed to both
Charlie Kaufman as well as Charlie Kaufman's fictitious twin brother, Donald
Kaufman. When *Adaptation* was nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay at the 2002
Academy Awards, both Charlie Kaufman and Donald Kaufman were nominated,
though, obviously, Donald Kaufman is not a 'real' person and simply a character in
Adaptation.

fellow screenwriter who Charlie views as an untalented, cliché riddled writer who relies on sex, drugs, and violence to sell his scripts[3]. As Charlie struggles to write an ending, *Adaptation's* narrative spirals out of control. Though Charlie has previously stated that he doesn't want his script to turn into "...an orchid heist movie" or "...a movie about drug running..." and doesn't want to "...cram in sex, or guns, or car chases..." this is precisely what happens on screen, and it becomes clear to the viewer that Donald, who is credited with writing the script along with Charlie, has taken over screenwriting duties in order to finish the script. Orlean begins to have an affair with John Laroche (played by Chris Cooper), the 'orchid thief' that Orlean is chronicling. Laroche, in turn, begins to produce psychoactive drugs out of the orchid plants he steals, which both he and Orlean consume. Eventually the film reaches a climax of a violent car chase in which Laroche pursues Donald and Charlie, ending in an epic crash and explosion that kills Donald. The film concludes with Charlie meeting with Amelia, Charlie's love interest throughout the film who he has perpetually driven away through a combination of nerves and self-loathing. As they sit together in a restaurant, Charlie finally confesses his love for Amelia. Amelia, though in a separate relationship, confesses that she still loves Charlie, too. After his interaction with Amelia, we hear Charlie's voice narrate the action on the screen, "Kaufman drives off after his encounter with Amelia, filled for the first time with hope. I like this. This is good." On the screen, the camera comes to focus on a bed of daises, and then cuts to black.

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[3] For example, in the film Donald Kaufman sells a script called "The Three" – a violent, drug fueled, detective/mystery thriller.

For many, this ending could be seen as entirely ironic and thus 'unhopeful' –
possibly insinuating that there is in fact no possibility for originality in Hollywood,
no hope for the audience to escape the trap of Charlie's conscious, and no hope to
climb out of the postmodern rabbit hole. "Clearly, the whole film is steeped in the
potential for it to be seem within perpetual 'quotation marks,'" (MacDowell, 2010)
explains James MacDowell in his essay, "Notes on Quirky." He goes on, "We are
given the *option*…of taking this ending, as Peter Mark does, as 'one of the most ironic
finales in modern American cinema history.' Yet this would not do justice to the
complex tone at play here…We are never allowed to forget the potential for ironic
appreciation, yet are encouraged to be genuinely moved nonetheless."

The "complex tone" that McDowell speaks of is the refusal by Kaufman and
Jonze to mockingly, unabashedly, 'ham' up the irony present in the film's final scene,
unlike the epic car chases and explosions and overdramatic, unrealistic plot twists
incorporated into the film's climactic scene. To the contrary, the interaction of
Charlie and Amelia is underemphasized or muted. There are no grand, passionate
declarations, but rather "…fumbled speech, anxious fiddling, and nervous glances."
(MacDowell, 2010) In fact, there is no assurance at all that Charlie and Amelia have
solidified any sort of relationship. MacDowell writes, "This is not the ecstatic
beginning of a new relationship for Charlie and Amelia, but the tentative *possibility*
for a new relationship, offering not emphatic happy closure but instead cautious
hope for the future." This muted, understated mix of subtle cliché and sincerity
extends to the films final shot, which is a time-lapse of a bed of daises, "…an image
that, while, again, mobilizing cliché to a degree, also invites us to notice that these

flowers are pointedly *not* the variety of orchids repeatedly made to represent

transcendental beauty throughout the film, but rather ordinary…daisies."

(MacDowell, 2010) By choosing to end the film in this way, we have somewhat

broken free of the orchid obsession that has kept the audience trapped in the film. In

this final shot, we no longer hear Charlie's narration or voiced-over scene directions

or his incessant, scripted worrying. We see or hear no tell-tale characteristics of

either Donald or Charlie. The somewhat cliché, well-wrapped, 'happy' ending would

contradict Charlie's distaste of people "growing, or coming to like each other."

Simultaneously, the ending's awkward, quirky, and frankly lackluster declarations of

love from Amelia and Charlie would not satisfy Donald's penchant for the epic, sexy,

and stimulating. Thus, this ending lies somewhere in the middle – perhaps

somewhere closer to an accurate representation of what 'real life' is like – not all

good, not all bad. Jonze and Kaufman offer a glimpse of hope, a sliver of optimism

that we have "…to some extent, escaped Charlie's film within a film." (MacDowell,

2010)

In this way, *Adaptation* revels in its own 'cheesiness', so to speak. Though

there is no be-all-end-all solution to the problems of Postmodernism, solipsism, etc.,

as *Adaptation* seems to suggest with it's ambiguous ending, there is still hope for

happiness, contentness, love, and even hope for hope itself. These conclusions seem

'cheesy' and cliché because they *are* cheesy and cliché. But rather than make fun of

this cheesy sentimentality with over the top, grand irony, *Adaptation* puts forth the

option of reading the film as both genuinely optimistic and ironic, placing the idea

that there may in fact be hope for happiness, progress, etc. squarely alongside the

possibility that there may not be. But this *possibility* of hope is enough to separate *Adaptation* from the likes of many other postmodern texts.

