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**POSTIRONY AND CAPITALIST REALITY IN DAVID FOSTER
WALLACE'S *THE PALE KING* (2011)**

MA thesis

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism has been connected to consumer habits and cultural production since the 1970s. Under neoliberalism certain elements of this connection have intensified, prompting artists who came of age under these conditions to respond to them critically in their art. *The Pale King* (2011) by David Foster Wallace is one such novel that comments on contemporary bureaucracy and the effect of capitalist systems on the individual and collective psyches. This thesis aims to connect the view on capitalism expressed in the novel to Mark Fisher's (2009) articulation of capitalist realism and postirony as discussed by Lee Konstantinou (2012; 2016; 2017).

The introduction will provide context for discussing *The Pale King* together with postmodernist literature and postmodernist philosophy. The literature review will outline the movement from Marxist cultural criticism to postmodern philosophy, critiques of capitalism and the related prevalence of postmodern irony. Then relevant concepts of postirony for analyzing *The Pale King* will be highlighted. The literature review will also provide an overview of academic and critical discourse on *The Pale King*. The second chapter will introduce the main themes of the book, after which an analysis of the novel in three subchapters will be provided through a close reading of the representations of credulous metafiction, intensified postmodernism, and bureaucracy in the novel.

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INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism, in a way, seems to be a thing of the past. While in the 1990s there were still active debates on postmodernity and postmodernism, today theorists are talking about post-postmodernism, metamodernism and other similar topics. Yet, when we look at the culture and literature around us, many features central to postmodernism are still all too visible, even if the mode in which they appear has changed.

One of the reasons why postmodernism continues to have relevance in cultural discussions is its ability to build a connection between economy and culture. Ever since being linked by cultural theorists to certain consumer tendencies and social phenomena in the 1970s, the concept of postmodernism has played a part in highlighting the way that the social, economic, cultural, and political realms interact with one another under the various configurations of the capitalist organization of economy in the last 50 years. Under this time period neoliberal policies that exacerbated capitalist motivations and effects of living under capitalism became dominant in the politics of the western world. This era has produced a culture permeated by certain anxieties and dispositions like that of irony.

Postmodernism, postmodernity, and the postmodern are terms that have been used to describe the postmodern field. The *postmodern* refers to a period in literary and cultural history from the 1950s to the 1990s and a set of aesthetic styles and principles that characterize the literary production of this era; *postmodernity* can be approached as a way of defining the state of society in a period that comes after the end of modernity; *postmodernism* can be understood as “a set ideas developed from philosophy and theory and related to aesthetic production” (Nicol 2009: 2).

There are two prevailing attitudes toward the postmodern. The first is mainly associated with Fredric Jameson, for whom postmodernism is a historicizing term, with late capitalism producing postmodernism as its cultural logic (Docherty 2016: 161). The other, associated with Jean-François Lyotard, considers the postmodern as a kind of mood, a mode or attitude that is not specific to any particular time and could even be a precondition for modernism, as, according to this interpretation, every period produces its own postmodernism when cultural production comes to its limits and forces it to engage experimentally with what has already been done (Docherty 2016: 161-162; Nicol 2009: 14). This thesis broadly uses the first approach and the analysis that it has spawned, which can generally be said to position postmodernism as a response to the cultural, political and socio-economic shifts that took place after the Second World War, much like modernism was for the First World War (Upstone 2016: 262).

The present thesis uses the term ‘postmodernism’ to discuss contemporary late capitalist society and argues that the inherent contradictions found in postmodernism are embedded into the capitalist organization of society. Late capitalism is the third stage of capitalism that supersedes the stages of market capitalism and monopoly capitalism, and within this late stage “the accumulative logic of capitalism extends into every possible area of society, and into every corner of the globe” (Nicol 2009: 3). The era of late capitalism spans from the end of the Second World War to today, but the term *postmodern* became widely used in public discourse in the late 1960s and the 1970s¹. When the sociocultural

¹ Postmodernism, carrying a different meaning from the context it found later in the 1960s, can be traced further back to 1870s and the early 20th century (Bertens 1995: 19; Sim 2011: viii)

state could no longer be accurately described as postmodern in the late 1990s, it was replaced by newer formulations that sought to capture the changed world of the time (Malpas 2005: 5; McHale, Platt 2016 3-4). During the period from the 1960s to the 1990s postmodernism was applied to a wide spectrum of phenomena from all across the cultural landscape, and different disciplines developed and continue to draw from their own senses of the postmodern and postmodernity (Malpas 2005: 5-6). Under the “postmodern” umbrella, one could find the Cabbage Patch Kids dolls, the Band Aid charity concert, novels, events, etc. and postmodern thought has influenced and interacted with our senses of history, politics, philosophy, and the various cultural currents therein (ibid.).

Depending on the interpretation, postmodernism as a way of thinking about the contemporary world takes on a large variety of identities. It has been viewed as a cultural dominant (Jameson 1991), a condition (Lyotard 1984), a set of artistic movements employing a parodic mode of self-conscious representation (Hutcheon 1988), and a period characterized by the end of history and historical thinking (Baudrillard 1994) (Malpas 2005: 6-7). Certain ideas and themes associated with postmodernism recur when postmodernism is used in literature: irony, disruption, difference, discontinuity, parody, playfulness, and hyper-reality (Malpas 2005: 7). Of the more integral among these for the present thesis, postmodern irony, can be approached as an attitude, a way of demonstrating looseness in the meanings of things and understanding of how our reality is ideologically constructed (Nicol 2009: 13). Parody and playfulness function similarly, allowing the crossing of cultural boundaries. Hyper-reality refers to postmodern subject’s experiences with mediated, virtual or otherwise fabricated phenomena that feel more intense and real than the physical world. Disruption and related terms refer to the postmodern commitment to the antinarrative, and non-cohesion on the level of literary form.

Postmodernists in literature have been divided into two generations: the first generation (William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, etc.) starting to write in the 1960s and the second (Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, David Foster Wallace etc.) in the early 1990s (Burn 2016: 450-453). While the first generation has been extensively studied (Connor 2004; Konstantinou 2016; McHale 2016; Nicol 2009), there is less work on the second generation. This thesis will focus on one the more recognized of the second-generation postmodernists, David Foster Wallace (1962-2008). Second-generation postmodernists attempted to forge “a new fiction” in the shadow of the authors of the previous generation (Burn 2016: 452). Wallace, too, has been studied as an example of postmodernism, especially his major novel, *Infinite Jest* (1996) (Daniel 2012; Holland 2006; Kaiser 2013; Woodend 2019). The novel immediately sparked debate, both academic and otherwise, and it continues to inspire a cult following as well as thorough academic research to this day (Rose 2020).

In contrast, the focus of the present thesis, Wallace’s *The Pale King* (2011) (referred to as PK from this point on) is situated more on the margins of Wallace’s oeuvre. First, the novel is a posthumous production that was not finished by Wallace in his lifetime, but was published three years after his suicide in 2008, compiled by his editor, Michael Pietsch, from the various sections of the draft that Wallace had left behind at the time of his death. Second, being unfinished, it can never fully represent what the author eventually meant to publish, and as such, it is secondary to the texts he completed in his lifetime. Third, the novel is inescapably shadowed by the author’s suicide at the time of writing. This can influence any reading and interpretation given to the novel. Therefore PK is often read alongside Wallace’s interviews or his other fiction to contextualize the intentions he might have had for the book and to more confidently identify its themes and elements.

PK was an effort that drew on and responded to postmodernist literary tradition and philosophy, though it has also been viewed as an attempt to move away from postmodernism that the author could not complete (Burn 2016: 450). Indeed, tension with postmodern culture can be seen all through Wallace's work. While Wallace has been celebrated as a postmodernist classic, in his own nonfiction he repeatedly expressed criticism of postmodern reality and especially postmodern irony. In his often-quoted essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993), he argued that postmodern fiction had exhausted itself, having nowhere else to turn, but to the self-referential irony and images seen on television. Wallace (1993: 192-193) imagined that the next generation of postmodernist literary anti-rebels might make use of sincerity in a way that manages to be genuine, unironic. Wallace's own fiction aspires towards a similar idea of overcoming the more negative ironic dimensions of postmodernist literature through fostering a connection with his readers. This is why Wallace's work has also been interpreted as an example of New Sincerity (Kelly 2010). New Sincerity in literature is an interpretative strategy that focuses on sincerity as the opposite of irony, stressing that sincerity should be the ultimate goal in using irony. This thesis, however, prefers the interpretation of Wallace as a postironist, as developed by Lee Konstantinou (2012; 2016; 2017). While postirony engages many of the same cultural dimensions as New Sincerity, it places Wallace conceptually closer to the frameworks of postmodernism and capitalism that are central to this reading of PK and in contrast to New Sincerity, it does not assume that the way to move beyond postmodern irony is to simply return to sincerity (Konstantinou 2017: 89).

My thesis centers around the assumption that PK engages with a view of capitalism closely resembling the concept of capitalist realism as outlined by Mark Fisher (2009) and uses what has later been described by Lee Konstantinou (2012; 2016; 2017) as postirony to

explore the possibilities of depicting this capitalist realism in ways that elicit nuanced responses that attempt to move away from postmodern ironic predispositions. While there has been notable research on PK, it has not been connected to postirony or capitalist realism in its academic reception, and it is the aim of this thesis to connect the novel to these concepts. The literature review will first outline the basis for the kind of postmodernist cultural critique that the concept of capitalist realism draws from before moving on to the features of postmodernist literature that PK engages with. From there the thesis will connect postmodernist philosophy to capitalist realism and the postironic response to capitalist attitudes. The thesis will then provide an overview of the general as well as academic reception of the PK. In the second chapter this theoretical apparatus will be used to provide a close reading of *The Pale King* from the perspectives of postirony and capitalist realism to understand how capitalist reality is approached in the novel. The results of the analysis will be discussed in the conclusion.

1. POSTMODERNISM, ITS CULTURAL LEGACY, AND POSTIRONY

1.1 Marxist cultural criticism

Postmodernist cultural critique studies and challenges the nature of capitalism, as it is inescapably central to contemporary culture (Malpas 2005: 109). These critiques tend to point toward societal disconnects or things being out of order, distantly echoing the sentiments of Karl Marx whose work responded to a very different time both in history and in the development of capitalism (Malpas 2005: 110). Marxist cultural analysis is broadly based on ideas of *base* and *superstructure* (Eagleton 2003: 5). *Base* describes the dynamic of the capitalist class that owns the means of production and the proletarian class that the capitalist class buys labor power from. *Superstructure* is made up of all the social systems, social consciousness and the ideology that emerges out of a particular period and has a legitimizing effect on the social relations in effect in the *base* (Eagleton 2003: 5-6).

As art falls under the umbrella of the *superstructure* by Marxist understanding, then decoding and understanding it requires a study of the complex connections between works of art and the ideological worlds they inhabit, as well their style, quality, rhythm, image, and form (Eagleton 2003: 6). It is important to note here that the *superstructure* emerging from the *base* is not necessarily a direct representation of particular socio-economic conditions, but rather a dynamic and reflexive representation of social relations (Eagleton 2003: 8-9). According to Eagleton (2003: 14-15), elements such as author's class position, ideological forms and their relation to literary forms, philosophy, literary techniques, and aesthetic theory are all relevant for understanding texts in the *base/superstructure* model in Marxist literary criticism. Texts can be understood as unique combinations that mediate certain sets of circumstances and techniques into universal expressions of the human condition (ibid.).

1.2 Postmodernism and late capitalism

In the context of postmodernism, however, the notions of *base* and *superstructure* become more muddled. One of the more prominent Marxist critics of postmodernism is Fredric Jameson, for whom postmodernism represents the final frontier of late-stage capitalism. In Jameson's (1991: xxi) view, late capitalism, synonymous with multinational capitalism and contemporary image society, is a phase of intensified commodification, in which the cultural and the economic, the *base* and the *superstructure* collapse into one another. Here one might think of pop culture celebrities finding success in politics or companies taking public stances on social issues to drive up sales. For Jameson cultural criticism on postmodernism is also inherently a political stance on the nature of contemporary capitalism (Jameson 1991: 3).

In this light, cultural commodification has also had a normalizing and pacifying effect on art. Jameson (1991: 4) suggests that once scandalous, subversive works of high modernism like Joyce's or Picasso's no longer have a distancing effect on people, and, on the contrary, seem rather "realistic". Due to the modern movement being canonized and academically institutionalized, the 1960s and the following generations would only be able to confront the formerly oppositional art of the modernists as "a set of dead classics" (ibid.). What was aesthetically estranged before has now become yet another common symbol in the contemporary commodity production. For Jameson, this is one of the features of the contemporary culture conforming to the endless economic urgency that postmodernity has brought about (Malpas 2005: 116-117). One of the more major changes is in people's perception of commodities from use value to one of exchange value (Malpas 2005: 119). In the new postmodern aesthetic almost every commodity on top of serving a use function also

serves as an infinitely exchangeable part of one's image or a representation of their lifestyle choices. Nowadays one might think of how driving certain types of cars can be seen as making a statement about one's wealth or values.

Jameson (1991: 14-16) suggests that in the time of postmodernity there is no longer a centered subject or a universal understanding of the psyche, for the previous notions of the bourgeois ego that were represented and outwardly expressed in art have dissolved in contemporary systems of bureaucracy and cultural fragmentation, and that the feelings that art expresses in the time of postmodernity represent no one in particular and might more accurately be called *intensities*. This emotional depthlessness of expression is the crux of Jameson's often criticized notion of "the waning of affect". Additionally, the loss of a centered self means the loss of the subject's ability to organize its past, present and future into a coherent experience (Jameson 1991: 25). Instead of a temporal whole, the postmodern subject is fragmented in infinite combinations, inhabiting combinations of perpetual presents in various cultural spaces, causing a disconnect between art and its audience.

