# The Inverted Nuke in the Garden: Archival Emergence and Anti-Eschatology in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

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As so often happens when the promising career of a talented artist is cut tragically short, the work of David Foster Wallace has received increased popular, critical, and scholarly attention since his suicide in 2008.[1] For many, Wallace has become emblematic of a generation of American fiction writers who were latecomers to the postmodernism of the 1960s–1980s. Most critics of Wallace have followed Marshall Boswell's lead in suggesting that he "proceeds from the assumption that *both* modernism and postmodernism are essentially 'done,'" and that "he might best

1. For a succinct account of some of the work being done on Wallace, specifically by younger scholars, see Jennifer Howard, "The Afterlife of David Foster Wallace," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, http://chronicle.com/article/The-Afterlife-of-David-Foster/125823/, and Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline," *IJASonline* (*Irish Journal of American Studies*), issue 2 (Summer 2010), http://www.ijasonline.com/Adam-Kelly.html. I also discuss Wallace's legacy and recent critical reception in my review of *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays* (ed. David Hering [Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2010]), in *Critical Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (July 2011): 102–6.

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[be] regarded as a nervous member of some still-unnamed (and perhaps unnameable) third wave of modernism."[2] In this sense, while Wallace identifies himself as a latecomer in his famous essay "*E Unibus Pluram*,"[3] he is now also viewed as the precursor to an emerging group of American writers who, Garth Risk Hallberg recently observed, "in 2011 . . . finally overran the mainland."[4] Wallace now often inhabits the curious position of both latecomer and forerunner, someone who felt he resided at the end of a long line of formal experimentation in US fiction that had become exhausted with its own exhaustion, while simultaneously a writer critics have hailed as representative of a "new sincerity," or "new realism," or (the slightly ridiculous term) "post-postmodernism."

Positioning Wallace as untimely in this Nietzschean fashion, however, has served to largely obscure the political timeliness of *Infinite Jest* (1996), an ambitious novel that, though set in the future, asks itself important historical questions about the Cold War and the possibility of articulating a post–Cold War, anti-eschatological imagination. Quite tellingly, in a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace framed literary postmodernism in particularly apocalyptic terms:

> It's almost like postmodernism is fiction's fall from biblical grace. Fiction became *conscious* of itself in a way it never had been. Here's a really pretentious bit of pop analysis for you: I think you can see Cameron's *Terminator* movies as a metaphor for all literary art after Roland Barthes, viz., the movies' premise is that the Cyberdyne NORAD computer becomes conscious of itself as *conscious*, as having interests and an agenda; the Cyberdyne becomes literally self-referential, and it's no accident that the result of this is nuclear war, Armageddon. . . . Metafiction's real end has always been Armageddon. Art's reflection on itself is terminal, is one big reason why the art world saw Duchamp as an Antichrist.[5]

2. Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 1.
3. See David Foster Wallace, "*E Unibus Pluram*: Television and U.S. Fiction," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1997), 21–82.
4. Garth Risk Hallberg, "'Why Write Novels at All?,'" *New York Times Magazine* (January 13, 2012). Hallberg primarily discusses the work of Jeffery Eugenides, Jonathan Franzen, and Zadie Smith as representative of this group.
5. Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 134.

Wallace's analogy is actually quite apt. *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), released less than a month after the election of Boris Yeltsin, was far and away the highest grossing film of the year and signaled a shift in the popular US nuclear imagination. In the film, the very systems that were initially instituted to provide some amount of protection in the case of nuclear exchange were imagined as *themselves* capable of producing global nuclear annihilation. In *Terminator 2*, nuclear anxiety narcissistically turns in on itself, distorting the political realities of the post–Cold War era and reinforcing American exceptionalism. By equating such a fantasy with postmodernism itself, Wallace acknowledges the profound failure of US cultural production to seize the opportunity to imagine an alternative national narrative presented by the end of the Cold War, one not defined by the ideological and rhetorical weight of eschatological discourse.[6] Consequently, the future of Wallace's legacy appears to be less about how to specifically relate him to the notoriously fickle and slippery aesthetic categories like postmodernism or the "new" than it is about continually acknowledging the ethical task he defines for the literary imagination as we move into the future. *Infinite Jest* and his subsequent fiction dramatize the profound necessity for literature to continue imagining a world in which the future is not always already eschatologically foreclosed.