Similarly, David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* does not shy away from the 'cheesy' or sentimental and allows itself to risk ridicule in order to posit the possibility of hope and progress. As noted earlier, *Infinite Jest* has an obsession with the use of clichés. Obviously, clichés are often sentimental and easy to ridicule or ignore, but this does not deter Wallace from putting them forth as an incredibly important aspect of his novel. Wallace repeatedly mentions multiple clichéd phrases and over-simplified 'life tips' that run counter to the intense academic and intellectual nature of postmodern thought.

Interestingly, the proponents of these clichés are often the most admirable characters in the book, while those who ignore them or ridicule them are unsuccessful or unhappy. As mentioned earlier, Don Gately is a huge proponent of the clichés that he hears from seasoned AA sponsors, and also, is one of the books few 'heroes', a human testament to resilience and sacrifice who ultimately sacrifices his own body to save the lives of other Ennent House residents. In opposition to characters such as Gately who live by clichés , addicts who disregard or make fun of the "clichéd directives' (pg. 273) are the addicts that usually don't recover. Geoffrey Day, who openly mocks these clichés while at Ennet House, stating that he is forced to "walk around with [his] arms out straight in front of [him] and recite these clichés. In a monotone" (pg. 271) is a pertinent example of this. Gately, in reaction to Day's antics, thinks to himself that "simple advice like this does seem like a lot of clichés-Day's right about how it seems. Yes, and if Geoffrey Day keeps on steering by

the way things seem to him then he is a dead man for sure. Gately's…watched

dozens come through [Ennet House] and leave early and go back Out There and then

go to jail or die. If Day ever gets lucky and breaks down, finally, and comes to the

front office at night to scream that he can't take it anymore and clutch at Gately's

pantcuff and blubber and beg for help at any cost, Gately'll get to tell Day the thing is

that the clichéd directives are a lot more deep and hard to actually *do.* To try and

live by instead of say." (pg. 273)

Importantly, in this example, the tone that Wallace purveys through the

narrator ensures that the sympathy of the reader lies with Gately and against Day's

mockery of clichés. It is almost impossible as a reader to not have some distaste for

Day, as Wallace paints him as naïve and sarcastic, unable to confront the clichés and

advice of Gately, seemingly more concerned with appearing "above", "cooler than" ,

or "smarter than" the suggestions of Gately and the Ennet House staff. From the

reader's perspective, we view Day as someone who is unable to open himself up to

the vulnerability of failure. In other words, through an acceptance of Ennet House's

clichés and advice, Day is accepting the possibility of failure and vulnerability –

failure through attempting to recover from his addiction and not succeeding, failure

through being unable to follow a path to recovery that others have used with

success, and thus, in comparison with these recovered addicts, appearing "lesser" or

"inferior." Through Day's mockery and dismissal of these "clichéd directives", he

risks no chance of vulnerability. From the vantage point of Day and his sarcasm, if he

succeeds and recovers, it was through only his hard work and not through the help

of others, and if he fails, he has the scapegoat of the Ennet House's inability to treat

him. Only through actually trying to follow Gately's clichés does Day risk vulnerability. As quoted earlier, Gately recognizes that Day will only succeed through an acceptance of the possibility of vulnerability, through "get[ting] lucky and break[ing] down and…[begging] for help at any cost." (pg. 273)

Yet, from the reader's perspective, Day's plan backfires. We do not see him as "cooler than the clichés", so to speak, but rather, afraid of them. And his use of mockery to void himself of personal responsibility and vulnerability is extremely off-putting. Wallace, cleverly, reverses the positions of dominance and weakness. Through Day's attempt at using sarcasm to position himself as dominant over the Ennet House staff and their advice, he in fact exposes his own weakness. It becomes, in the eyes of the reader, "uncool" and "distasteful" to be sarcastic and cynical and hopeless. Day's "hopeless" approach to his recovery, his lack of individual responsibility and unwillingness to accept inferiority and vulnerability in lieu of recovery, does nothing but expose his fear and insecurity. By accepting his insecurities, by putting his weaknesses on display, and by being hopeful, Gately becomes the "hero" of the scene.

Furthermore, though I have already gone into the significance of the use of clichés in great detail above, clichés are extremely relevant to ideas of a possibility of hope and progress. The clichés that Wallace reiterates again and again through his characters attempting to overcome drug and alcohol addictions are usually blanket, face value statements about life. For example, some of Wallace's favorite clichés include: "One day at a time", "ask for help", and "Poor me, poor me, pour me a drink." What's important about these statements is that they seem to offer insight

into some sort of truth, without actually making any declarative statements. They, instead, offer a sort of general advice or an avenue through which one can work to better themselves. Though a 'truth' of this sort may not be any deep, intellectual, profound revelation, they themselves suggest a possibility of hope and progress. It is through these clichés that there is a possibility of recovery for the addicts of *Infinite Jest*. Importantly, the key to literally staying alive for the tenants of Ennet House is trying to live by these clichés. The clichés then become beacons of hope themselves, as if to suggest to the reader that "taking it one day at a time" or "asking for help" offers the potential for contentness or fulfillment. Wallace puts forth a path to 'recovery' that flows through clichés, and though these clichés are vague and general, they offer the possibility of progress, the possibility of hope. Wallace uses the heroics of Don Gately and the ignorance of characters like Geoffrey Day to push the reader to feel that there is no progress to be made by the ridicule of sentimentality or clichés. Only through an attempt to truly understand and accept this sentimentality or clichés is there hope of progress.