One of the ways in which Jameson's understanding of fragmentation in culture manifests itself is modernist styles and norms becoming postmodernist codes (Jameson 1991: 17). In this process, previously fully fleshed styles that referred to a larger, shared sociocultural norms are reduced to elements in directionless postmodern compositions employed in capitalist systems (*ibid.*). In an endless plurality and globalization of different social norms and codes, the closest thing to a central cultural mode is bureaucracy and economic strategy (*ibid.*). In such circumstances, there is nowhere to turn but the past when it comes to cultural production. Reproduced images of the past resemble blank pastiche in "random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" (Jameson 1991: 18). This is in contrast

to modernism, as Len Platt (2016: 17) puts it: “When modernism was future facing, postmodern aesthetic practice plundered the past for all it’s worth.”

Image, both literally and figuratively, is at the center of capitalist consumption. Commodities serve as an extension of one’s outward image, and images themselves, symbols and visual cultural productions are the form in which much of the entertainment industry is consumed. As society depends more and more on the image, it begins to be shaped by images of itself. This addiction to images leads to a cultural understanding of the past and much of the present becoming a simulacrum, a copy without a referent to the real (Jameson 1991: 18). The contemporary account of the past is largely dominated by a vast collection of images, a “photographic simulacrum”, in which certain periods are represented as sets of various aesthetic clues (Jameson 1991: 18-19).

The concept of the simulacrum, together with simulation, the real and the hyper-real, is also a cornerstone in the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s work. According to Baudrillard, the object and the sign have become indistinguishable in contemporary culture, blurring the lines between the real and simulation (Baudrillard 1994: 5; Malpas 2005: 121-122). His view on capitalism is similar to Jameson’s in that capitalism invades all aspects of every day experience and that commodity exchange in capitalist economy is a meaningless exchange of lifestyle signs (Malpas 2005: 122). Almost anything related to identity can be simulated using a certain set of signs, i.e. what you wear and publicly consume etc., and images of these identities are used to advertise to the individual. As a whole, this constitutes our perceived reality. The contemporary consumer society consumes reproductions, or, simulations, images of things and events as if they were real (ibid.). This can be observed in how society often perceives wars through videos, mediated info channels, films, and these

representations become the perceived reality of that war (ibid.). Baudrillard (1994: 2-5) argues that the contemporary world finds itself in a crisis of signifiers, where everything we consider to be real can be simulated and often that very reproducibility signifies something as real (for example, we believe that something is real because we have seen it before).

In Baudrillard's perspective the postmodern consumers are fueled by a great desire for happiness, and make individual purchases expecting to achieve this happiness, though are always left desiring more (Malpas 2005: 122). The production, manipulation, and proliferation of this excess desire is, for Baudrillard, the driving force behind capitalism (Malpas 2005: 123). Driven by this desire to consume, and finding the simulations and representations of things more appealing than the things themselves, one finds oneself in the realm of the hyper-real. The hyper-real is a cultural phenomenon, in which people's experiences and desires interact more meaningfully and intensely with virtual simulations and representations than with the real world around them (Malpas 2005: 125). For Baudrillard (1994: 12-13), at the time of writing, United States is a perfect example of a hyper-real space dominated by images of itself. It is masked by different orders simulacra, the highest of which are theme parks, most prominently Disneyland, experiences so obviously fantastical and engrossing that the USA that surrounds these fantastical images seems more real (Baudrillard 1994: 12-13). However, Disneyland *is* America, or more precisely, America *is* Disneyland, and this America belongs to the realm of simulation with no way of distinguishing the simulated parts of it from the real (Baudrillard 1994: 13-14).

The loss of the postmodern subject's ability to orient historically and the society's understanding of history becoming a simulacrum lead to, as Jameson (1991) argues, cultural changes in how we perceive time and space. Whereas modernism was mostly concerned

with the categories of time, postmodernism is dominated by categories of space (Jameson 1991: 16). When time is perceived as a series of perpetual presents, as it is in Jameson's formulation of postmodernism, the aspect of space becomes much more central to subject's experiences than time.

For the postmodern forms of realism in fiction to be considered representations of reality, the postmodern space has to itself be regarded as a historical reality, rather than an ideological construction (Jameson 1991: 49). Jameson (1991: 51) proposes the aesthetic of "cognitive mapping" that culturally critical texts could employ to effectively question and explore the postmodern notions of spatiality in a postmodern world. This system would attempt to position the subject's individual and collective identities within global systems of capitalism (Jameson 1991: 54). In other words, these critics could interrogate cultural objects and structures to "produce accounts of how they emerge from, fit into, and potentially disrupt the apparently universal systems of contemporary capitalism", mapping the subject's experiences with the consumer culture with context and depth that is otherwise lost in postmodern representations (Malpas 2005: 120-121). Jameson does not know if this form of representation is wholly possible, but is optimistic that we may begin to grasp and struggle with our individual and collective identities within the postmodern world, a notion that has been neutralized in the postmodern temporal and spatial confusion caused by the widespread loss of historical depth within the culture (Jameson 1991: 54).

1.3 Postmodernist literature

From today's perspective, postmodernist writing was the dominant mode of literature in the latter half of the 20th century (Lewis 2011: 169). According to Barry Lewis (ibid.) the postmodernist novelists of the 1960s to the 1990s "contested the representational claims of

realist writers such as Honoré de Balzac, Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy” as well as “the totalizing tendencies of the great modernists such as Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, and the distinctions they made between high and low culture”. Influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, postmodernist texts were exceedingly self-aware of their form and playfully challenged the medium of language (ibid.). The large-scale changes in the world around 1990, like the collapse of the Soviet Union, the globalization of media, and the computer becoming commonplace also impacted postmodernist writing, making it possible to draw a line between “first generation” postmodernist writings of the 1960 to the 1990s and “second generation” postmodernist writing that came afterwards (Lewis 2011: 169-170).

While the first and second waves of postmodernists cannot be said to form unified movements, there are some features that run through the writings of both (Lewis 2011: 170-171). These include intertextuality, temporal disorder, erosion of the sense of time, pastiche, fragmentation, loose association of ideas, paranoia, vicious circles, and a loss of distinction between logically separate levels of discourse (Lewis 2011: 170). The second wave of postmodernists operated on an established landscape, where the experimentations of the earlier generation had already been absorbed into the general culture and their use of these techniques and ideas carried less of an aura of innovation but still remained central (ibid.).

Barry Lewis (2011: 172) summarizes the postmodernist technique of playing with time thus: “Postmodernist fiction did not just disrupt the past, but corrupted the present too. It disordered the linear coherence of narrative by warping the sense of significant time, *kairos*, or the dull passing of ordinary time, *chronos*”. Where the realist writing had mainly

specialized in *chronos*, and the modernist in *kairos*, postmodernism sought to blur the lines between them and cast doubt on them as devices for storytelling (ibid.).

Pastiche as a postmodernist technique is, in essence, imitation, but manifests itself more as reorganization of stylistic components of various genres and texts (ibid.). Pastiche became prevalent after artists realized that most stylistic combinations had already been exhausted within genre conventions (Lewis 2011: 173). For the writers in the second generation, pastiche as a technique of mixing and overlapping genres and their conventions became natural (ibid.)

Fragmentation is the breaking down of plot, thematic elements, and characters into separated sections with highly varying levels of cohesion. Fragmented structures open the text up to open endings, contradictions, and more loosely connected ways of storytelling (Lewis 2011: 174-175). While the technique was used by modernists, it was motivated by a “need to find new forms of continuity in the absence of the old linear plots”, whereas it was for postmodernists a way of expressing skepticism towards wholeness (Lewis 2011: 175). A similar form of disruption to fragmentation, looseness of association allows for books to have less defined entry- and exit points, and to be less influenced by conventional narrative structures (Lewis 2011: 175-176).

Postmodernist characters also often experience a paranoid anxiety of being conspired against, being controlled, or otherwise robbed of their autonomy, and formulate counterplots to circumvent the scheming of others (Lewis 2011: 176). These paranoias often go unresolved in that the suspicions of characters and, by extension, readers do not get fully confirmed nor denied.

Vicious circles are formed in fiction when the literal and the metaphorical merge in stories, which can take the form of *short circuits*, where the author steps into the text and thereby contradicts the narrator's role and the reality effect, by which the reader deems the text as believable or not (Lewis 2011: 178). Another form of vicious circles are *double binds*, where a historical figure appears in a fictional text, challenging the perceptions about people who are traditionally written in congruence with what is formally known about them (Lewis 2011: 178). These paradoxes and contradictions actively challenge notions of realism. These aspects all make up the broad stylistic tendencies of postmodern texts, and many of them are present in PK.

1.4 Capitalist realism

Mark Fisher (2009: 7) feels that many of Jameson's cultural observations have only intensified in the 21st century, but he prefers the term *capitalist realism* to Jameson's understanding of postmodernism for describing the present socioeconomic circumstances. Fisher (2009: 7-8) lays out three major reasons: 1) when Jameson wrote about postmodernism in the 1980s, political alternatives to capitalism still existed but were exhausted soon after; 2) postmodernism had a confrontational relationship with modernism with some modernist motifs making their way into the popular culture while modernist values were challenged, but capitalist realism already assumes the death of modernist values and only recognizes modernism as one possible aesthetic style; 3) the presence of capitalist motivations in every facet of life is by now an ingrained fact of life.

Capitalist realism, Fisher (2009: 16) remarks, is not his original coinage and can be traced back to the 1960s and 1980s, where it was used as a term to parody socialist realism. However, much like Fredric Jameson's account of postmodernism, Fisher's (ibid.) capitalist

realism is a more far-reaching concept that not only describes cultural production, but also the regulation of work and education as well as the effects of existing under late capitalism on the collective psyche and action.

Fisher (2009: 16) identifies a difficulty in critiquing capitalism – moral critique of capitalism only serves to reinforce capitalist realism: highlighting how capitalism leads to suffering simply paints suffering as an inevitability in our reality. An effective critique of capitalist realism has to demonstrate its inconsistencies in its representing of reality, allowing for the aspects of the world it represses to surface (ibid.). However, reality is a dynamic and perpetually shifting construction that is strongly influenced by politics. Under decades of pervasive neoliberalism, capitalist realism has perpetuated a universal understanding in which it is a foregone conclusion that every facet of society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business (Fisher 2009: 16-17). As political reality changes, so does what can be considered realistic. Since the 1980s, the neoliberal regimes across the world have privatized and denationalized more and more economic fields with the intention of making previously unprofitable avenues profitable, and the criteria for realism, perceived accuracy in depicting contemporary life, has shifted accordingly (ibid.). PK also depicts a fictionalized account of one such shift that took place in American history, when in 1986 tax reforms considerably lowered the top tax rates for the highest earners while increasing the bottom tax rates for everybody. The novel frames this process as the American IRS (Internal Revenue Service) undergoing a change from the role of a representing a civic necessity to that of a for-profit organization

Fisher's (2009) concept of capitalist realism, and by extension this thesis, assumes an ontological difference between *the real*, and what capitalist realism deems as realistic.

Mark Fisher's (2009: 17-18) analysis of *the real* and *reality* draws from Slavoj Žižek's work, which in turn is based on Lacanian psychoanalysis. In Fisher (2009: 18) "the Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality." In this context, reality is a construct that seeks to suppress and hide what is actually real, and in exploring this relationship we can find an avenue for a critique of capitalism that does not reaffirm its inevitability. There is no clear breakaway point between the real and the simulacrum of capitalist realism, or we might not be able to recognize it when we see it, but it is possible to demonstrate certain instabilities within the systems of capitalist realism and recognize models that these systems cannot account for when faced with the real.

Fisher (2009: 18-20) highlights three observable areas through which capitalist realism can be shown to be inconsistent or unsustainable: environmental issues, mental health, and bureaucracy. The incorporation of climate change and resource depletion into marketing strategies give an impression that any problem earth faces can be solved with and in the global market (ibid.). At the same time international capitalism is accelerating the processes of global climate change and the profit it generates doing so will likely collapse when it faces environmental disasters. Thus, environmental catastrophe only features in capitalist culture as a kind of simulacrum with its real implications for capitalism too traumatic to be assimilated into the social reality (ibid.). In climate change discussions, much of the burden of responsibility is put on the individual to reduce their personal carbon footprint, whereas the perceived pressure is much smaller on the level of companies and governments, who are more directly contributing to climate change. Fisher (2009: 19-20) highlights a similar phenomenon in how under neoliberalism, mental health disorders are on a steady rise and individuals have to seek treatment and find ways to cope. Much of the stress

and distress generated by capitalist realism has been privatized, reduced to the level of the individual, whereas, as Fisher (ibid.) argues, it should be also be reframed as a systemic issue, which would also suggest that “capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high”.