For it is clear today that the dominant modes of imagining the present and future have gone in the opposite direction. The end of the Cold War did not diffuse the nuclear fantasy of the twentieth century nor did it produce a cease-fire of apocalyptic projections. Rather, a heterogeneous multitude of disaster narratives have replaced the US national fantasy of global nuclear annihilation.[7] Further, it has become increasingly difficult to

6. As Zadie Smith has noted, Wallace "was, in the broadest sense, a moralist: what mattered to him most was not the end but the quality of our communal experience *before* the end, while we're still here. What passes between us in that queue *before* we die" ("*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace," in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* [New York: Penguin, 2009], 264).

7. Donald Pease provides an excellent account of the US national fantasy of nuclear destruction in his book *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009): "American exceptionalism was imagined as the primary means of warding off not merely an enemy ideology but a scene of catastrophic violence that could include the entire planet in its sphere of destruction. Defined as a heresy none of whose tenets could become representable within the categorizations of the enemy's symbolic order, American exceptionalism positioned U.S. citizens who took up this fantasy within the fantasmatic space of catastrophic destruction. When they hallucinated

draw a line between the reality and the representation of disaster. As Ulrich Beck argues about what he calls the "world risk society," the contemporary projection of risk changes its global possibility: "global risk is the *staging of the reality* [*Realitätsinszenierung*] of global risk."[8] The reality of global risk is, quite simply, how we best imagine it to be. For example, during the first nuclear age, the *staging of the reality* of nuclear war was articulated in the discourse of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), which ultimately served to deter risk. MAD staged a reality so horrible that it could not occur, or if it did, if the "to come" was realized, there would be no one around to record it anyway. In this fashion, the apocalyptic imagination between Hiroshima and the fall of the Berlin Wall was unique to something that can be called in retrospect, as Molly Wallace recently has, a "first nuclear age."[9] The nuclear imagination of this period is wonderfully captured by the final moment of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). The image of the 00000 rocket descending on the Orpheus Theater in Los Angeles stages the reality of global nuclear risk, and metaphorically captures the dominant US national fantasy of the first nuclear age. With this image, Pynchon understood that the possibility of global nuclear war could be mapped along an asymptotic curve with a final delta-T it could never reach. As such, each addition to the cultural archive of imagined nuclear annihilation, and of course *only in hindsight*, deterred the very catastrophe this dominant fantasy projected.

The second nuclear age's relationship to catastrophe, however, is more difficult to define. Indeed, this name—*the second nuclear age*—is hardly evocative of contemporary realities, as there is something strangely anachronistic about labeling the present "nuclear."[10] If the first age's pri-

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themselves as positioned there, this sublime fantasy enabled U.S. citizens to enjoy the attainment of their exceptional American identity through this awe-inspiring image of its possible total loss" (16–17).

8. Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Malden, MA: Polity, 2009), 10.

9. I owe this term to a recent reconsideration of nuclear criticism. Molly Wallace's "Will the Apocalypse Have Been Now?: Literary Criticism in an Age of Global Risk" presents the convincing argument that nuclear criticism could learn much from ecological criticism, and vice versa (in *Criticism, Crisis, and Contemporary Narrative: Textual Horizons in an Age of Global Risk*, ed. Paul Crosthwaite [New York: Routledge, 2011], 15–30).

10. Jonathan Schell, in his book on the present and future of nuclear weaponry, reads US nuclear policy under the administration of President George W. Bush as follows: "the chronicle of American targeting in the nuclear age would run thus: first, the target was Germany, then Japan, then the Soviet Union and its allies, and now it is . . . 'capabilities.' Which capabilities? . . . [Donald] Rumsfeld's most famous articulation of this new

mary narrative referent for communication was the instantaneous sending and arrival of a nuclear letter—something that could not be received, for to receive the nuclear communication was to be destroyed[11]—today the nuclear trope appears to have imploded. Communication itself has become a site of disaster, defined by a global network capable of communicating the disaster instantaneously. As a result, it is possible to understand such diverse events as Hurricane Katrina, the Fukushima nuclear meltdown, the war on terror, and the economic crisis of 2008, to name only a few examples, under the metaphorical banner of an informational, recursively vicious loop of disaster, an info/eco-apocalypse, affecting all aspects of the species' material condition. There is a concurrent sense, however, that it need not be this way, that global narratives do not have to invoke this or that end, this or that apocalypse, this atmosphere of rhizomatic doom.