Also similar to *Adaptation*, Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* concludes in such a way that it seems to undo all the work that Franzen has done over the previous 500 pages. More specifically, Franzen devotes the vast majority of his novel to chronicling a very short span of time in the lives Chip, Gary, Denise, Alfred and Enid, detailing the months of October to December, while covering almost two entire years in the book's final chapter and simultaneously tying together many of the book's loose ends (for example, Alfred dies, Denise, who had previously been fired from her position as a head chef, gets a new job, and Chip gets married and has

children). The speed at which Franzen rattles off these conclusions in contrast to the deliberate pace of the rest of the book could certainly be read, and has been read by many as somewhat satirical. In his analysis of Franzen's tidy conclusion, Stephen Burn recalls Henry James' sarcastic quotation that the conclusion of a novel is for "distribution at last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks." (Burn, 125), insinuating that Franzen has 'tidied up' the conclusion of his novel with an ironic wink to the reader. Specifically, Burn points to the novel's final sentence, in which the narrator, speaking of Enid, states, "She was seventy-five and she was going to makes some changes in her life."(566) Of this sentence, Burn declares "the note of optimism struck by the last ten words is so deeply qualified by the first four words that pathos seems to fall into irony." (Burn, 125) Surely, Burn's reading of the novel's final sentence is accurate. There is no denying that there is a sad irony working beneath the surface of Enid's attempts to change her life at such an advanced aged. Yet, that fact remains that Enid *does* now have the opportunity to change, more than any other time in her recent past. Enid is now independent from Alfred for the first time since she was a young woman. She no longer carries the burden of an unhappy marriage and having to care for a seriously ill man, thus actually giving the prospect that she could in fact "make some changes." Nonetheless, since Enid is seventy-five, it remains to be seen how much "change" can actually be made in the time she has left to live. And so, just like *Adaptation*, we see a blending of irony and sincere hope. We are given the *option* of reading the conclusion as optimistic and hopeful, though it is qualified, to some extent, by the irony that underlines it. This layered approach, swaying towards

neither overt sentimentalism or outright irony, leaves the reader with a sense of "rational" hope – not a "happily ever after" ending, in which every problem is resolved, every loose end tied, and fulfillment and happiness are all but guaranteed for the characters, but rather an idea that progress is *possible.* That, although it is equally possible that characters will never grow or advance toward gaining happiness, there is a sense of hope that it could happen. Through perseverance and hard work, Enid could "make some changes", regardless of her age, thus leaving the reader with a reason for qualified optimism, tying in well to the New Humanist concept that we can't escape the grand hopelessness of Postmodernism (i.e, we will never be able to access truth, etc.) but we can still look for hope on a day to day basis.

Another Charlie Kaufman screenplay, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, this time directed by Michel Gondry, takes a similar approach in ending the film as both *Adaptation* and *The Corrections*. As in both of those texts, Gondry and Kaufman choose to end on a note of ironic and hopeful ambiguity. As in *Adaptation*, the viewer is forced to recognize the ironic or satirical undertones of the movie's final scene, yet are pushed to sincerely feel the same emotions and hopefulness that Gondry and Kaufman cast in a satirical light.

To understand the film's conclusion, some context of the plot is necessary. The film chronicles the romantic lives of Clementine (Kate Winslet) and Joel (Jim Carrey) , two quirky, emotionally vulnerable people that embark on an odd and tumultuous relationship. Though the narrative is non-linear, we eventually learn that Clementine and Joel had a rocky, up and down relationship and have broken up

unamicably, which prompts Clementine to undergo a new medical procedure to erase her memory of any recollection of Joel at all. Upon finding out that Clementine has done this, Joel retaliates by electing to undergo the same procedure. Joel, midway through undergoing the memory erasure procedure, realizes that he does not want to have his memory erased. We are then thrust into the throes of Joel's memory, and follow him through his mind as he attempts to hide Clementine in the dark recesses of his memory in order to protect her from being erased. Eventually, he fails, and Joel is unable to stop the procedure from continuing on its due course, erasing his mental conception of Clementine completely. After the procedure, a disgruntled employee at the memory erasure practice, Mary (Kirsten Dunst), upon finding out that she had previously undergone the procedure herself, decides to send out the medical files and details of each procedure to every past client. Meanwhile, Joel and Clementine are reunited on a train and rekindle their romance (although the 'rekindling' aspect of their interaction is unbeknownst to them), only to discover a package on their arrival home detailing their memory erasure procedure and the fact that they have erased one another from their memories.

In the film's final scene, after Clementine and Joel have come to find out the truth about their past relationship and the promise of a fresh, exciting relationship has been squashed, we see Clementine turn to walk away from Joel forever. "Wait!" Joel exclaims. "What?" asks Clementine, annoyed, "What do you want, Joel?" "I don't know. I don't know! Just wait, just wait. I don't know. I want you to wait for…just a while." responds Joel. "I'm not a concept, Joel. I'm just a fucked up girl looking for her own piece of mind. I'm not perfect," says Clementine. Joel continues, "I can't see

anything that I don't like about you." To which Clementine responds, "But you will!

But you will…you will think of things and I'll get bored with you and feel trapped

because that's what happens with me." Joel, matter-of-factly, just shrugs and says,

"Ok." Clementine begins to cry and laugh simultaneously and says, "Ok." The two

begin to giggle, and the camera cuts to Joel and Clementine running together along a

snow-covered beach, while Beck's "Everybody's Gotta Learn Sometime" plays.