Most importantly for the present thesis, bureaucracy is the third frontier of capitalist realism meeting the real as discussed by Fisher (2009: 19-20). While neoliberalism sought to oppose the top-down, centralized bureaucracy associated with socialist regimes of the past, it only managed to create a new, contemporary form of bureaucracy that is decentralized, easily proliferated and prioritizes measuring outcomes and the way things look from the public relations (PR) perspective over the way things actually work (Fisher 2009: 40). Fisher (2009: 42) summarizes the pervasiveness and multiplicity of this new bureaucracy thus: “The drive to assess the performance of workers and to measure forms of labor which, by their nature, are resistant to quantification, has inevitably required additional layers of management and bureaucracy.” Contemporary bureaucracy in Fisher (2009: 44) relies on the Lacanian notion of the big Other (*sic*), a symbolic structure that has no body, but can be encountered through stand-ins. The big Other can be construed as the symbolic consumer of PR and propaganda, an entity that has to be convinced that one is meeting certain standards (Fisher 2009: 44-46). In postmodernism and capitalist realism the ambiguity of the big Other is intensified due to there being no external authority to offer an official explanation behind the motives of any particular form of bureaucracy. Meanwhile workers themselves become enforcers of this bureaucracy, and concurrently also fill the role of the big Other, auditing themselves in meeting ambiguous standards (Fisher 2009: 44-51). Exploring this closed loop of bureaucracy can perhaps yield results for understanding the ways in which capitalist realism establishes itself.

Speaking of those who have grown up under capitalist realism, Fisher (2009: 9) describes a generation that “comes after history”, who have no horizons for innovation and whose every move is marketed and sold before they get to make them. Thus, the cultural landscape of capitalist realism is primed for ironic attitudes that allow for awareness, even choice, in how to engage with the capitalist realist world, but on the other hand promote cynicism and passivity.

A representative of this generation, David Foster Wallace’s fiction is concerned with many of the same problems formulated by Mark Fisher (2009) and explores, what can be interpreted as a version of Fisher’s capitalist realism. With *Infinite Jest*, Wallace commented on issues related to mental health and entertainment, and to a lesser extent the failure of capitalist systems to account for environmental catastrophe in a sustainable manner. With PK, Wallace employs the theme of bureaucracy as means for exploring the relationship between perceived reality and the real.

1.5 Irony and Postirony

In a historical sense, postmodernism may be a thing of the past, but its connection to the cultural logic of capitalism as formulated by Jameson, Baudrillard and later Fisher continues to be relevant through the continued omnipresence of capitalism and attitudes encouraged by postmodernist thinking. Irony has been recognized as central to the postmodern social and cultural landscape since late 1980s and the 1990s. In the context of postmodern culture, irony does not simply refer to verbal irony, i.e. saying something but meaning the opposite or another, but a wholly ironic disposition that takes irony, a once useful tool for critiquing socioeconomic and political circumstances, and turns it into a

default position for engaging the world. There are several reasons for irony's pervasiveness in contemporary cultural space and the subsequent need for postirony.

The first reason can be traced to Francis Fukuyama's concept of the *end of history* that refers to the point in which the Cold War ended and it became clear that alternatives to the consumer-oriented capitalist democracy had proven morally and pragmatically unsustainable and neoliberalism was permanently enthroned (Konstantinou 2016: 167). The arrival of this period marked a sense of stagnancy, where there were no more historic events to participate in, and on a broader socio-economic scale, nothing else to do than to redistribute the surplus value produced by capitalist systems and attempt to equalize opportunities across socioeconomic spectrums (ibid.). However, even this formulation is unrealistic, as neoliberalist capitalism has disproportionately benefited the wealthy, without raising the economic floor for everyone. Thus, cynical views of socioeconomic conditions overflowed into cultural production and its reception, and the stage was set for irony to become a cultural dominant.

The second reason has to do with the way irony is employed by the entertainment industry. In 1993, Wallace argues in his influential essay "E Unibus Pluram" that irony has permeated the culture through media, namely television embracing and using irony's addictive qualities to motivate prolonged watching. Television audience feels smart for understanding the self-referential and cynical irony that is employed, however this effect is precisely the intended goal to make the audience consume more television. Literary fiction, then, began adapting the mode of irony developed by television due to its popularity and relevance in the pop-cultural space. Thus, Wallace found himself in a literary field where

there was both supply and demand for ironic content. Konstantinou defines Wallace's relation to this cultural situation thus:

Wallace and Eggers write against a culture defined by solipsism, anhedonia, cynicism, snark, and toxic irony—a culture whose disenchantment and sadness can be traced back, in one way or another, to the consumerist end of history. Their primary oppositional strategy is to imagine a characterological countertype to the incredulous ironist. (Konstantinou 2016: 169)

The sense of stagnation described above combined with cultural emphasis on disconnection and cynicism over connection and credulity lead to a loop of ironic attitude, where one cannot imagine not having an ironic disposition and is more and more receptive to irony. When used situationally, irony can be a great tool for highlighting contradictory or problematic circumstances in life, however it loses its critical edge when it becomes a mode of interpreting the world, and starts having the opposite effect to that of sharp critique. Using irony as the sole generative strategy, ironists create shallow perceptions of subjects through irony only to undercut the potential of discourse by disregarding a possibility of progressive treatment and eliciting a cynical response instead of dialogue and direct engagement (Konstantinou 2016: 7-8). David Foster Wallace notes in an interview with Larry McCaffery in 1993 that society has inherited a disposition of destructive irony and cynicism from the postmodern heyday, further commenting that “it’s become our language; we’re so in it we don’t even see that it’s one perspective, one among many possible ways of seeing. Postmodern irony’s become our environment.” The culture Wallace describes is permeated by sadness and disconnection, and is catered to by the incredulous ironists, who only further propagate ironic attitudes as there are seemingly no belief systems worth exploring beyond irony.

Wallace's statements on irony and his exploration of the related themes in his fiction have led Lee Konstantinou (2012; 2016; 2017) to regard Wallace as a postironist. For Konstantinou (2017: 88) postirony refers to a particular cultural effort to move beyond

postmodernism. Postirony, according to Konstantinou (ibid.), is the project of transcending irony's limitations and connotations, giving it a less corrosive, even progressive form. It does not reject irony, but rather employs it in a way that does not reduce or disregard its subject. Konstantinou (ibid.) links postirony to various novelists who came of age under postmodernity. Konstantinou (2017: 87) considers David Foster Wallace as one of the initiators of the postironic project that also includes Dave Eggers, Helen DeWitt, Zadie Smith, Tao Lin, and Jennifer Egan among others. Konstantinou (2017: 88) sees postirony as a necessity for these novelists: "Such writers define irony as an ethos, a stance that interprets the world and language via a corrosive practice of symptomatic, skeptical or paranoid reading. In the face of postmodern culture, transcending irony's limitations becomes an urgent artistic, philosophical and political project." Konstantinou (ibid.) does assert postirony as the new dominant to replace postmodernism, but uses it to designate the "effort to move beyond the problems that irony has created for contemporary life and culture".

A postironic approach can be taken towards both postmodern irony as a form and content. By irony as postmodern content, Konstantinou (2017: 89) means characteristically ironic representations of institutions, doctrines, theories, and attitudes that might become subject matter in literary art. By postmodern irony as form, Konstantinou (ibid.) means ironic representations of styles, genres, and modes of presentation, though these are not always distinctly separate from content, as, for example, metafiction could be interpreted as either content or form, or both. For instance, Wallace uses postmodern ironic form and content in *Infinite Jest*, where he describes a film that is so addictive that anyone watching it will be unable to do anything else but to watch it until they die. An ironic layer is added by the fact that the fictional film shares the name *Infinite Jest* with the actual book, intrinsically making a joke that the book is so thrilling it cannot be put down (in fact the book is structured to

actively attempt to break immersion and reading flow, which is generally considered a postmodern form or technique). A postironic interpretation, however, somewhat reductively, would suggest that Wallace is being serious when he ironically says that people can get so addicted to entertainment that they kill themselves, hinting at the often unhealthy habits of consuming entertainment.

Konstantinou (2017: 89) identifies four distinct contemporary artistic modes that relate to irony as content and form in different manners: motivated postmodernism, credulous metafiction, the postironic Bildungsroman, and relational art. Out of the four artistic modes, two are relevant when discussing Wallace and PK: motivated postmodernism and credulous metafiction. Motivated postmodernism rejects neither postmodern form nor content, but rather intensifies them (Konstantinou 2017: 90). For this thesis, I will be using the term intensified postmodernism in lieu of motivated postmodernism, because it more accurately represents the aim of my analysis, primarily looking for techniques and representations, instead of the secondary goal of exploring what motivates them. In intensified postmodernism, postmodernist features and techniques like pastiche, unreality, and reflexivity no longer serve as critique by the virtue of their use and become ways to register features of postmodern reality. The critical edge in intensified postmodernism is in how it suggests that the world it describes has become compatible with features that are traditionally regarded as postmodern to such an extent that postmodern techniques become ways of achieving realism (Konstantinou 2017: 92). According to Konstantinou (2017: 90) this form of postirony can be observed in Tom Carson's (2004) novel, *Gilligan's Wake*, where the author "marries Joycean stylistic experiments to a reimagining of the television programme *Gilligan's Island*. Carson not only regurgitates US pop culture, but he turns *Gilligan's Island* into a Rosetta Stone for deciphering the ultimate truth of the American

Century”. Wallace’s first novel *The Broom of the System* (1987) also features this mode of postirony, when it satirizes *Gilligan’s Island*, by having some scenes take place in a bar themed and named after the show in what Konstantinou (ibid.) calls intensified postmodern pastiche. These novels show how symbols from popular culture are incorporated into marketing and employed towards capitalist goals.

Credulous metafiction uses postmodern form of metafiction to foster a connection with the reader that is based on a shared belief and goal of overcoming the default mode of ironic interpretation, unlike the shared ironic disposition that it seeks to replace. Metafiction is a form of fiction that draws attention to its status as a fictional text, posing questions about what is fictive and what is real, and in the process inviting the reader to think about their relationship to the text and the reading process (Konstantinou 2016: 172-173). Konstantinou (2017: 93) describes the writer’s motivation to employ this mode in the context of postirony thus: “Accepting that they live under a global regime of postmodernity, writers of credulous metafiction nonetheless want to find a way to revive or reinvent the values, commitments and practices thought to be characteristic of life before its debilitating onset.” Konstantinou (2012; 2016; 2017: 93) considers Wallace to be one of the primary representatives of this literary mode. Writers engaging in credulous metafiction presume that the postmodern cultural reality, in this thesis capitalist reality, has undercut the readers’ ability to experience literary works with conviction and belief (Konstantinou 2017: 94). Konstantinou’s (2017: 94) concept of credulous metafiction aims to repair this ability: “Credulous metafictionists treat postmodern forms as tools for reconstructing readers’ lost capabilities. Artistic form is not, as for motivated postmodernists, representational. In credulous metafiction, form is tactical or instrumental”. The author uses techniques associated with postmodern metafiction to forge a connection with the reader based on postironic belief, with the concept of belief

emptied of its religious context, and instead asking the reader to believe in author's credulity and commitment to the text enough to not take an ironic attitude towards them (Konstantinou 2016: 173). Postirony through credulous metafiction attempts to retain irony's critical edge, but to keep the reader from adopting it as an interpretative strategy: "If a cynic can be naïve, then someone nonnaïve can be also noncynical. Wallace attempts to help his reader adopt a stance of nonnaïve noncynicism by means of metafiction." (Konstantinou 2016: 174).

Konstantinou (2016: 178-180) draws an example of credulous metafiction from Wallace's short story "Octet", where the author addresses a writer in second person "you" form, and debates whether this writer should address the reader directly. The reader is asked to equate the author and the writer as Wallace, emphasizing that the reader has to choose to believe (and to be receptive to belief in general) that it is in fact Wallace himself in the story having an inner debate whether or not he should ask the reader how they feel. While postmodern metafiction attempted to draw attention to the fact that the boundaries between fictional and real are muddled by its use, credulous metafiction invites the reader to not get stuck at the question of what is real and what is not: "Whereas the fourth wall of traditional metafiction opens onto the situation of the reader, revealing that what the reader reads ought to be disbelieved, Wallace's fourth walls opens onto the real conundrum of the writer, whom we as readers are asked to believe in." (Konstantinou 2016: 184).

The concepts of credulous metafiction and intensified postmodernism will be used for interpreting PK through postirony. PK makes explicit use of traditionally postmodern literary techniques that are not immune to cynical interpretations, meaning one has to exercise postironic belief to see if the text responds to this kind of disposition and whether or not it distances itself from postmodern rhetoric while using postmodern forms. It is also

important to keep postirony in mind to observe if the text shows a critical attitude towards capitalist realism and if bureaucracy as an area of possible transparency in critiquing capitalism gains a dimension from a postironic approach. However, one has to remember that postirony is not a solid standard that one can measure a text against, but an interpretative system of belief related to the way of using traditionally postmodern techniques to elicit belief.

1.6 The Pale King

1.6.1 Initial reception

The initial reviews of the novel offer a rather uniform perspective. Out of seven reviews of PK in higher profile newspapers and magazines over the course of the first few months of the book's release, four (Hallberg 2011; Kakutani 2011; Lasdun 2011; Roberts 2011) identify boredom as the central theme of the book. Another aspect that most of the reviews point out is the sadness conveyed in the novel: the sadness it evokes in the reader, the sadness of American individuals that the novel has captured or Wallace's own sadness that has been channeled into the text. The shadow of Wallace's successful magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*, is explicitly present in these reviews: six out of seven reviews (Hallberg 2011; Kakutani 2011; Lasdun 2011; Rayner 2011; Roberts 2011; Sullivan 2011) draw direct comparisons to or delve into themes of *Infinite Jest* when talking about PK. The reviews generally acknowledge the novel's shortcomings as an unfinished text, that there is a pattern of introducing a character and their backstory, but that very few of them eventually interact. One review (Lasdun 2011: para. 10) also aptly points out the lack of development of PK's female characters. Despite these shortcomings, all reviews seem to agree that the text still makes up a whole. The text is held together by Wallace's observational skills and his ability

to capture distinctly human moments, and while you can only guess where Wallace was going with the novel, it does not need to be a complete narrative to have something worthwhile to offer in terms of reading experience. What is also highlighted is how the novel creates a facade of tedium to challenge the reader to pay close attention. They all compliment Wallace's writing abilities and find the text to be thought-provoking in that it displays a selection of different reading experiences that offer opportunities for self-reflection, aesthetic beauty, or direct engagement with the reader through playing with textual structures and forms.