*Infinite Jest* is representative of such an anti-eschatological vision, and one unique to a period of transition between the first and second nuclear ages. Wallace, more than a latecomer to literary postmodernism, was a latecomer to the nuclear imagination of the first age, and often cripplingly so. When he attempted recursively extending what he called postmodern metafiction's "Armageddon-explosion"[12] into fractal loops in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (1989), thereby achieving a kind of eschatological aesthetic stasis, we should not read what he felt was a crude, naïve, pretentious failure of youth as a failure of his imagination, but a result of the relationship "Westward" had to its political and historical moment. In 1989, "Westward" metacritically asks its characters, "right off the top of their head, what they fear most in the whole world. Their one great informing fear."[13] Though people give many answers to this question within the novella, the most frequent response is: "Bomb . . . Meltdown or Bomb . . . Russian Bomb" (272), et cetera. Through the course of the novella, nuclear fear and desire are transformed, through a coupling with

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strategic uncertainty principle was that you must plan not only for the 'known unknowns' but for 'the unknown unknowns.' In the last analysis, the target of the U.S. nuclear arsenal became history and whatever it might produce—not a foe but a tense, the future itself" (*The Seventh Decade: The New Shape of Nuclear Danger* [New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007], 120, 121).

11. See Peter Schwenger, *Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

12. McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," 142.

13. David Foster Wallace, "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," in *Girl with Curious Hair* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1989), 283. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically by page number only.

what Wallace called "postmodern metafictional irony," into "The ultimate McDonald's commercial. A kind of logarithm of all other McDonald's commercials," which will "attempt to capture a crowded and final transfiguration that will represent, and so transmit, a pan-global desire for meat, a collective erection of the world community's true and total restaurant" (272). Pioneered by J. D. Steelritter, "The revelation of What They Want will be on them; and, in that revelation of Desire, they will Possess. . . . Their wishes, yes, come true. Fact will be fiction will be fact. [John Barth] and his academic heirs will rule, without rules. *Meatfiction*" (310). This consumer revelation, this apocalypse of aesthetics-as-product, of the advertisement, clearly projects a type of Frankfurt School dystopian future; the culture industry absorbs the last fragment of romantic subjectivity, and something like John Barth's seminal postmodern story "Lost in the Funhouse" becomes just another site of reification. But it is more revealing of two other concerns. The first is Wallace's anxiety, further explored in *Infinite Jest*, regarding the disappearance of the Soviet Other. Without such a national narrative, the characters in "Westward" and *Infinite Jest* turn in on themselves, consuming their waste and detritus, enjoying themselves to death. The second is a more programmatic question: how might this apocalyptically and solipsistically crippling system of human connection articulate an alternative narrative, a writing without the disaster?

*Infinite Jest* is a sustained, subtle, and complex engagement with the dominant trope of the twentieth century, the nuclear bomb. It is a work wholly structured by and grounded in the nuclear imagination, and is not merely concerned with nuclear weaponry but how the nuclear trope is inextricably interwoven with information technology, textuality, and literature itself. It is a novel for which Jacques Derrida's provocative statement—"[Literature] has always belonged to the nuclear epoch, even if it does not talk 'seriously' about it"[14]—holds rigorously true.

*Infinite Jest* begins from the insight that nuclear war is

> a phenomenon whose essential feature is that it is *fabulously textual*, through and through. Nuclear weaponry depends, more than any weaponry in the past, it seems, upon structures of information and communication, of language, including unvocalizable language,

14. Jacques Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 1, trans. Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 402.

> of codes and graphic decoding. But the phenomenon is fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it.[15]

Beginning from such a nuclear trope, *Infinite Jest* belongs to an apocalyptic tradition that ultimately strives to construct a literary project that is *anti*-eschatological, an aesthetic practice that continually attempts to evade narrative reification, and to convey a sense of (American) history without an end. Pushing Derrida's insights about nuclear textuality past their limit and through the singularity of Pynchon's Orpheus Theater, the grand historico-political threat *Infinite Jest* imagines is a text *itself* capable of producing mass-death through a kind of aesthetic *emergence*. This is the danger that confronts Wallace's imagination: an aesthetic singularity emerging from our inability to articulate or imagine an alternative narrative. Rather than participate in the heterogeneous cacophony of ideologically determined eschatological discursive practices, Wallace's project in *Infinite Jest* reconsiders and attempts to abandon the "Armageddon-explosion" of postmodern American metafiction. If it fails to do so, it is simply because, that though "we have talked our extinction to death,"[16] the story never gets old.