Just as in *Adaptation*, *Eternal Sunshine*'s final scene leaves open the

possibility for a multitude of interpretations. From all that we have learned

throughout the film, we understand that the relationship between Joel and

Clementine is prone to intense conflict and doomed to struggle. It seems that Joel is

trapped in his own head and blinded by his perceptions, causing him to repeat his

cycle of mistakes without the ability to view his actions from 'askew'. He only

recognizes his love of Clementine when he conceptualizes her during his memory

erasure procedure. It is his *mental perception* of Clementine that causes him to fall in

love again, not any actual interaction with Clementine. Importantly, Clementine tells

Joel in the movie's final scene that she's, "not a concept" to which Joel responds, "I

can't see anything I don't like about you", almost confirming Clementine's fear that

Joel is in love with his image of Clementine rather than Clementine herself through

his inability to see her human flaws. Joel is unable to get around his perception of

Clementine in order to see her as she truly is. Essentially, Joel can't get outside of his

own head, an inherently postmodern fear. Furthermore, Beck's "Everybody's Gotta

Learn Sometime" plays as Joel and Clementine decide to take another shot at their

relationship, implying that Joel and Clementine haven't learned from their past

mistakes, and are destined to continue the cyclical nature of their turbulent

relationship characterized by breaking up and getting back together. Interestingly,

as the film begins to fade to white, the clip of Joel and Clementine running along the

beach loops three times, adding to this feeling of a cyclical trap that Joel and

Clementine have fallen into.

In this sense, the ending can be viewed as completely unhopeful. Just as many

postmodern writers and thinkers fear, Joel is trapped by his consciousness, doomed

to repeat a cycle of pain and mistakes and unable to access the "truth" or see the

"reality" that would set him free from his constraints. So, in this way, the ending of

the film seems to have completely negated the entire narrative that has just taken

place. We are exactly where we started, unable to make any sort of progress or

growth. When viewed as such, ironically, the ending and the beginning of the film

could very well be interchangeable.

Yet, undeniably, the ending does not *feel* unhopeful. The tone of the film's

final scene is one of happiness, joy, and hope. Joel and Clementine are crying and

laughing with excitement and relief as they decide to take another shot at their

relationship. The camera looks up from below at Joel and Clementine, forcing the

viewer to look up at the event with some awe, almost as if from a child's perspective,

implying a sense of wonderment and innocence, and even perhaps hope. The

hallway within which they stand is filled with soft, white light – a type of light that is

unmistakably a morning light, once again, suggesting a "beginning" rather than an

end, a nervous optimism of the day to come. The last shot of the movie shows Joel

and Clementine frolicking through a snow covered beach, hand in hand, thoroughly

enjoying each other's company. The romantic setting of a snowy beach, and the obvious flirtatiousness and joy with which Joel and Clementine toss snow at each other, skipping of into the distance as the screen fades to white (not black, importantly) provides us with a portrait of thoroughly loving couple. As Joel and Clementine run along the beach, the diagetic sound is cut, instead replaced by Beck's "Everybody's Gotta Learn Sometime", in a sense, acting as a frame for the hope of the moment, freezing Joel and Clementine in their world of optimism and love. Stripped of their voices and the sound of the crashing waves on the beach, we are shown a moving portrait – a picture of joy and love. Even as the clip of Joel and Clementine on the beach loops, insinuating a cycle – a "stuckness" – the frame that they are stuck in is one of joy, flirtatiousness, and happiness.

Just as in *Adaptation*, the body language and dialogue between Joel and Clementine is not cliché or saccharine so as to impose on the viewer a clear sense of irony or satire – there are no overt "parentheses" around the interaction between the two. Joel stumbles over his proclamation that he wants Clementine to stick around. In fact, Joel can't even immediately think of a reason as to why he wants Clementine to stay, repeating the phrase "I don't know" multiple times. There is no cliché, passionate kiss or epic declaration of love – neither Joel nor Clementine ever say they love one another, and the two don't even embrace each other after they have decided to continue their relationship, let alone kiss. They simply stand, looking at one another, laughing with relief. To the audience, too, it's a heart warming and relieving moment.

Furthermore, the dialogue between Joel and Clementine affords the audience the opportunity to be hopeful that Joel will be able to "get outside of his own head." In response to Clementine's prediction that Joel will find something he doesn't like about her and that she will get bored with him, Joel simply responds with an, "Okay." The ambiguity of the response leaves Joel's thinking completely up to interpretation. It's entirely possible that he is simply ignoring the problems that he knows that he and Clementine will eventually encounter in their relationship. But it is also equally as possible that Joel is saying "okay" in acceptance of Clementine's declaration of both of their flaws. Through his "okay", Joel could be showing progress towards being able to see Clementine beyond the 'concept' of her that he has built up in his mind. He very well could be accepting the challenge of trying to look beyond the image of Clementine, and moving towards understanding and accepting her flaws, thus getting outside of the cage of his consciousness and perceptions.

Importantly, Joel has not done anyone of these things yet. But Gondry and Kaufman have provided the audience with the sense that hope, growth, and progress are a possibility. Unlike many postmodern novels, such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow,* which ends midsentence with the inevitable doom of nuclear destruction looming, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* does not seal the fate of it's characters. Like *Adaptation, The Corrections*, and *Infinite Jest, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* ends on an ambiguous note. The audience is left unsure as to if the story has reached a resolution or not. And just like *Adaptation,* and *The Corrections*, the final scene allows the audience to view the film with an

opportunity for progress, an *opportunity* for growth, thus providing the viewer with a sense of hope.