1.6.2 Academic reception

PK's academic reception seems to agree with the reviews in that, despite being unfinished in many ways, the novel's exploration of the themes of boredom, economics, philosophy, politics, its use of diverse textual forms and devices, as well as its status within the world of literary fiction merit extensive research and analysis (Boswell 2012; Boswell 2014; Elderon 2014; Groenland 2017; Hogg 2014; Shapiro 2014). However, the novel's posthumous, unfinished status invites a lot of speculation as to the author's intentions with the text that was published as well as the parts that Wallace did not get to finish. As a result, the research rarely focuses only on PK and often looks elsewhere in Wallace's fiction or his interviews for perspective for decoding the novel.

Wallace's manuscripts for PK, located at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin along with the rest of Wallace's archive, have been studied by different scholars (Groenland 2017; Roache 2019; Staes 2014) who read the manuscripts alongside the published novel. Staes (2014) looked into the early manuscripts to further study the fictional authorship and narration from a narrative standpoint whereas Groenland (2017)

examined the process of writing to conclude that the text is self-reflectively in dialogue with itself. In Groenland's (2017) reading, the stylistically clashing parts of the book and the metafictional David Wallace persona highlighting bureaucracy in fiction publishing reflect Wallace's writing process and his inability to conclude or even tie together a coherent story in a satisfactory manner. A similar connection between PK's self-consciousness as a bureaucratic text and representations of bureaucracy is made by Simon de Bourcier (2014), who argues that they constitute a kind of mimesis, because the text is so self-conscious about its attempt to portray bureaucracy that it begins to approach itself in a bureaucratic manner. Bureaucracy is also the central theme in James Gourley's (2018) research that looks into the textual link provided by Wallace directly quoting a sentence from Franz Kafka's *Amerika* (1927) in PK. Gourley (ibid.) suggests that PK treads a line between tragedy and comedy in a way that is directly influenced by Kafka's humorous perspective on bureaucracy in that the bureaucratic systems represented in the text are so rigid, absurd and inhuman that there is an inherently sad, yet comedic aspect to characters getting stuck in them.

As this research (Groenland 2017; Roache 2019; Staes 2014) suggests, the metafictional aspect of the multiple characters named David Wallace in the novel is a focal point in the discourse surrounding PK. It is additionally the subject of studies conducted by Winningham (2015), and more notably Marshall Boswell (2014) and Mike Miley (2016), who disagree on the relationship between the real and the fictional David Wallace. Boswell (2014) argues that these chapters provide a way for Wallace to parody himself and to distance himself from preconceived notions about his writing, while also incorporating enough parallels to his actual experiences and public image to leave room for doubt as to what could be considered *real*. For Miley (2016), in contrast, the narrative persona of David Wallace is much more conflated with his real public persona, and the David Wallace chapters

of PK are no less performative than real Wallace's image as a writer, essentially rendering any attempt by either the real or fictional Wallace to claim authenticity as an individual unsuccessful. Both studies build their argument on Wallace's interviews and other fiction.

Wallace's depiction of the IRS has also spawned research from economic, political, and historical perspectives. Mark West (2017) looks at Chris Fogle's story in chapter 22 as emblematic of the civic ideals of the 1970s in contrast to the larger critical focus on the 1980s individualism and neoliberalism that the novel has otherwise cultivated (as argued by Boswell 2012; Hogg 2014; Godden & Szalay 2014; Shapiro 2014). Richard Godden and Michael Szalay (2014) regard various characters, the state, and organizations in the novel as financial abstractions, representations of financial value and attitudes towards the market and financial assets. Emily Hogg (2014) suggests that the novel explores how personal experiences shape and destabilize individual political views.

Out of the available research on King, perhaps one the most adjacent to present thesis is Stephen Shapiro's (2014) study that suggests that *King* uniquely depicts simultaneous capitalist temporalities, those of long term and short term, to explore the effects of capitalist abstraction of human relations in the capitalist organization of the economy. The long term timescale of capitalism refers to recurring general features of capitalism, and the short term to features prevalent in specific phases of capitalism, which in the case of PK is late stage capitalism under neoliberalism. Shapiro (2014) also argues that PK is suggestive towards communist ideals. Shapiro looks at Wallace's short story collections and texts by other authors, most prominently Herman Melville, whose works Shapiro names as PK's intertexts, to identify themes in the unfinished novel. Shapiro (ibid.) argues that the novel is critical of individual selfishness and encouraging individualistic attitudes and constant distraction over

prolonged concentration. In this perspective, the novel is a call to collectively return to a more selfless, but less exciting, *pale* outlook on life. In refusing to conform to the expectations of readerly entertainment, *The Pale King* asks the reader to refuse the allure of distraction and to accept the pale aspects of contemporary life, which might have the effect of emancipating us from the destructive effects of capitalist abstraction that the society faces every day.

The debate on irony and sincerity has played a central part in the discourse on *Infinite Jest* (Holland 2006; Dulk 2012; Kelly 2010; Woodend 2019). It has also been transferred to the discussion of PK. For example, Shannon Elderon (2014) suggests that the characters in PK face similar obstacles regardless of their commitment to irony or sincerity and use both to their advantage, becoming more aware of themselves as multifaceted humans in the process of telling stories and forming narratives about themselves. Elderon (2014: 509) argues that sincerity is not the primary tool Wallace's characters use to connect with the world in his later fictions, instead discovering performance and pretense as useful tools. These characters discover that they are not as shackled to who they thought they are and can start processes of change in their lives, beginning with a performative change. Elderon (ibid.) posits that the themes of irony and sincerity are not as binary for Wallace, as some of the earlier discourse had assumed, which is a stance echoed by Lee Konstantinou's (2016; 2017) positioning of Wallace as a postironist.

The worldview that I argue David Foster Wallace's PK engages with is very similar to that of capitalist realism, as formulated by Mark Fisher (2009) that sees capitalism as having rooted itself so deep within the society's collective conscious that it becomes next to impossible to imagine alternatives or change within expansive capitalist systems that

everyone is connected to. Fisher's concept can be traced to older analyses of postmodernist culture being linked to consumer habits and the late capitalist sociocultural landscape that have their roots in Marxist cultural criticism. These include philosophies of Fredric Jameson (1991), whose influential work framed postmodernism as a system connections between the collective psyche, cultural production, and the effects of existing under late capitalism that later postmodernist philosophy could not ignore, and Jean Baudrillard (1983; 1994), whose work mapping the dimensions of the real, simulation, and the hyper-real is important in understanding how a shared perception of the world can be untethered from what is real and take different forms. While Fisher's perspective of the then contemporary world is bleak, he finds avenues of possible criticism of capitalism, most relevant of which to PK is bureaucracy.

I argue that PK takes a constructive stance towards and explores some of the more negative cultural legacies of postmodernism, which can be best understood from the interpretative logic of postirony as formulated by Lee Konstantinou (2012; 2016; 2017). Postirony is concerned with moving past the default position of irony, a phenomenon traced to the late capitalist cultural space. To call something as postironic also assumes that the author utilized a critical approach to postmodern irony. In the case of Wallace there is a strong precedent of his own critical remarks on irony as well as his earlier fiction being used to exemplify his postironic ethos. Previous studies (Gourley 2018; Elderon 2014; Shapiro 2014; Boswell 2014 etc.) on Wallace and PK have glanced at certain elements within the novel related to postirony, such as capitalism, metafiction, and postmodernist techniques, but have not made the connection to postirony. Konstantinou, one of the primary scholars on literary postirony has also not provided a postironic interpretation to PK, though he has provided such analyses for a large selection of Wallace's other fiction. Konstantinou (2012;

2016; 2017) has also previously not explicitly treated a single work of fiction as representing multiple modes of postirony (out of the four that he identifies). My assertion is that two, intensified postmodernism (defined as motivated postmodernism in Konstantinou (ibid.)) and credulous metafiction appear in PK. My thesis seeks to make the connection between PK and postirony, and to show how PK explores postmodernist literary and sociocultural legacies with the intent of moving past their more negative dimensions through postironic belief.

2. POSTIRONY IN *THE PALE KING*

2.1 Methodology

I have identified three distinct elements of postirony and capitalist realism that can be found in PK and approached from the perspective of postirony. These include credulous metafiction, intensified postmodernism, and bureaucracy. These were chosen, because they provide distinct, yet connected ways to approach the novel, and can account for a diverse selection of the book's various themes and literary techniques. These themes and elements will be highlighted through close reading. First, the concept of credulous metafiction appears within the novel in chapters where an implied author of the novel appears and discusses their role in relation to what is fictional and what is real. Credulous metafiction is the primary mode of postirony David Foster Wallace is associated with (Konstantinou 2012; 2016; 2017) and its explicit use in PK provides the most obvious connection to postirony. Second, I will approach intensified postmodernism by finding discernibly postmodernist techniques and themes used in the novel and submit them to positronic analysis to see if they could be considered a kind of realism supported by positronic theory. Third, bureaucracy is one of the central themes in the novel and a major area of Fisher's (2009) critique of capitalism. As such it has potential to yield results under the lens of postirony. I will focus on instances when the theme of bureaucracy is used to define the way the characters or the world in PK function. I will first provide a short overview of the book, after which I will examine these three elements one by one through specific examples of postironic form and content from PK. Afterwards I will conclude my findings and discuss the implications of my analysis.

2.2 Book overview

The majority of the narrative of PK depicts the life and work of people working in US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) tax return processing center in Peoria, Illinois in 1985. The book is made up of accounts of their childhood, how they were drawn to the IRS, and the lives of people in and outside of the office. The structure of storytelling varies from chapter to chapter. Some chapters are made up of shorts skits, conversations around the office, some are monologues of varying length, some are from the perspective of a seemingly omniscient narrator, some parts just describe or even take the form of legal documents that the IRS workers deal with etc. The structure of the novel has been described in a review as “montage-like” (Lasdun 2011: para. 7). Another review states that “I’m not sure you even need to read it in any particular order. It’s not that kind of book.” (Alsup 2011: para. 5).

There are 50 chapters in the novel, and their length varies from just half a page (chapter 28) to 98 pages (chapter 22). Characters are introduced and given backstories, but do not get to complete or often even participate in story or character arcs and it could be said that very little of note happens to them at all from the aspect of over-arching narrative. What little overarching narrative there is could be said to revolve around particular workers, who possess extraordinary talents when it comes to concentration and data analysis. They are scouted by DeWitt Glendenning, the titular *pale king* (Wallace 2011: 130), for something that seems to be related to a certain Spackman initiative, a turning point for the IRS where it ceases to function as a necessary civil service run by hard working accountants and begins to function as a profit driven organization run by computers and algorithms. This internal plot within the organization remains mysterious and only hinted at, reminiscent of the aura of paranoia in postmodern works like Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*.

In a section called “Notes and Asides” at the end of the book the editor has included a selection of a few pages out of the hundreds of notes left by the author. The notes are from various stages of the book’s development and can be contradictory, i.e. they claim in separate instances that different characters inhabit the same role in the story. However, they do give a vague impression of what was meant for the unfinished portions of the book. These notes lay out initially intended themes, which are paying attention, boredom, realism, monotony, Attention Deficit Disorder, machines vs. people at performing mindless jobs, being individual vs. being part of larger things and a team player (Wallace 2011: 547-548). The notes also reveal that the plot was intended to include a series of set-ups for something to happen without anything actually happening (Wallace 2011: 548).

2.3 Credulous metafiction in PK

Some of the more provocative and discussed parts of the book are chapters 9, 24, 27, 35 and 38, where two fictional characters named David Wallace (a David Foster Wallace, who is a writer, and a David Francis Wallace, who is an experienced accountant) appear, the first of whom narrates in first person in chapters 9, 24, and 38 (and possibly 35) claiming to have written the book that the reader is reading. Chapter 9 is called “AUTHOR’S FOREWORD”, something one would expect at the beginning of the book. However, this chapter begins on page 68. The aspect of position and space is further played with, when David Wallace, the implied author, asks the reader to flip back to the copyright page at the beginning, describing its precise location and arguing that while it does contain the disclaimer that “The characters and events in this book are fictitious”, it is in fact based on true events. The irony of calling the ninth chapter of the novel “THE AUTHOR’S FOREWORD” is undercut by the fact that it was intended by Wallace, as noted by the book’s

editor Michael Pietsch (Wallace 2011: xi) and echoed in the footnotes, where the fictional Wallace implies that the foreword has been moved further back in the text due to the publisher's demands and fears that readers would believe everything that follows in the book to be true if it was left at the beginning (Wallace 2011: 69).

This is characteristic of a conflict set up between the fictional author and publisher in this chapter. It is further elaborated that the book had legal troubles prior to release and clearing it for release was a lengthy bureaucratic process (Wallace 2011: 72-73). Groenland's (2017) analysis of the text being in dialogue with itself about the difficulties of presenting it is helpful for decoding the significance of this conflict. While the text depicts the publisher as a third party who makes it hard for fictional Wallace to put out his story, it is conceivable that the publisher is a stand-in for one side of Wallace, the real-life author, while a fictional Wallace portrays another. This would mean that the decision to place the foreword further in the book is not a contrivance for the sake of narrative conflict, but a strategic placement by Wallace, and that it was not the publisher's, but Wallace's own fear that the reader would interpret everything that follows as true if it were placed in the beginning, which, as it relates to the publisher representing the real author, is what a postironic reading would also suggest. The presence of this author–publisher conflict serves to substantiate the implied author's urgency and motivation to enable readers to experience the text. The articulation of the author's inner conflict demonstrates the desire to evoke in the reader nonnaïvety (that they would not attribute these stories to the real author's life experiences just because the implied author says so) and noncynicism (not interpreting the metafictional aspects as shallow irony).