Written primarily between 1991 and 1993, *Infinite Jest*'s composition is marked by its historical proximity to the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Set in an imagined 2009, the political landscape of the novel is defined by the absence of the USSR. Like the perceived need for an intentionally constructed site of otherness in *The Broom of the System*—the blasted wasteland of the man-made Great Ohio Desert (or G.O.D.)—*Infinite Jest*'s President Gentle realizes that lacking the Soviet Union as a clearly defined external threat, the United States needs an antagonist for the 2000s, something against which to define itself, an other. He carefully constructs the US national other from the very garbage the United States produces, ascending to the presidency on a single-issue platform railing against waste. His "Clean U.S. Party" effectively mobilizes the lack of an external political threat by defining an internal threat; the ideological other of *Infinite Jest* is the detritus and waste expelled from the self, the abject. Gentle not only runs on a platform to make America so clean one could literally eat off its soil, but, by absorbing Mexico and Canada into an Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N), the

15. Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," 393.
16. Robert Lowell, "Fall 1961," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 329, line 8.

United States could then excrete its waste, its other, into the "Great Concavity," a site geographically and politically "outside" of itself. This policy is cleverly and concisely summed up in Wallace's neologism "Experialism." Rather than absorbing and transforming the other through imperialist foreign policy and the grand narrative of Manifest Destiny, Gentle's program gets rid of the exorbitant, excessive other by "gifting" or "exporting" irradiated portions of the United States to Canada.

The effects of US Experialism produce the narrative's primary conflict, motivating the Québecois terrorist organization, "*Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents* [*sic*]" (the A.F.R. or "Wheelchair Assassins"), to attempt the massive dissemination of the apocalyptically engrossing Entertainment to US citizens, potentially causing catastrophic loss of life. In this fashion, US foreign policy describes the horizon of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative structure, as most of its many characters and virtually every plot point are continually set against the background of Experialism, a background with a clear narrative telos. The disappearance of the dominant twentieth-century sense of an ending—the *absence* of the discourse of MAD—is also structurally important. Even though the possibility of MAD is absent, this does not change the nuclear structure of Wallace's postmodern eschatological narrative. The disappearance of the threat of global nuclear war following the dissolution of the Soviet Union does not remove the eschatological threat to the species, nor does it necessarily reconfigure the nuclear imagination. Consequently, even though the apocalyptic limits of the text perhaps appear only tangentially nuclear (and indeed, one might get through *Infinite Jest*'s 1,079 pages without noting any physically present nuclear weapons at all), Wallace is everywhere structuring his epidemiological and ecological catastrophes—the threat of the Entertainment and the irradiated landscape of the Great Concavity—along nuclear lines. In this sense, he is reconceiving and repurposing the nuclear imagination in the face of the nuclear bomb's absence, while also exploring the persistence of eschatological cultural fantasy.

In a typical moment of highly mediated textual layering, Wallace gives the "history" of the novel's political events in filmic form. Mario Incandenza, the middle brother of the Incandenza family, is this untitled film's *auteur*. Mario's film is a mixture of a puppet show depicting President Gentle and other members of his staff, and "his late father's parodic device of mixing real and fake news-summary cartridges, magazines, articles, and historical headers from the last few great daily papers, all for a sort of time-

lapse exposition of certain developments leading up to Interdependence."[17] Though there are many clever moments of political parody in Mario's film, one scene stands above all others in terms of discussing nuclear weapons as *physically present* within the political and historical space of the novel (rather than, as they are elsewhere, textual or simulated): "Unspecified Services Office spokespersons have declined to comment on reports of such erratic Executive directives as: . . . instructing silo personnel at all S.A.C. installations north of 44° to remove their missiles from the silos and reinsert them upside-down" (*IJ*, 407). The formation of the highly toxic conditions in the Great Concavity can be accounted for by the detonation of these inverted missiles. But like the many other events in the novel that remain ultimately ambiguous, the highly mediated manner in which Gentle's order is presented prevents us from knowing whether this order was in fact ever given or carried out.

The ambiguity of this moment, however, should not distract us from how Wallace effectively (and quite literally) inverts the nuclear trope itself, and does so by extrapolating the narrative that Leo Marx provided in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964).[18] Marx concludes his study of the representation of technology and the pastoral in American literature by arguing that, within the American imagination, "There is nothing in the visible landscape—no tradition, no standard, no institution—capable of standing up to the forces of which the railroad is the symbol. . . . The contrast between the machine and the pastoral ideal dramatizes the great issue of our culture. It is the germ, as [Henry] James puts it, of the most final of all generalizations about America."[19] With the possibility of nuclear bombs inverted in their silos and detonated to create the Great Concavity, Wallace moves Marx's narrative past this "final generalization." The Great Concavity is not merely a toxic-waste dump, a typical post-apocalyptic spatial projection of ruins and radiation—or what one imagines would be the "conclusion" to this final generalization; it is also the site of what the novel calls "annular fusion," a

17. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (1996; repr., New York: Back Bay Books, 2006), 391. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *IJ*.
18. For a longer discussion of the relationship between Wallace's fictional landscapes and Marx, see Graham Foster, "A Blasted Region: David Foster Wallace's Man-made Landscapes," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), 37–48.
19. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 352–53.