Similarly, the opening story, "Crash While Hitchiking", in Denis Johnson's collection of short stories, *Jesus' Son,* shows the possibility of the beginning of a transformation of one man from postmodern isolation and self-obsession to the hopefulness and longing for progress that is characteristic of the New Humanists. In "Crash While Hitchhiking", we are introduced to the story's protagonist, Fuckhead, high on amphetamines, who seems aimless, lost and alienated, and is attempting to hitchhike a ride in western Missouri. He eventually is picked up by a family of a husband, wife, and child driving an Oldsmobile. While driving, they are involved in car accident. Fuckhead recalls of the wreck that, "I was thrown against the backseat so hard that it broke. I commenced bouncing back and forth. A liquid I knew right away was human blood flew around the car and rained down on my head. When it was over I was in the back seat again, just as I had been…As far as I could tell, I was the only one conscious."(p. 7) A strong allegory can be drawn between Fuckhead's description of the accident and the affect of the postmodern "exposure." The wreck is a jarring, life-altering event, just as postmodern posits maybe to people when first exposed to their premises. But beyond that, the crash represents an undoing of humanity, a "coming apart", so to speak, as if a thread has been pulled and the whole has fallen apart. There is a falling apart of bodies, "human blood flew around the car…"(p. 7), like humans themselves have become literally disconnected, echoing the deconstructive forces of postmodern thought. There is a fracturing, a shattering

akin to the attempts of postmodern novels to debunk and shatter the views of logic, reason, truth, etc.

But something strange happens. After being "bounc[ed] back and forth" and thrown around by the force of the collision, Fuckhead ends up "in the back seat again, just as [he] had been." While the world around him has shifted, shattered, exploded, Fuckhead himself has ended up exactly where he started. There's motion but no progress or movement. Postmodernism, and in particular, irony, act in a similar matter, since both are used to negate or disavow previous conceptions, tear down what is thought to be common sense, but they do not give us anything to move forward with. They do not attempt to "redeem," leaving us in the same spot that we began in, but with our whole world shifted and shattered around us. Even the car crash itself is indicative of this, for what is a car accident other than a complete, abrupt stop in motion. Progress has been stopped, and destruction is what remains. Fuckhead, after the accident, is "…as far as [he] could tell…the only one conscious." . The isolation of self-obsession and the purely one-sighted approach of individualism is a result of the shattering. Fuckhead gets out of the car and sees corpses draped from cars, a hellish scene, as if to suggest that the apex of the terribleness, the lowest of the lows, maybe hell itself, is this lonely isolation of being the only conscious being.

Johnson does not leave us just with destruction, though. Like the New Humanists, he attempts to build off of the destruction, using it as a base from which to start anew. He wishes to rise up from the rubble and again attempt to move forward. What takes place after the accident exemplifies this notion. A small baby is

one of Fuckhead's only fellow survivors following the terrible accident. As other cars

and emergency responders show up to the scene, Fuckhead holds the child in his

arms. As J. Scott Farrin describes in the essay, "Eloquence and Plot in Denis

Johnson's *Jesus' Son*", "The end juxtaposes the promise of healing against the despair

of the crash. The baby lives, a symbol of the future and of hope, and is held in

Fuckhead's arms as he stands on the side of the road, the wreckage that was the cars

and their passengers smoldering around him."(Farrin, 135) This juxtaposition is of

the utmost importance. As in *Adaptation* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*,

the reader is presented with the binary of hope and despair simultaneously at the

conclusion of the story. Although there is doubtless turmoil surrounding Fuckhead,

the possibility of progress still lives, this time in the life of the small child. Although

there is no *promise* for progress, the opportunity for a positive outcome nonetheless

remains present. Hope is not destroyed in the wreck; rather, hope is one of the few

things left unharmed.

Chapter 4

Use of Postmodern Ideology as a Means to Move Forward

Many of the texts that I have listed as exemplifying New Humanist film and literature may seem themselves to be Postmodern. Some of these texts have even been hailed as postmodern masterpieces, including *Synecdoche, New York*, which *The Guardian* called "the ultimate postmodern…film."(Hoby, 2009) The confusion is understandable, simply because New Humanist texts encompass many Postmodern ideological and stylistic techniques. As stated previously, the New Humanists do not necessarily contradict Postmodern notions. In fact, they generally accept them as truths, but seek to use this understanding to move forward beyond them, instead of "beat the dead horse" of Postmodernism, so to speak.

With that in mind, New Humanist texts will often seek to 'encompass' Postmodernism and i's techniques and theories, while using them to effectually create an entirely new literary ethos. For example, themes of solipsism, inauthenticity, simulation of reality, the effects of late capitalism and mechanical reproduction, and circularity play prominent roles in many New Humanist texts (think of simulation in relation to *Synecdoche, NY* and solipsism in *Infinite Jest* and *Adaptation*).

Yet, what separates the New Humanist from the Postmodernist is that these ideas are not ends in and of themselves. For the New Humanist, these notions serve the purpose of offering us greater understanding of the human being. They are themselves a succinct branch in the tree of human experience. Postmodern ideology

is certainly part of what it's like to be human, and we must accept that, but we need to look forward beyond it, encompassing it in order to move beyond it.

Postmodern stylistic techniques are still very much alive in New Humanist texts. Pastiche, intertextuality, and metanarratives, all staples of Postmodernism, can easily be identified in New Humanist texts. For example, one need not look beyond the titles of *Infinite Jest* (borrowing from *Hamlet*), or *Jesus' Son* (from The Velvet Underground song "Heroin") to see intertextuality and pastiche alive and well. But for the New Humanist, these techniques serve a different purpose. In a notion presented by Stephen J. Burn, they do not merely represent the incapability of originality or authenticity, but instead represent an attempt to go beyond the text, not necessarily with the postmodern intent of having the view/reader recognize the text as fiction, but rather to "meet the reader halfway," so to speak, in an attempt leave the page or the screen, and enter the world of the reader in order to 'humanize' the text as much as possible, and make it applicable to the life of the reader.