To the same end, the words *truth* and *real* are constantly repeated by the fictional David Wallace in the context of the events depicted in the book (Wallace 2011: 68-71). The first time truth is claimed this way is between the first and second paragraphs of the 9th chapter, where there is a separate line that reads “All of this is true. This book is really true.” (Wallace 2011: 69). It can also be found in other chapters, for example in chapter 26 an omniscient narrator establishes a much more unrealistic truth: “The truth is that there are two actual, non-hallucinatory ghosts haunting Post 047’s wiggle room.” (Wallace 2011: 317). The significance of this repeated emphasis on truth can be uncovered by peeling back the various rhetorical layers it operates in. The first is that of sincerity on the behalf of the implied author, who, as a fictional construct, is asking the reader to believe the truth of his fiction. The second is that of irony, which comes from the fact that the implied author makes a show out of overemphasizing the aspect of truth, while also bringing attention to the book as an artifact, acknowledging that the text is a form of fiction, but still arguing that the events depicted have really happened. The third is that of postirony, which operates in the gray area between the motivations of the fictional and the real author. When the fictional author tells the reader to flip back to the copyright page, the reader will be inevitably reminded of there being a real author behind the implied one that is addressing the reader. The reader is asked to equate the two authors and even the publisher as one indeterminable entity that crosses the lines between fiction and real. The postironic layer asks the reader to believe both the sincere and the ironic interpretations, to regard the text as fiction with a goal to tell a story as well as an attempt by the author to communicate with the reader directly. The goal of this communication is for the author to prove that such a connection can be made in the first place and perhaps to extend the connection to chapters that make less of an effort to connect to the reader, and from the perspective of the reader to develop and demonstrate an ability

to hold a complex disposition towards the text that does not cynically disregard its claims to storytelling nor assume the text to be wholly ironic. Another aspect relating to truth pertains to holding various perspectives that clash to be true. The commentary on truth seems to ask the reader to not discredit something claimed to be true just because it is in conflict with already established truths, in other words, to develop a nuanced understanding of the possibility of belief and truth.

9th chapter's particular use of irony can be seen in how the fictional David Wallace discusses the nature of the book. He tells the story of how he came to work at the IRS and that the stories in PK are collected from his coworkers with some added embellishments. The character goes on to discuss the nuances of the "unspoken contract" between a book's author and its reader, saying that the contract differs for fiction and non-fiction, implying that this one more closely resembles that of a non-fiction book (Wallace 2011: 69-75). One of the more telling passages in regards to irony is Wallace's own articulation of the short-circuit present in this chapter:

This might appear to set up an irksome paradox. The book's legal disclaimer defines everything that follows it as fiction, including this Foreword, but now here in this Foreword I'm saying that the whole thing is really nonfiction; so if you believe one you can't believe the other, & c., & c. Please know that I find these sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes irksome, too—at least now that I'm over thirty I do—and that the very last thing this book is is some kind of clever metafictional titty-pincher. (Wallace 2011: 69)

It is ironic that the fictional author says that they dislike metafictional paradoxes while appearing to set up paradox of claiming to operate within the realm of non-fiction while the book's first pages clearly frame it as a work of fiction. By staging and discussing in advance various conflicts for the reader, i.e. those between fiction and nonfiction, the author and the publisher, the reader's expectations vs. to what extent and when the text delivers on these expectations, the text demonstrates that the author has predicted various conflicts that a reader would face reading such metafiction and through it, the text devalues their ironic

charge. Regardless, one cannot take the author on their word that the text is not paradoxical or metafictional because it demonstrably is those things and the author's articulation of these elements is unavoidably ironic. The reader is conditioned to accept irony as a part of the text and is even asked not to reject the text when it is confusing:

Our mutual contract here is based on the presumptions of (a) my veracity, and (b) your understanding that any features or semions that might appear to undercut that veracity are in fact protective legal devices, not unlike the boilerplate that accompanies sweepstakes and civil contracts, and thus are not meant to be decoded or 'read' so much as merely acquiesced to as part of the cost of our doing business together, so to speak, in today's commercial climate. (Wallace 2011: 75)

Essentially, the text articulates possible ironic responses in a manner that leaves the reader with a sense of being clever from understanding the irony, but does not promote adopting an ironic stance themselves. Thus, PK's metafiction uses irony in a way that renders any cynically ironic response from the reader feeble and edgeless, indicating a desire to connect to the reader through postironic belief instead.

Another way the connection is established in the 9th chapter is by imagining something akin to a dialogue between the implied author and the reader's thoughts. One of the ways this is done is by referring to the reader directly as "you", and the narrator by "me". This effect is assisted by footnotes, which serve a number of purposes as it will be detailed further in other sections of my analysis. The footnotes sometimes predict the reader's reaction or question, and answer them. On the one hand, this disrupts the reading experience by making the reader break away from the main text when they come across a footnote marker, but on the other it creates a sense of mutual understanding or inclusion that has the potential to further engross the reader and emphasize connection. The footnotes are sometimes apologetic in tone, asking the reader to be empathetic towards the text when the author is forced to use vague or frustrating language due to the bureaucracy surrounding the release of the book. For example, footnote 15 of chapter 9 starts with "Sorry about that

sentence. The truth is that..." (Wallace 2011: 80) and the subsequent footnote 16 with "And please forgive the contrivance here. Given the..." (ibid.). Later in the main text, Wallace mentions the average author's advance in payment, and the attached footnote 20 starts with "If you're interested, this term is shorthand for..." (Wallace 2011: 83). The metafictional author seems to care about the reader's investment and to have anxiety about how the reader relates to the text. This in turn makes the text feel personal and the reader's opinion feels valued.

The ninth chapter attempts to forge a connection with the reader through shared postironic belief, even articulated as a two-way contract. It does so by overexposing the traditionally postmodern technique of inserting oneself into the narrative to set up various conflicts and demonstrating to the reader that the author is aware of their position and the urge to be cynical. The reader can infer that while what is being said in the text may be ironic, the manner in which it is being said does not assume an ironic stance and might still carry some critical insight into the way we perceive the world. Postironic belief fostered through this metafiction functions to also strengthen the legitimacy and claims to reality of the constructions of intensified postmodernism and bureaucracy detailed below. The novel has a fragmented structure and while one might presumably expect the chapters, in which an implied author of the whole novel appears, to function as a narrative glue explaining and providing context for the rest of the book, it does not do so directly. I propose that the 9th chapter constructs is a postironic belief that entails an understanding that the author, here a fluid construction containing both the implied author and the real author, has a reason for using postmodern techniques as well as irony, and to adopt a nuanced disposition that accepts the text the way it is and allows their preconceived notions to be challenged without responding to these challenges only with cynicism.

2.4 Intensified postmodernism in PK

In this section I will be highlighting the ways in which postmodernist techniques are utilized in PK and analyze if they could be said to achieve a reality effect through intensified postmodernism, i.e. whether and how the use of these techniques could be interpreted as realism.

2.4.1 Intertextuality and pastiche

In the 9th chapter of PK, the character of David Wallace says that he dreamed of becoming an “immortally great fiction writer a la Gaddis or Anderson, Balzac or Perec” (Wallace 2011: 75). Stephen J. Burn (2016: 453) has argued that the listing of these names as inspiration indicates real Wallace’s literary heritage and the motivations for PK. William Gaddis is a writer associated directly with first generation postmodernist writing, and his name at the head of the list may indicate the writing Wallace mainly drew inspiration from. Honoré de Balzac is one of the key authors of realism and was known for his attention to objects and detail, whereas Georges Perec’s experimental style makes use of numbers and statistics among other things (Burn 2016: 453-454). The author not only seems to hold these writers in high regard, but they all represent major stylistic themes in PK, suggesting that the inclusion of these names was not coincidental.

As for Sherwood Anderson’s influence, the parallels with PK are explicit. Anderson’s inclusion in Wallace’s list is probably due to Anderson being a notable American Midwestern writer, who is concerned with realism and whose work has been described as an exploration of the struggle between sincerity and commercialism (Burn 2016: 454). Wallace’s prose in the first chapter of PK mimics the style and rhythm of Anderson’s first passages in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), signifying a movement from Anderson’s naturalist

vision of humanity to Wallace's depiction of a world where economics drive everything (Burn 2016: 453-455). Here is a comparison of these passages:

Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly /.../ insects at their business. Ale-colored sunshine and pale sky and whorls of cirrus so high they cast no shadow. Insects all business all the time. Quartz and Chert and schist and chondrite iron scabs in granite. Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers. (Wallace 2011: 5)

Upon the half decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio, a fat little old man walked nervously up and down. Across a long field that had been seeded for clover but that had produced only a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds, he could see the public highway along which went a wagon filled with berry pickers returning from the field. (Anderson 1976: 27)

Both passages are overtly visual and descriptive of a landscape and feature detailed descriptions of wildlife as well as a juxtaposition of country and highways that creates a sense of inescapable connectedness between country and cities. One can see how PK has demonstrably mimicked Anderson's rhythm and thematic elements.

Another textual link in the PK connects it to Franz Kafka's *Amerika* (1927). A particular sentence is borrowed from Kafka's book almost word for word. Wallace has reworded the subject of the sentence to "he" instead of "you" in a quote from *America* so it reads: "He will be given only a small job to begin with, and it will be his business to work his way up by diligence and attentiveness;" (Wallace 2011: 262). James Gourley (2018) has concluded that this link indicates that the two novels share a common critique of bureaucracy. They regard bureaucracy as a frustrating, unknowable, and aimless part of contemporary life but one that the two novels regard as humorous, as there are no other positive ways to relate to it. Importantly, this sentence is in a footnote in chapter 24, the second chapter that is introduced with the words "author here". These direct links to other authors are thereby only made from the direct perspective of the character implied to be the writer. This could be seen as Wallace using satire to expose his writing in a way he could

not without the satirical layer. The concept of Wallace satirizing himself will be further explored below.

While intertextuality alone cannot be said to directly contribute to realism, the way it is used through the fictional writer can. The character of David Wallace tells a fictional story, and provides fictional details about himself as proof of this story being true. The facts that he offers cannot be substantiated, but the reference to these real-world writers and their thematic connections to the novel provide a level of realism not offered by the fictional details, as they can be proven to be accurate. Another interesting dimension gained by this technique is in how the chapters that are not explicitly narrated by David Wallace gain a thematic context by the naming of literary inspirations for the novel. Naming specific authors and providing direct textual and thematic references to them feel less like blank pastiche when filtered through the perspective of a fictional character. David Foster Wallace, the real author, might avoid interpolation and mimicry of other texts so late in his career and it would feel somewhat out of character in regards to what is expected of his writing, but in depicting a struggling writer facing many conflicts, these elements add to the believability of the text. A character is created, for whom these techniques would be believable and is used to employ postmodern intertextuality in a way that, while buffered by a layer of satire, probably represents the real David Foster Wallace's inspirations as well. This technique is postironic, as the author is using performative irony to say something, while likely also sincerely meaning what they say, though, of course, it is impossible to arrive at a conclusive understanding of author's intentions. In this instance, we can see credulous metafiction actually enable the reality effect in intensified postmodernism.

2.4.2 Unrealism, satire, and fictional worlds: how to approach PK

It is impossible to say if the character of David Wallace's authorship extends to all of the book, and as such, many of the postmodern techniques in the book, and indeed, the book itself, take on multiple meanings and generate various ways of relating to them. I have identified three interpretative responses to how PK is constructed. The novel seems to elicit these responses often concurrently and all three have different implications for realism in the novel. The critique of capitalist realism through the novel's themes is not changed much in the different ways of interpreting the authorship of the novel, but it can take new dimensions, when one considers what holding these different perspectives to be synchronously true can mean.

One mode of interpreting the author's role sees the entirety of PK as an artefact produced by a fictional author named David Wallace (whose full name is also David Foster Wallace (2011: 415)). As demonstrated above, this satire is not fully ironic and explores a certain dimension of realism in the sense that the book itself becomes an artifact of a fictional world. This would also assume that the reader should believe the claims to truth put forward by the fictional author. In the book elements of unrealism are used casually next to bureaucratic IRS lingo with a normalizing effect towards the more fantastical elements, and if the fictional author is to be believed, these elements of unrealism are a part of the world he is describing. For example Claude Sylvanshine, an IRS worker is described as having ESP (extrasensory perception) in the form of having random facts about people and the world intruding his thoughts uncontrollably (Wallace 2011: 120). This information is introduced with a certain matter-of-factness: "An obscure but true piece of paranormal trivia: There is such a thing as a *fact psychic*. Sometimes in the literature also known as a *data*

mystic, and the syndrome itself as *RFI* (= *Random-Fact Intuition*).” (Wallace 2011: 120). It is implied that this is a phenomenon that occurs in the world and that the people affected by it refer to it as a disability as it is so disruptive (*ibid.*). This mode of interpreting PK assumes that the events are taking place in a world, in which there some fantastical elements are normal, but are not thought to be special within the world. This nonchalant attitude towards the fantastical could be read as commentary on the way information overflow desensitizes people to not regard things as special, or, as a demonstration of a point made in the book about a technique in bureaucracy, that important or sensitive information can be hidden in plain sight as long as the way in which it is presented is sufficiently tedious or boring. However, there is also a level on which it has to be taken literally in the sense that the implied author is describing his reality.