One need not look beyond Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* in order to see evidence of this encompassment and push beyond Postmodernism. *The Corrections* is littered with allusions to postmodern novels, including the title itself, which many have seen as a subtle nod to William Gaddis' novel, *The Recognitions.* As Stephen Burn notes, "There are several overlaps between [*The Corrections* and *The Recognitions*. Both books critique those who are unable to 'distinguish the false from the authentic'", Chip's email address is *exprof@gaddisfly.com*, as well as the fact that "Chip resembles Gaddis' s money obsessed writer Otto Pivner: Chip's complaint,

while taking a cab ride in New York, that 'without money he was hardly a man'

recalls Pivner's observation that "a man does feel castrated in New York without

money.'"(Burn, 98)

Although this surely exemplifies Franzen's interest in Postmodernism and

the pastiche technique that he lifts from postmodern authors, *The Corrections* can be

understood to imply a "correction" to the missteps of Postmodernism. As Burn goes

on to explain, *The Corrections* has a numerous common characteristic's with

Gaddis's novel *A Frolic of his Own*, particularly between Chip and *A Frolic of his

Own*'s lead character, Oscar Crease. "Both Chip and Oscar are simultaneously

repulsed and seduced by American commerce. Both are estranged from their

fathers, but move toward something of a reconciliation with fathers who die at the

end of each novel. Both are writers and, indeed, both could be described as 'a

suffering artist…who happens to have little talent.'" (Burn, 99) As Burn goes on to

note, both Chip and Oscar recognize their shortcomings as writers and attempt to

overcome them, with Chip realizing that his overtly sexual screenplay would never

succeed because, "he'd written a thriller where he should have written a farce."

(534) As Burn points out, "Franzen is actually rewriting Oscar's recognition of the

limitations of *his* self-justifying script at the end of *Frolic*: 'No, no I cast myself a

hundred years too early didn't I, with those tragic heroics…when it was a farce all

the time.'"(Burn, 99)

But simply recognizing similarities between Franzen's Chip and Gaddis's

Oscar does not tell the whole story. As described by Burn, "A character, Gass insists,

is "a proper name", not a person." (Burn, 123), leading Gass to treat characters like

"a mark of a symbol" (Burn, 123). But, according to Burn, "Franzen's characters are meant to be both "someone in a story" and "letter[s] in the alphabet" in the linguistic games Franzen plays."(Burn, 123) Burn gives us an example using the first letter of the first name of each member of the Lambert family. When put out in alphabetical order, Franzen seems to have laid out the "flow of patriarchal power" (Burn, 123), starting with Alfred, followed by Chip, Denise, Enid, and Gary. Yet, upon further consideration, the flow of names could be interpreted in another way, instead noticing that "Franzen has deliberately fractured [the flow of patriarchal power], so that the two father figures in the family – Alfred and Gary...- are isolated from the rest of the family...[T]he structure of the family has changed, and the patriarch is now in exile, separated from the rest of his children,"(Burn, 123) mirroring a theme of fatherly isolation that Franzen's focuses upon deeply throughout *The Corrections*.

Although Franzen may use "linguistic games" reminiscent of Gaddis to make his characters become representative symbols, Franzen also treats his character's as legitimate people within the realm of a fictional world, and not simply a "mark or symbol." Franzen's deeply descriptive treatment of characters has been well documented. His ability to construct a person out of words on the page makes his characters almost "three-dimensional", often using twisting, longwinded and incredibly in depth detail and back-story to create a character. For example, in the description of Denise's affairs with both Robin and Brian Callahan, Franzen twists and turns all the way through Denise's complete sexual history, detailing her first ever sexual interactions with a coworker of Alfred's, through her first homosexual relationship with a coworker, all the way through her first marriage. In this way,

Denise's entire history of past sexual encounters and transgressions informs her current sexual decisions. Thus, with this deep description of Denise, we are able too achieve an intimate understanding that presents her as more than just a symbol, but a "human" in her own right, complete with not only strengths and flaws, but also reasons *how* Denise gained these strengths and flaws that inform her personality. Certain aspects of her personality are not just presented to be taken at face value, but rather to be understood how these personality traits have grown out of her life experiences, upbringing, and genetics. We almost come to sympathize with her decision to have an affair with each spouse of a married couple.

In this way, Franzen engulfs Postmodernism and moves beyond it, taking postmodern techniques and updating them or *correcting* them. Franzen does not treat the characters of his story as simply symbols or representations, as Gaddis does, nor does he refute Gaddis's approach to using characters for linguistic games or symbolic purposes. By applying a postmodern approach to the use of character on top of a more traditional treatment of the character as a human being within a fictional universe, Franzen embeds the tools of Postmodernism within a more classical technique, thus creating an entirely different, more humanistic approach to the purpose of characters. As Franzen himself stated of *The Corrections*, "I was…looking for a counterpoint to the relative abstraction of the cultural or political or linguistic preoccupations that drove the previous generation of big novels…a correction towards more traditional and humane motives for a novel." (Burn, 92)

Just as Franzen "corrects" Gaddis's treatment of characters in *The Corrections,* similarly Franzen gives the reader a "corrected" version of Don DeLillo's

novel, *White Noise.* Burn notices many overlaps between Franzen's *The Corrections* and DeLillo's *White Noise*, including "its college setting, its critique of consumer culture, and its characters who believe in the restorative power of lists" as well as major plot points such as "recounting a parent who is increasingly suffering from memory lapses, a mother who is secretly taking mood-altering drugs, and a child who begins to police that drug taking." (Burn, 98)

Yet, Franzen does not simply recreate these plot points and themes of *White Noise.* While DeLillo's novel strays away from the central family the narrative has been following, "mov[ing] outward from the family toward ecological catastrophes and elaborate murder plots…"(Burn, 98), Franzen resists this reach towards an overarching megaplot and large, Pynchon-esque conspiracies. Instead, Franzen uses *The Corrections* to "redirect his narrative energy into the heart of the family…" thus "superimpos[ing] onto the foundations outlined in DeLillo's…novel" (Burn, 98) a deeper, emotional, more humanistic element, correcting where *White Noise* went astray.