Another possibility is that the fictional writer inhabits a world that operates by the same standards of realism as our world, and that he is just making use of unreality as well as postmodernist techniques. While the first mode of interpretation would regard fictional Wallace as a realist writer, this one would rather see him as a postmodernist. This interpretation of PK supported by David Foster Wallace, the real writer being associated with postmodernism or responding to postmodernism. Thus, this approach imagines PK as an ironic response to his reputation as a postmodernist and postmodernism as a whole through the perspective of a fictional writer, whose style is loosely modeled after his own. Through this interpretation, the character of David Wallace and his book are a satirical commentary on Wallace as a writer. Another layer prevalent through this mode of interpreting PK is that the book may represent the impossibility of following up *Infinite Jest* in a way that he, the real author and perhaps his readership would be content with. This would support the notion that the “notes and asides” section in the end might have also been

a planned part of the book, and that the book was meant to be “incomplete” so that the reader has to confront the monumental task of putting together all of the fragments themselves, and through this also confront the reality of what they expect out of David Foster Wallace.

A third mode of interpretation sees the fictional character of David Wallace as one of many concurrent constructions of postmodern reality in the book. Similarly to the first and second interpretations, this one sees the novel as an exploration of boredom and bureaucracy through the setting of the IRS, but regards the various perspective and formal shifts and techniques in the text as commentary on the impossibility of representing the contemporary world accurately and that truth is a matter of perspective. The major difference between this and the first two modes of interpretation is that this one does not assume that the novel is filtered through a secondary character. Moreover, the third mode of interpretation sees various constructions of reality as critique on the contemporary world, and not critique on the expectations on Wallace (both fictional and real) as a cultural critic or writer, as the second mode of interpretation synchronously demands. This perspective is supported by the disjointed narrative structure, overall lack of focus, and the stories not having much more in common than general theme and setting with some exceptions.

It is also interesting that these three approaches to the question of authorship in the novel correspond to the styles of writers that fictional Wallace claims he looks up to. The first corresponding to the realism of Balzac, the second to the postmodernism of Gaddis, and the third to the experimentalism of Perec. I will refer to these ways of interpreting the book in that order, as one or all of them are likely to be useful for analyzing certain parts of the text. They all operate through a layer of postirony, although they have different relationships with irony. The first refuses irony, when it chooses to believe the implied author and the text

to the extent that it regards the novel's content as a truthful attempt to describe its fictional world. However, irony is present in the understanding that the shadow of the real author is inescapable and the reader has to exercise utmost belief in the text while acknowledging the position of the real author. The second operates distinctly on the level of irony, as it regards the novel as satirical in nature. This approach overemphasizes irony and makes it useful for highlighting critical elements in the text. The third uses a cynical approach in that it does not believe the implied author's claim of authorship beyond the scope of the chapters where he appears, but on the other hand looks at the various constructions in the text as attempts by the real Wallace to explore the themes of the book. The interpretations converge in the David Wallace chapters, where the explicit metafiction retains the same effect, mainly due to the direct language used to address the reader. The novel challenges the reader to hold all three interpretations as possibly correct, again challenging the notions of a singular truth.

2.4.3 Footnotes

David Foster Wallace is known for his use of endnotes and footnotes as an extension of the text in both his fiction and non-fiction. He plays around with this concept and especially in his fiction often tells parts of the story or buries important bits of information into notes. Footnotes in PK appear in chapters 9, 13, 24, 35, 38, 39, and 46. The first footnote appears on page 67, the first page of chapter 9 and it takes up more room and is longer than the main text on the page. Similarly, pages 70 and 71 have 5 and 9 lines of main text respectively and the rest is filled with the text of footnote 3, with the last line on the bottom of page 71 also containing footnote 4. This sort of over the top use of footnotes can be observed in every chapter where there are footnotes. The way footnotes can take up the majority of these pages has a distracting, even distancing effect at first, as the reader is met

with blocks of text in very small print and it is not made clear whether or not the info contained in the footnotes is even essential to the reader. They do turn out to be important to the chapters and often contain pertinent info. This sort of play with form is traditionally associated with postmodernism.

There is certainly a satirical element characteristic of the second mode of interpretation established above. As David Foster Wallace is known for his use of various notes, the at times overexaggerated use of them in PK links the fictional Wallace to the real one, and is later used in certain chapters as a way of reminding the reader that the author exists, inserting both the fictional and the real Wallace into the text. It is, however, more fruitful to regard this overflow of data into footnotes as commentary on the impossibility of representing contemporary reality. The way some footnotes are out of proportion in relation to the text they are supposed to be supporting implies that there is endless context to everything, and that even when we regard the inclusion of exacerbated footnotes as a sincere attempt to illustrate this point, it still feels like ironic play with the reader's expectations and literary tradition. However, the footnotes also sparingly provide structure. There are only a handful of chapters that make use of footnotes and it can feel like in some parts the novel there is too much info that is not relevant, in which case the footnotes have a comforting effect of reminding the reader of the author who made a sincere attempt to connect to them beforehand. Contemporary society having to deal with an overflow of information is one of the themes of the book, and the use of footnotes in PK can be regarded as intensified postmodernism in the way it attempts to demonstrate its effects in a world where there is too much data to comprehend.

2.4.4 Resisting structure, criticism of capitalist reality

PK's fragmentary structure means that information is not conveyed in a linear timeline or through coherent overarching storytelling. A postmodern trope of playing with narrative cohesion and convention can be observed throughout the book. As an example, I once again return to the 9th chapter, which is titled "AUTHOR'S FOREWORD", but is placed 68 pages into the main text. On the one hand, it is logical that the chapter is different from the rest of the book, as it is labeled as an author's foreword and typically in literary fiction this would be the place for the author to address and prime the reader in some way, but its deliberate positioning as a part of the main text could be read as a commentary on a reliance on structure and systems, without which it becomes difficult, even impossible to orient oneself.

This resisting of structure can be observed in the inclusion of many short chapters that explore the themes of the book without context. Chapter 3, for example is a short, two pages of somewhat uncomfortable conversation about masturbation between two coworkers sharing a long and apparently tedious car ride (Wallace 2011: 27-28). Chapter 4 is of a similar length and depicts a news article from 1980, where it is said a man was found dead after sitting, dead, behind his desk at the IRS for four days without being noticed (Wallace 2011: 29-30). The dead examiner in chapter 4 is later in chapter 26 even confirmed to become a ghost that visits various examiners at the IRS building when they exercise concentration for long periods of time (Wallace 2011: 317-318). Chapter 17 is from the perspective of someone looking back on their childhood self wanting to become someone who does important work that does not get widely recognized, an "institutional, small-*h*

hero”, telling of the kind of people the book alleges to seek work in the IRS (Wallace 2011: 129). There are more examples of these kinds of loosely thematically correlating short stories throughout the book. A somewhat ironic throughline can be observed: in chapter 3 it is the irony of depicting the unimportant conversation in the novel in the first place, in chapter 4 it is the implication that an accountant’s job is so boring and lifeless that no one can tell if you are dead, and in chapter 17 it is the unlikely notion of a child idolizing bureaucracy.

The chapters all use irony in a way that is critical of capitalist reality. The conversation in the car is telling of us being uncomfortable with boredom and being removed from stimuli, the dead worker at his desk literally works himself to death and no one notices, whereas the child idolizes the very same job, because work seems more heroic when no one applauds you. The stories in PK indicate a pervasiveness of capitalism in the way people start to think at a young age all the way up to their death. When discussing these short chapters, all previously discussed modes of interpretation arrive at the same critique of capitalism. When written by a realist it depicts a bleak reality, when written by a postmodernist it depicts a sad reality through irony, and when written by an experimentalist it shows how different structures and perspectives can be used to arrive at a singular point about a system that connects them all.

2.4.5 Textual experimentation

Many chapters in this novel could be considered experimental, but it seems that the rest of the novel is deliberately positioned between three particular chapters that are different from the rest. Chapters 1, 25, and 50 serve as the novel’s beginning, middle, and end. All three are concerned with observing or paying attention to one’s surroundings, and their

placement at structurally significant points serves to reinforce the novel's main themes, like data overflow, paying attention when faced with boredom, and completing tasks.

The first chapter juxtaposes nature scenery with data overflow already within the first sentence:

Past the flannel plains and blacktop graphs and skylines of canted rust, and past the tobacco-brown river overhung with weeping trees and coins of sunlight through them on the water downriver, to the place beyond the windbreak, where untilled fields simmer shrilly in the A.M. heat: shattercane, lamb's-quarter, cutgrass, sawbrier, nutgrass, jimsonweed, wild mint, dandelion, foxtail, muscadine, spinecabbage, goldenrod, creeping charlie, butter-print, nightshade, ragweed, wild oat, vetch, butcher grass, invaginate volunteer beans, all heads gently nodding in a morning breeze like a mother's soft hand on your cheek. (Wallace 2011: 5)

The passage begins with a view of Midwestern countryside and pivots to an exhaustive list of various plants that can be seen growing there. The realism of this scene is undercut by the sheer quantity of data presented to the reader. The effect of listing these plants depends on the reader's expectations and willingness to pay attention to excessive detail. While playing with reader's expectations could be interpreted as a postmodern trope, one might also view it in this instance as an invitation to the reader to adjust their expectations and consider this excessive representation of reality as an accurate depiction of the world. The way this sentence is used to introduce the book to the reader sets the tone and immediately starts building on the two-way contract between the text and the reader that is expanded on in the 9th chapter. The chapter continues to describe the landscape and various animals and insects who inhabit it, but then addresses the reader: "Very old land. Look around you. The horizon trembling, shapeless. We are all of us brothers." (Wallace 2011: 5). The text instructs the reader to look and pay attention, while the phrase "we are all of us brothers" alludes to a certain solidarity and connection. The short chapter adjusts perspective, zooming in and out between the minute details of the wildlife and the broader landscape, and then with the last words in the chapter, addresses the reader again, saying "read these" (Wallace 2011: 6). The

chapter experiments with the combination of what can be considered nature writing and breaking the fourth wall in addressing the reader. It also makes use of excessive descriptions, providing something for the reader to pay attention to. The calls to the reader to look around and read can feel out of place when first starting the book without the context given in the author's foreword, especially because the prose in chapter 1 makes a great effort to be aesthetically pleasing and depict an immersive and detailed world.

In sharp contrast to the nature writing and aesthetic aspirations of the first chapter, chapter 25 in PK seemingly uses an inverse strategy of achieving realism through stripping sentences down to their most basic meaning. The chapter is just four pages long, but uses a number of formal techniques to set itself apart from the rest of the novel. First, the text is spread into columns, akin to a newspaper article. Second, the sentences are short and have simple constructions with few minor deviations. Third, each sentence jumps to a new character or an aspect of the room and the text never lingers on a single character for longer than the span of a single sentence. Close reading does not reveal any significant plot details or patterns. As such, any part of the text could be considered to be representative of the whole chapter, I have isolated a section from the third column to illustrate:

Latrice Theakston turns a page. Rotes Group Room 2 hushed and brightly lit, half a football field in length. Howard Cardwell shifts slightly in his chair and turns a page. Lane Dean Jr. traces his jaw's outline with his ring finger. Ed Shackelford turns a page. Elpidia Carter turns a page. Ken Wax attaches a Memo 20 to a file. Anand Singh turns a page. Jay Landauer and Ann Williams turn a page almost precisely in sync although they are in different rows and cannot see each other. Boris Kratz bobs with a slight Hassidic motion as he crosschecks a page with a column of figures. Ken Wax turns a page. Harriet Candelaria turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page. Ambient room temperature 80° F. (Wallace 2011: 313)

I have chosen this passage in particular, because it offers a significant detail about the room, namely that it is "half a football field in length". Thus, the chapter depicts a vast space filled with rote examiners checking filled tax forms day in and day out, symbolic of the vastness of bureaucratic systems all people are enmeshed in their everyday lives. It depicts the

monotony of bureaucracy at work and strips this representation down to offer minimal stimulus. The reader is challenged to find a way to cope with the boredom conveyed in this style of narration and naturally starts looking for patterns or inconsistencies.

The close reading and pattern checking puts the reader in the shoes of the workers in the text, who are checking tax returns for inconsistencies. The chapter can be said to generate a very particular form of realism through intensified postmodernism. The textual play is taken to such an extreme that it becomes an accurate strategy for depicting reality, as it generates empathy and even a solidarity with the fictional workers. While the chapter represents tedium and boredom, it is personally one of the more memorable parts of the book for me. It is so stripped down of added layers that it becomes a blank canvas of sorts. The reader comes across some familiar characters by this point in the book, but is confronted with the idea that this is what the characters are doing for large portions of their days. There is just one adjective used in the whole chapter, and only a few adverbs. If one thinks of adjectives and adverbs as adding color to language, then the chapter could even be said to represent the paleness alluded to in the book's title *The Pale King*.