Once again, it is clear here that Franzen does not attempt to completely disregard Postmodernism. Franzen, also, does not wish to be aligned with postmodern authors and the common techniques they use to put forth a message. Rather, Franzen encompasses Postmodernism, in this specific example, reworking the plot of DeLillo's *White Noise*, and building atop of his postmodern predecessors to create a new ethos.

In comparison, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* also reacts and mends the work of his postmodern predecessors, but in a slightly different manner. In classic

works of Postmodernism such as Don DeLillo's *White Noise,* Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49,* and films such as the Wachowski Siblings' *The Matrix* and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, when the viewer enters the fictional universe of the narrative, the world is recognizable and realistically mirrors the universe that we live in day in and day out. When we begin these texts, the author appears to have chosen a "realist" approach to their narrative. But also with each of these texts, we soon are thrown into an overarching, "unrealistic" and massive plot that sucks us out of the realistic narrative world we think we have entered. We come to suspect massive conspiracies or cover-ups, and the world that we originally related to evaporates. Think of Jack Gladney's discovering of the Dylar conspiracy in *White Noise*, or Oedipa Maas' uncovering of a massive, age-old "Trystero" plot that she can't quite put together, or Neo's uncovering of the secret world of The Matrix.

As a narrative device, this "conspiracy" plot technique does an excellent job of pushing forward some quintessential postmodern posits, such as the ideas that our world is confined to and dictated by words and symbols (i.e. Oedipa Maas's obsession with the word 'Trystero' and the horn-with-a-mute symbol she discovers around Los Angeles and San Narcisso), and that we are forever unable to experience 'reality' and understand 'truth' because of our inability to escape our own perception and consciousness (i.e. Neo's discovery of the 'true' reality once he is unplugged from the matrix). But, just as Jonathan Franzen attempted to "correct" shortcomings of DeLillo's *White Noise* plot line by adding a more distinctive, human element where DeLillo's narrative veered off into abstraction and conspiracy, David Foster Wallace too attempts to amend these shortcomings, but not through

"correction", like Franzen, but through a reversal of the conspiracy plot. Instead of presenting to the reader a realistic, relatable mirroring of reality and then ripping the reader out of that comfort zone through conspiracy plots and abstraction, David Foster Wallace does the opposite, presenting the reader with the abstracted, overarching conspiracy first, and then slowly slipping the reader into a recognizable, realist fictional universe.

One need not look beyond the first few chapters of *Infinite Jest* to see this technique exemplified. In the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to an abstracted, conspiracy and mystery filled universe. In the novel's opening chapter, we witness Hal Incandenza succumb to some sort of attack while in an interview with University of Arizona officials and tennis coaches, in which Hal can no longer speak or form sentences and is instead producing guttural noises in place of words and grotesque facial expressions, all unbeknownst to Hal, who believes he is speaking perfectly normally. Eventually an ambulance is called and Hal is sent to the hospital, but the reader is completely unsure of what just happened. A few pages later, we witness the death of the Saudi medical attaché, who dies after watching the "Infinite Jest" video cartridge, which is so entertaining that those who watch it can do nothing but watch the cartridge repeatedly until they die. Thus, within the first thirty pages of the novel, the reader is introduced to the two major, overarching conspiracies that line the book's entire narrative. And by page 87, we are introduced to the characters of Steeply and Marathe, thus presenting to the reader the smaller sub-conspiracies of Marathe's "quadruple" agency, as well as his connection and membership in the infamous French-Canadian wheelchair gang, *Les Assassins des*

Fauteuils Roulants. As a result of explaining and detailing these overarching conspiracies upfront, the reader is placed in a completely abstract universe from the get go.

Wallace then proceeds to work "backwards", so to speak, injecting humanistic, relatable, and realistic elements into the postmodern conspiracy narrative. In the exact opposite process of *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which the once recognizable universe of Oedipa Maas becomes overcome with a conspiracy that is so big and unfathomable that the reader can never really grasp what exactly the conspiracy is, Wallace widdles down his massive conspiracy, making the universe he has created relatable and humanistic without exactly solving the conspiracy at hand. For example, Wallace does not leave the reader confused or unsure of what the conspiracy exactly is, like Pynchon does, but instead goes into great detail about every element of the "Infinite Jest" video cartridge conspiracy. He details the process of the filmmaking, the life and work of the filmmaker, James Incandenza, including a massive, incredibly descriptive, and now somewhat famous filmography of Incandenza's work, detailing and summarizing every film that Incandenza ever made. Wallace makes the lead actress in "Infinite Jest" into a main character of the novel, Joelle Van Dyne aka Madame Psychosis. Wallace even goes as far as to describe what actually goes on on-screen in "Infinite Jest" multiple times, describing it once as, "Madame Psychosis as some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death, sitting naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing, hugely pregnant, her hideously deformed face either veiled or blanked out by undulating computer-generated squares of color or anamorphosized into unrecognizability as

any kind of face by the camera's apparently very strange and novel lens, sitting there nude, explaining in simple, very child-like language to whomever the film's camera represents that death is always female, and that female is always maternal." (pg.788) Furthermore, Wallace presents Hal, the victim of the strange language and facial attacks, as perhaps the novel's main protagonist, going into great detail about his upbringing, family life, social life and past experiences, unlike the distant and almost inhuman character of Oedipa Maas.