There is, however, one instance of the pattern breaking and something is indeed buried in the monotonous narration: "Ed Shackleford turns a page. Two clocks, two ghosts, one square acre of hidden mirror. Ken Wax turns a page. Jay Landauer feels absently at his face. Every love story is a ghost story. Ryne Hobratchk turns a page." (Wallace 2011: 314). The stylistic change is in the phrases "hidden mirror" and "every love story is a ghost story" that introduce allegory and metaphor to the otherwise stylistically blank text. While the mention of ghosts is also an unreal element, the presence of ghosts in the Peoria center is established in the book and in a way mentioning them is no different from stating the room

temperature, as in the passage highlighted previously. “One square acre of hidden mirror” probably means that the spacious room filled with workers is symbolic of something, that is soon revealed to be “every love story is a ghost story” a strikingly poignant concept in the context of the chapter that, up until this point has avoided any species of double entendre or deeper meaning on the sentence level. One can only guess at the precise meaning of this metaphor in the context of PK, but I would offer an interpretation that the characters in the book are typically lonesome or not romantically committed and the few relationships depicted in this novel have an element of tragedy to them, meaning that something tragic happened in the narrative past and the relationship in the narrative present could be seen as a shell held together by shared trauma. Another interpretation is that death eventually creates a ghost of all love shared in life. This rather cynical depiction of love is extended in this metaphor towards all love stories and its effect at the level of sentence is magnified by the monotony of the text surrounding it. It also shows that when one pays attention when faced with tedium, they might find important information hidden in bureaucratic constructions. I interpret it as an extension of the concept about the inhumanity of bureaucracy and that the tedium generated by contemporary life exacerbates inclinations towards feeling like the lifelessness of bureaucracy bleeds into all other aspects of life.

The last chapter in PK returns to directly addressing the reader, but takes the concept even further, as the reader becomes a character in the book themselves. The chapter uses a “you” construction and an omniscient narrator who describes the setting and orients the reader in the fictional space, for example in the quote “Your sight line is the seam of the wall and drop ceiling; the toes of your shoes are visible at the lower periphery.” (Wallace 2011: 539). The text even provides narrative context for you being in the room: “You are a trained observer and there is nothing to observe” (Wallace 2011: 539). You are in an indistinct

office, sitting opposite of an unnamed woman, who can be assumed from context clues to be Toni Ware, an established character in the book (ibid.). The woman instructs you to be aware of your body in order to start a process of some kind (Wallace 2011: 540). The last paragraph of the novel seems to depict the reader fusing or merging with the “you” construction in the book:

Since we all breathe, all the time, it is amazing what happens when someone else directs you how and when to breathe. And how vividly someone with no imagination whatsoever can see what he’s told is right there, complete with banister and rubber runners, curving down and rightward into a darkness that recedes before you. It is nothing like sleeping. Nor does her voice alter or seem to recede. She’s right there, speaking calmly, and so are you. (Wallace 2011: 540)

There seems to be a movement from the role of the reader in chapter 1 to fully becoming a part of the book in chapter 50. An abstract concept, to be sure, but it would imply that the book becomes the reader’s reality. Another way of framing it would be that the PK suggests that reality of the book is already the reader’s reality, i.e. they already live in a postmodern world where they are a part of vast bureaucratic systems and would find certain parts of the real world unreal if given the knowledge and perspective. It is also remarkable that the three modes of interpreting the author’s role cannot be applied to these chapters to any distinct results.

2.5 Representations of bureaucracy in PK

2.5.1 Boredom and bureaucracy

In the last paragraph of the 9th chapter, an important thematic focal point is articulated by the author in a manner that leaves a very narrow line between the fictional and the real Wallace. After detailing how he came to work in the IRS and what he experienced, David Wallace claims to have gained a new perspective on dullness and boredom that goes beyond that particular line of work:

The memoir-relevant point here is that I learned, in my time with the Service, something about dullness, information, and irrelevant complexity. About negotiating boredom as one would a terrain, its levels and forests and endless wastes. Learned about it extensively, exquisitely, in my interrupted year. And now ever since that time have noticed, at work and in recreation and time with friends and even the intimacies of family life, that living people do not speak much of the dull. Of those parts of life that are and must be dull. Why this silence? Maybe it's because the subject is, in and of itself, dull... only then we're again right back where we started, which is tedious and irksome. There may, though, I opine, be more to it... as in vastly more, right here before us all, hidden by virtue of its size. (Wallace 2011: 87)

The passage speaks to universal experiences of perceived time, the tendency to focus on and speak about significant time, known as *kairos* and to disregard seemingly ordinary time, known as *chronos*, even though most of life is usually spent in ordinary time. Through this concept the novel makes the connection between its major themes, boredom and bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy is usually regarded as tedious in PK, but this is not the only perspective offered. Understanding bureaucracy is framed as a way of perceiving structure in the world. This structure is artificial and monotonous, and PK depicts accepting its boring reality and thriving in it as one of the main challenges of existing in the contemporary world, even representing it as a necessity. Boredom drives one to seek or be inclined towards distraction, but distraction is harmful for productivity. It is implied in PK that most people fail or do not even attempt to overcome the urge to be distracted. The novel does this through repeatedly framing managing to concentrate on tedious or seemingly uninteresting jobs as heroic or some sort of great power.

This can be observed in the aforementioned chapter 17, where an unnamed character claims to have always idolized people who do tedious work without recognition, calling them “small-*h* heroes” (Wallace 2011: 129). This is echoed in chapter 22, the longest chapter in the book, where a guest professor at a lecture frames accounting as heroism, inspiring the

first-person narrator of the chapter, Chris Fogle to turn his life around from aimlessness and get into accounting, where he would find purpose. The lecturer says:

Yesterday's hero pushed back at bounds and frontiers—he penetrated, tamed, hewed, shaped, made, brought things into being. Yesterday's society's heroes generated facts. For this is what society is—an agglomeration of facts.' /.../ 'In today's world, boundaries are fixed, and most significant facts have been generated. Gentlemen, the heroic frontier now lies in the ordering and deployment of those facts. Classification, organization, presentation. To put it another way, the pie has been made—the contest is now in the slicing. /.../ You have wondered, perhaps, why all real accountants wear hats? They are today's cowboys. As will you be. Riding the American range. Riding herd on the unending torrent of financial data. (Wallace 2011: 234)

The image of an accountant is somewhat ironically equated to that of the cowboy. A cowboy would characteristically remain brave and emotionless in the face of danger, a part of life that is seemingly eliminated from contemporary bureaucratic jobs, at least in the physical sense. The various dangers a cowboy would face in westerns is equated to the dangers of boredom and distraction in the modern world, making those who face it equivalent to cowboys. The impassioned speech of the lecturer is juxtaposed with the later depiction of this sort of work in action in chapter 25 as monotone and lifeless. This is later echoed in chapter 44, where an unnamed character who used to work as a cart boy in the Peoria IRS Regional Examination Center tells what he learned from his experiences about bureaucracy:

The underlying bureaucratic key is the ability to deal with boredom. To function effectively in an environment that precludes everything vital and human. To breathe, so to speak, without air. The key is the ability, whether innate or conditioned, to find the other side of the rote, the picayune, the meaningless, the repetitive, the pointlessly complex. To be, in a word, unborable. I met, in the years 1984 and '85, two such men. It is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish. (Wallace 2011: 440)

The passage depicts bureaucracy as a kind of inhuman machine that is central to contemporary life and needs to be adapted to. A successful adaptation would minimize the effects of boredom so that one can maintain concentration over extended periods of tedious work. Overall, these representations point out the lifelessness of bureaucracy and romanticize eliminating a human response to tedium so that systems of capitalism might

function more smoothly. This understanding of bureaucracy can also be considered postironic, as its inhumanity is depicted through ironic images and ways of thinking about heroism and bravery, but on the other hand there are obvious benefits to being able to resist distraction in the face of tedium in contemporary environments. Then again, completely accepting the pale and boring realism of bureaucracy as a way of life is not framed positively, as exemplified by the death of a worker at his desk, who was only noticed after being dead for four days, as he was known to be a hard worker who was the first one in and the last one out of the office.

There is, however, a benefit to being able to develop the sort of resistance to tedium that the characters in PK call for. Boredom can act as defensive layer to exploitative capitalist systems, and being able to penetrate this layer might be advantageous to individuals:

Fact: The birth agonies of the New IRS led to one of the great and terrible PR discoveries in modern democracy, which is that if sensitive issues of governance can be made sufficiently dull and arcane, there will be no need for officials to hide or dissemble because no one not directly involved will pay enough attention to cause trouble. No one will pay attention because no one will be interested, because, more or less *a priori*, of these issues' monumental dullness. (Wallace 2011: 86)

The passage is insinuating that there is a tendency to ignore or gloss over things, as long as they are represented in a sufficiently dull manner. In contemporary everyday life this is encountered in various terms and conditions that are notoriously tedious to read, but can contain important, damning, or misleading information in such dull language that people are likely to prefer to ignore it entirely. The novel uses this technique to illustrate the power of style and tone in language. For example we can think back to chapter 25, where within simple one sentence descriptions of the people working in a large office space and the details of that environment there was a mention of there being two ghosts present: "Two clocks, two ghosts, one square acre of hidden mirror" (Wallace 2011: 314). The style of the text and how the ghosts were represented made their existence feel mundane and unimportant. Another

example would be the language used to establish the existence of “fact-psychics” in chapter 15 that did not attempt to prove their existence or even frame it as something particularly special. The third example comes from chapter 46 of PK that depicts a drawn-out conversation at a bar between two coworkers, Shane Drinion and Meredith Rand. Meredith is described as a “legendarily attractive but not universally popular” (Wallace 2011: 448) woman, whose presence generally makes her male coworkers nervous, whereas Shane is described as “possibly the dullest human being currently alive” (Wallace 2011: 450). As the conversation draws on it appears that Shane Drinion begins levitating.

Drinion is actually levitating slightly, which is what happens when he is completely immersed; it’s very slight, and no one can see that his bottom is floating slightly above the seat of the chair. One night someone comes into the office and sees Drinion floating upside down over his desk with his eyes glued to a complex return, Drinion himself unaware of the levitating thing by definition, since it is only when his attention is completely on something else that the levitation happens. (Wallace 2011: 487)

This passage is the only explanation given for Drinion being able to levitate. His ability to levitate when concentrated serves no narrative significance beyond the fact that it stands out as unreal in comparison to the style of prose surrounding it, which is grounded in realism. There is also a single footnote in the chapter, which indicates the presence of a narrator who is aware of the textual medium. While not making a direct point about bureaucracy, this chapter also indicates how the novel attempts to demonstrate the importance of paying attention and not taking for granted that levels of perceived reality operate how one would expect them to.

2.5.2 Characters consumed by bureaucratic systems

Bureaucracy in the PK also manifests itself as an example of the ability of capitalist systems to consume self-identity. There are several characters who can be said to be

consumed by bureaucratic systems, but I want to focus on only three of them in particular, David Foster Wallace, David Francis Wallace, and Claude Sylvanshine.

The two David Wallaces are connected in the narrative by a mistake made by automated systems, which failed to distinguish between two people sharing a name. The workers in the IRS are divided by their job and paygrade into categories, like GS-9, GS-10, GS-11, GS-13, etc. The implied author of the book, David Foster Wallace, a GS-9, describes his arrival at the IRS intake processing facility, where upon his arrival he is greeted differently from the other new GS-9 recruits (Wallace 2011: 258-260). He is taken to personally meet high ranking people and has a guide to see him around. He is then taken to an orientation presentation along with a handful of GS-13 recruits and realizes he cannot follow anything that is being said.

Meanwhile, David Francis Wallace, a highly valued professional recruited from another branch at the IRS and the person who was actually supposed to be personally greeted and introduced to high ranking workers in the branch, arrives a day later and is spends several days at the center trying to prove his identity against the mistake made by the system:

.../ why that older, elite, highly valued David F. Wallace spent almost two full working days with his Xerox copies of the Forms 141 and chintzy brown suitcase in first the lines for the GS-13 Intake Station and then Problem Resolution desks in the REC's main building's lobby, then sitting in a corner of the lobby itself, then in the Security offices off Level 2's 3 southeast corridor, sitting there with his neotenous face blank and his hat in his lap, unable to proceed, since of course the bureaucracy's computer system had him listed as already having gone through Intake and received his Post 047 ID and badge—in which case where were his badge and ID, a Security part-timer kept asking him, over again each time he checked the system, and if he hadn't lost them then why couldn't he produce them? and so on and so forth.

The confusion is eventually cleared and the two continue at their intended jobs, but the situation is hinting at the potential of being consumed by systems of bureaucracy to the point of the person's self-identity not mattering against how inhuman systems see them. This is

supported by two particular quotes, one that serves as the introduction to the novel and one from David Foster Wallace's notes.

The quote that introduces PK in its initial blank pages is from Frank Bidart's *Borges and I* (1960) and reads "We fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed" (Wallace 2011: 3). I believe it holds multiple meanings. First it frames the entire novel as it relates to the pre-existing ideas about Wallace's literature, postmodern literature, fiction and nonfiction, and then becomes its own formulation of what it means to relate to these things. The second, and more relevant to the present argument, is that bureaucratic systems include everyone in their spheres of influence. The pervasiveness of capitalist systems grows infinitely as people are forced to engage with these systems in their everyday lives and in turn the systems learn to account for their presence and potentially exploit and profit from them. This in turn changes people as they are confronted by the inevitability of existing under these structures.

The second quote I wish to highlight comes from notes and asides after the end of the main text, in which a plan for the character of David Wallace is articulated: "David Wallace disappears—becomes creature of the system." (Wallace 2011: 548). This quote is in relation to the writer, who, despite reaching out to the reader and wanting to say something critical about bureaucracy, is himself consumed by bureaucratic systems.

Taken together, these concepts have two interesting implications. One is that capitalist systems, represented through bureaucracy, have a capacity to entangle individuals. The character of David Wallace attempts to depict bureaucracy through a memoir and gets lost in bureaucratic systems (on the level of abstraction, as he is absorbed into the novel, and on the level of him having to jump through figurative bureaucratic hoops with his publisher,

as he attempts to relay this story about bureaucracy). The second relates to the chapters analyzed in the subchapter of this thesis titled Textual experimentation. Chapters 1, 25, and 50 effectively frame the absorption of the reader into the book, from the invitation to observe in chapter one to the tedious and monotone observing in chapter 25 to the reader being narrated as a professional observer within the world of PK in chapter 50. In chapter 25, another way of characters becoming “creatures of the system” can be observed. The chapter illustrates the concept of the big Other, an unknowable entity that holds workers to certain standards, while the workers themselves become enforcers of this entity’s authority. The people working through tax forms are looking for potential crime or inaccuracies in filled tax forms, enforcing the fact that every citizen is observed and held to a certain standard of lawfulness, while they themselves are subject to the same bureaucratic overwatch and are forced to meet quotas on their job.

The consuming force of bureaucracy is further highlighted by the way the character of Claude Sylvanshine is narrated. The character is introduced in the 2nd chapter of PK and it is quickly revealed that he defines himself by the way that IRS’s internal systems categorize him: “Sylvanshine and Reynolds were both aides to Systems icon Merrill Errol (“Mel”) Lehl, although Reynolds was a GS-11 and Sylvanshine only a miserable and pathetic GS-9.” (Wallace 2011: 8). He is further contrasted with Reynolds, a higher ranked worker:

Reynolds had both his CPA and a degree in Information Systems Management although he was only slightly more than two years Claude Sylvanshine’s senior. This asymmetry was just one more thing that compromised Sylvanshine’s self-regard since Rome and made him doubly loyal and grateful to Systems Director Lehl for having salvaged him from the debris of catastrophe in Rome and believing in his potential once his niche as a cog in the system was found (Wallace 2011: 9)

The catastrophe in Rome refers to a situation in which Sylvanshine was a part of one of two departments that fell greatly behind schedule in the New York, Rome IRS Regional

Examination Center. The departments started to hide their overflow tax return forms and eventually the overflow caught up with them. Despite being a part of one failing system, Sylvanshine is assimilated into another. There is almost no characterization of Sylvanshine beyond how he obsesses over the test that would take him to a higher paygrade and how he overthinks situations due to the anxiety of failing the bureaucratic system he is a part of once again. This anxiety is illustrated by a nearly three-page long single sentence on his thought-process from how to proceed from an airport on a business trip to how a realization of him not being suited for whatever tasks lay ahead will lead him to a mental break-down and losing his job.

Whereas most characters in the IRS are given a context, Sylvanshine only exists as an extension of the service that defines him. However, his thought-processes are at the same time crippled by anxieties of possibly failing the system he defines himself by. He is the same creature of the system that David Wallace, and to a certain extent the reader are turned into over the course of the book.

Bureaucracy is depicted critically in PK. It is shown that bureaucracy as an extension of capitalism's reach has the capacity to consume individuals and enthrone ways of thinking positively about capitalism from an early age. However, the system is also depicted as an equalizer of sorts, a way to generate solidarity and empathy between individuals. In PK, to be successful in bureaucratic systems is to resist the human urge to distract oneself in the face of boredom. This can be seen as a commentary on our reliance on distraction and how it inhibits concentrated work, or as criticism on the manner in which bureaucracy suppresses human instinct. Both are elements of the contemporary world and as is characteristic of all postirony in PK, one has to adopt a nuanced understanding of conflicting elements and their

reaction to the said elements in order to understand their own perspective and how it aligns with others.

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of capitalist systems in everyday lives has motivated artists to depict the contemporary world in new and experimental ways. One of the main challenges in capturing the multifaceted reality of this century is critically depicting the individual in the face of vast systems of capitalism that they are enmeshed in, a strategy once coined by Fredric Jameson (1991) as cognitive mapping. Jameson was concerned with mapping the postmodern reality, but the issues he raised in his account of postmodernism have only intensified since then. Thus this thesis operates from the more contemporary perspective found in Mark Fisher's (2009) *Capitalist Realism*. Capitalist realism can be said to aptly capture the intersection of capitalism and postmodernism at the time of David Foster Wallace's long process of writing *The Pale King* (PK) and to represent the worldview that the novel engages with. Additionally, Fisher (ibid.) nominates bureaucracy as one of the areas for effectively demonstrating some of the contradictory elements in capitalist systems. The concept of capitalist realism illustrates a need for approaches adjacent to metamodernism, such as postirony, which, I argue, is the most relevant response to postmodernism for decoding PK. Postirony responds to irony as a cultural dominant and the default position for engaging the world. Works engaging in postirony utilize irony through techniques that are traditionally associated with postmodernism, but have the effect of eliciting a response that is not cynical in nature.

Postirony manifests in PK in two ways. First the novel makes use of what Lee Konstantinou (2017) calls credulous metafiction. Credulous metafiction draws attention to the text as an artefact, but attempts to form a connection to the reader through a mutual belief and commitment to the text. This mode of postirony operates from the assumption that this

kind of connection needs to be built up because of a cultural tendency to relate to postmodernist elements cynically, undercutting its potential to both tell a story and convey cultural commentary. Credulous metafiction appears in PK through a character named David Foster Wallace, who in the novel claims to be its author and explores the question of authorship as well as the relationship between the truths of fiction and nonfiction. The narrative author attempts to connect to the reader by addressing them directly and asking them to hold a multifaceted view of the irony used in the text, as well as to understand that the paradoxical and conflicting elements found in the text are the result of a long bureaucratic process of getting the book published. The narrative author discusses the urge to respond ironically to the kinds of techniques he uses in the novel with the effect of emptying such responses of any cynically critical edge. It also has the effect of framing further textual play in the novel beyond the scope of metafictional chapters as potent critique of postmodern realities brought about by the implied author's understanding of bureaucracy developed through the experiences depicted in the novel.

Second, it utilizes Konstantinou's (2017) concept of motivated postmodernism, adapted for this thesis as intensified postmodernism, in which postmodern elements are intensified and extended to describe the postmodern reality. PK makes use of traditionally postmodern techniques such as pastiche, fragmentation, excessive footnotes, open-endedness, playing with expectations, and experimenting with abstract notions of author and reader roles. I have identified three main interpretative responses elicited by the question of authorship in the narrative of the novel, which I argue are expected to be held concurrently, even if the reader does not decode them as explicitly. These are 1) that the fictional author is describing his world truthfully, including the unrealistic elements i.e. the fictional world of which the novel is an artefact of operates by rules that would be considered to not be

representative of the real world; 2) the novel is a satirical reproduction of a novel filtered through the perspective of a fictional David Wallace, commenting on the irrepresentability and impossibility of delivering on certain expectations that he as well as his readership has for his fiction; 3) that the narrative persona of David Wallace and the narrative arc of a fictional writer is just one of many postmodern constructions found in the novel and that the novel is not written through the lens of a fictional writer. In other words, the novel depicts the lives of the workers at the Peoria IRS Examination center but the fictional writer is just one of the avenues pursued in exploring the intended themes for the novel. PK can be said to operate in between these concepts fluidly.

One of the more experimental throughlines in PK is the way the role of the reader is played with, culminating in the reader being figuratively absorbed into the novel: the first chapter invites the reader to read, observe, and pay attention, the 25th chapter in the middle depicts a large IRS office space filled with examiners and is stylistically written as if from the perspective of someone making a series of objective observations about what happens in the office over a short period of time, inviting the reader to mimic the work of accountants and observe the text closely, and the final chapter, narrated using a “you” construction, says that this “you” is a trained observer, and describes a process that can be understood as being absorbed into something.

This also represents one of the approaches to the theme of bureaucracy in the novel. Bureaucracy in PK is the primary avenue for highlighting realities and contradictions under late stage capitalism. My thesis highlights two major approaches to bureaucracy in PK: 1) connecting bureaucracy and tedium, highlighting how the characters in the novel see overcoming being bored or distracted as the key to being successful or even as an act of

heroism. However, in suppressing the natural reaction to find distraction and becoming capable of increasingly long bouts of monotonous concentration the characters begin to lose what makes them capable of connecting to the more human side of themselves, becoming figuratively *pale* as the title of the book suggests.

2) Bureaucratic processes consume individuals and their senses of self. This is illustrated by the absorption of the character of David Wallace into the bureaucratic systems they set out to characterize and critique, as they vanish after relaying a story about the figurative absorption into bureaucracy of a second character named David Wallace, who arrived at the IRS one day after the author of the same name and was mistakenly regarded by the automated computer system as having already arrived. This is further exemplified by Claude Sylvanshine's lack of self beyond his identity in the IRS systems of hierarchy. The absorption of the reader can also be read as symbolic of capitalism's inevitable drive and power to consume.

The positioning of the individual against boundless bureaucratic systems in PK can be seen as a form of cognitive mapping as put forward by Fredric Jameson (1991). This is supported by the focus on the individual stories and thoughts of the workers in the IRS contrasted with how they function and operate as parts of inhuman systems. The critical depiction of the American working class and the inherent monotony of the work culture at the time of writing is telling of a Marxist heritage.

The three possible realities constructed in the PK (1. that the book is an artefact of a world we would consider to be unrealistic; 2. that the book is an artifact produced through the lens of a satirical character as commentary on the real author's position and expectations on him; 3. that the simultaneous but seemingly disjointed realities in the book are different

ways to depict the themes of the book and the narrative author is just one of such approaches found in the book) are a continuation of Baudrillard's (1983) understanding of simulation, by which contemporary reality is constructed of several orders of simulacra and within them it is sometimes impossible to distinguish between what is simulated and what is real. Additionally the novel demonstrates the tendency of capitalist systems to consume identity and become perceived as a natural part of the world, as formulated by Mark Fisher in *Capitalist realism* (2009).

Postmodern textual features such as intertextuality, resisting narrative cohesion, metafiction, and experimenting with dynamics of the author and the reader put the text in dialogue with postmodernism, and the inherent irony in the language used to establish these features is telling of PK's engagement with irony. However, the particular exaggerated use of ironic elements along with criticism aimed at capitalist systems thought to produce a culture of irony largely empties their potential to evoke cynicism, though every reader will likely be different and the connection that the text manages to establish is specific to the reader.

Overall, the novel sets up numerous layers of abstraction and makes use of traditionally postmodern tropes to show the irrepresentability of reality in late capitalism, as well as the difficulties an individual faces to maintain a sense of self and an understanding of the systems they engage with in contemporary conditions. It asks the reader to hold multiple concurrent beliefs that may conflict with one another, for example that David Wallace is a satirical character as well as a character that is sincere in their attempts to represent their reality. The novel makes an effort to foster a postironic belief and commitment towards the text that strengthens its merit both as a story as well as metaphoric

commentary. The irony used in the novel's various layers and constructions also points towards being intended to be understood as noncynical. The various narrative constructions and techniques show the potential of one's perception of reality to dramatically change based on their predisposition, changes in perspective, and what is paid attention to.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Ott Abroi

Postirony and Capitalist Reality in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King* (2011)

Postiroonia ja Kapitalistlik Reaalsus David Foster Wallace'i *The Pale King*'is

Magistritöö

2022

Lehekülgede arv: 79

Käesoleva magistritöö eesmärgiks on uurida postiroonilisi ja kapitalismiga seonduvaid reaalsuse konstruktsioone David Foster Wallace'i romaanis *The Pale King* (2011). David Foster Wallace'it seostatakse tihti postmodernistliku kirjandusvooluga, kuid ta on nii oma ilukirjanduses kui ka esseistikas olnud postmodernismi kui kunstivoolu kui ka filosoofilise maailmapildi osas kriitiline. Romaani teemadeks on igavus, bürokraatia, ühekülgus, tähelepanuvõime, ja kohanemine.

Töö sissejuhatus selgitab miks *The Pale King*'i postmodernismi kontekstis käsitleda ja paigutada raamatu Wallace'i laiema loomingu konteksti. Esimene peatükk käsitleb baas/superstruktuur dünaamikat marxistlikus kultuurikriitikas ning selle väljendumist postmodernismi kui hiliskapitalismi kultuuriloogika käsitlemist läbi Fredric Jamesoni (1991). Samuti käsitleb esimene peatükk Jamesoniga suhestuvat Mark Fisheri kapitalistliku realismi käsitlust. Tutvustatakse ka postirooniat läbi Lee Konstantinou (2012; 2016; 2017) tööde, mis suhestub kapitalismi kontekstis tekkinud iroonilise hoiakuga ja millest lähtuvalt on romaani analüüsimiseks relevantseid kaks kontseptsiooni: vastuvõtlik metafiktsioon ja intensiivistatud postmodernism. Veel tutvustatakse ka olemasolevaid akadeemilisi uurimusi *The Pale Kingi* kohta.

Teises peatükis tutvustatakse töö metodoloogiat ja antakse lühiülevaade romaani sisust, pärast mida analüüsitakse romaani vastuvõtliku metafiktsiooni, intensiivistatud postmodernismi, ja bürokraatia esinduste kontekstis. Töö peamisteks leidudeks on et romaan loob ühenduse lugejaga läbi metafiktsionaalse David Wallace nimelise tegelase, kasutab postmodernistlike vormi- ja sisuvõtteid, et kaardistada tänapäevamaailma eripärasusi ning käsitleb kapitalismi läbi bürokraatlike süsteemide võime indiviidi endasse neelata ning neilt võtta autonoomsus endasse suhtumisel.

Märksõnad: postmodernism, kapitalism, postiroonia, bürokraatia, metafiktsioon

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