The result of this reversal of the postmodern conspiracy plot is that the story and it's characters get more and more humanistic, realistic, and recognizable as the story goes along. As we learn more and more about these characters, we begin to understand their motives, their connections to the conspiracy, reasons why they may have gotten involved with such a conspiracy in the first place etc. Instead of exploding the focus of the novel's narrative outward, creating a sense of overwhelming and incomprehensible conspiracy, Wallace narrows the focus of his novel, injecting "human" characteristics into the vastly foreign and abstract world he places us into in the novel's opening chapters. Unlike Franzen, who attempted to blend humanistic elements into DeLillo's *White Noise* structure by redirecting the plot's path, Wallace instead reverses the prototypically postmodern plot outline entirely so as to allot room for humanity and character.

Synecdoche, New York, too builds off of and simultaneously tweaks Postmodernism. As stated earlier, many critics have regarded *Synecdoche, New York* as a postmodern film. Indeed, just like Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, *Synecdoche, New York* incorporates many postmodern elements and techniques, but

builds off of these, expanding and elaborating on them, ultimately separating itself

from Postmodernism. The plot of *Synecdoche, New York* itself feels extremely

postmodern, following the "conspiracy plot" mentioned above, presenting Caden

Cotard in a recognizable mirroring of reality and then completely abstracting the

universe he inhabits. When we first meet Caden, we see him interacting with his

wife and child, eating breakfast, reading the newspaper, going to doctors

appointments etc., standard day-to-day activities. Yet as the plot progresses, Caden

enters an unrecognizable world, this time that world being the massive warehouse

that is an exact replica of New York City. Furthermore, as stated earlier, *Synecdoche,*

New York, through the use of this warehouse, pays homage to postmodern

philosopher Jean Baudrillard and his use of the story of the one-to-one mapping of a

kingdom in *Simulacra and Simulation*. Kaufman also makes great use of characters

and their names as symbols, in the vain of Gaddis (for example, the last name of

Caden Cotard and his consistent, unwavering fear of death line up well with

"Cotard's delusion", a psychiatric delusion in which one believes they are dead).

But once again, like Franzen and Wallace, Kaufman inserts a human element

into these classic postmodern techniques, elaborating on their shortcomings. Unlike

in *The Crying of Lot 49* or *White Noise,* in which the reader feels as though there is a

massive unknown, and that they are on the outside looking in, unable to fully

comprehend what is going on around them, Kaufman places us *inside* of said

massive unknown. Rather then reveal to the reader that there is much more to

reality than meets the eye, like Pynchon and DeLillo, Kaufman gives us a distinctly

human perspective. Instead of the conspiracy or unknown coming from outside of

the main character, and the main character "opening their eyes" so to speak to all the unknown around them, in *Synecdoche, New York*, the grandiose and colossal "unknown" is Caden Cotard's attempt to artistically reconstruct the world around him. In other words, it's not the world around Caden that is unknown and conspiracy driven and leaves him singled out, but rather it is Caden's attempt to construct, conduct, and control the world around him that leaves him sad and completely alone. This may seem like a minor discrepancy but it is a very important detail. The onus or "blame" is shifted off of the surrounding world and instead placed on the individual. Instead of the problems of loneliness and isolation and uncertainly being at the hands of a big, scary world, it is instead Caden's treatment and interaction with that world that causes his isolation. As quoted earlier, the films final monologue mentions that "everyone is everyone." That quote is again pertinent in this context. Caden's attempts to reconstruct the world under his direction still leaves him at the center of the universe, so to speak, with himself being the most important being of that universe. With *Synecdoche, New York,* Kaufman has reversed the focus of the postmodern narrative. Instead of viewing the narrative from the perspective of an outsider looking in on the unknowns of the universe, as in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *White Noise*, we are told the story of a man who has created his own isolation instead of recognizing, as Kaufman said, that "periphery is an illusion." Kaufman places the power of recognizing this illusion in the hands of the individual.

Conclusion

Though there has been much progress made beyond Postmodernism in the last twenty to thirty years, the process has only just begun. The New Humanist movement is only in its infancy, and will continue to develop and mature in the future. What can be said, though, is that there has been a clear foundation laid, a decisive attempt at growth above and beyond the ideas and philosophies of Postmodernism.

As the influence of the likes of David Foster Wallace, Jonathan Franzen, Denis Johnson, Charlie Kaufman, etc. on emerging writers and filmmakers becomes more and more evident, the full shape and extent of the New Humanist movement will become clearer and clearer. With these new authors and filmmakers, new techniques and styles will emerge, continuing to advance the groundwork constructed by the artists studied in this essay. Although the literary landscape in the United States is constantly changing, the distinct trend towards a more humanistic approach to fiction and film has already staked its claim in the evolution of the American narrative for years to come. Perhaps, as Postmodernism once did, the effects of New Humanism will spread beyond the borders of the page and screen, and seep into the everyday life of common individuals, fulfilling the goals of those studied in this essay. In true New Humanist fashion, the future of this literary ethos is one of hope and the possibility of progress.

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