(nuclear) process which depends upon massive amounts of toxic material to produce energy, the by-product being more toxic material, which annular fusion then recursively uses to begin the cycle over again. The Great Concavity is neither natural nor pastoral, for it goes from "overgrown to wasteland to overgrown several times a month. With the first week of the month being especially barren and the last week being like nothing on earth" (*IJ*, 573). Wallace, through merely suggesting that nuclear weapons have been inverted in their silos and used against New England, creates an alternative space where the boundaries between "machine" and "nature" break down, not by creating a pastoral space but rather a fundamentally uninhabitable "outside" which is neither nature *nor* technology, a space that the United States nevertheless relies upon for its energy supply. Wallace effectively contributes a kind of epilogue to Marx's work that sees the machine exploding against itself and the "garden" containing it in order to create a "new" nuclear (rather than simply machinic) space, a space that cannot be captured by the categories of "nature" or "civilization," but rather depends upon the entire textual, metafictional universe Wallace has built in *Infinite Jest* for its coherence. Though surely a critique of the ecologically disastrous effects of pollution and waste disposal in the United States, these inverted nukes invite a metacritical reading in which their target is American literature itself. *Infinite Jest* takes postmodern recursivity to the extreme, aiming nukes at itself in order to target the Armageddon-explosion of postmodern textuality.

In one of the most compelling scenes in the novel, this inversion is made explicit during the Eschaton game young members of Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) play. Eschaton is a war game in the classically nuclear sense, simulating and then developing the conditions that would lead up to global nuclear war, and then further simulating how exactly such a conflict would transpire. It is a fabulously complex game, with a dense rule book, which "is about as long and interesting as J. Bunyan's stupefying *Pilgrim's Progress*" (*IJ*, 322). The game is played on a "map" of four contiguous tennis courts and uses old tennis gear to represent various strategic targets. Nukes are "launched" by lobbing tennis balls at certain targets, and where the balls land in relation to their targets is entered into a complex algorithm to assess damage to the area and to determine the victor of the game.

The narrator of *Infinite Jest* explains some of the attraction of the game for its participants as follows:

> Every year at E.T.A., maybe a dozen of the kids between maybe like twelve and fifteen—children in the very earliest stages of puberty

> and really abstract-capable thought, when one's allergy to the confining realities of the present is just starting to emerge as a weird kind of nostalgia for stuff you never even knew—maybe a dozen of these kids, mostly male, get fanatically devoted to a homemade Academy game called Eschaton. Eschaton is the most complicated children's game anybody around E.T.A.'d ever heard of. . . . Its elegant complexity, combined with a dismissive-reenactment frisson and a complete disassociation from the realities of the present, composes most of its puerile appeal. Plus it's almost addictively compelling, and shocks the tall. (*IJ*, 321–22)

Within the projected future of *Infinite Jest*, Eschaton evokes "a weird kind of nostalgia for stuff you never even knew." The game's participants, mostly children just on the verge of puberty, would have been born in the late 1990s. The "stuff" they never knew is precisely the threat of global nuclear war. They have nostalgia for such a conflict, for a world marked both politically and historically by such a grand narrative. The confining realities of the present, the conglomeration of the United States, Mexico, and Canada into O.N.A.N., the lack of any clear transnational political conflicts, and the lack of a national narrative conspire to evoke nostalgia in the prepubescent youngsters for a world where a narrative eschaton, the possibility for total annihilation, was possible. It must be stressed, however, that the "stuff" these kids never knew, their nostalgia, is also a fantasy. In an endnote to the "stuff they never knew," Wallace writes, "the basic phenomenon being what more abstraction-capable post-Hegelian adults call 'Historical Consciousness'" (*IJ*, 1023n120). This "historical consciousness," however, is nostalgia for *something that never happened*. The political scenario of the game not only never occurred but is obviously completely fictional with regard to the political realities of either the Cold War or the world O.N.A.N. inhabits. The combatants involved are all conglomerations of transnational interests and are given acronyms signifying these conglomerations: AMNAT, SOVWAR, REDCHI, IRLIBSYR, et cetera (*IJ*, 322). Eschaton blurs its relationship to concrete political realities, as each of these acronyms only roughly evokes a past, present, or possible future. The game attempts to extend the exceptionalist American narrative of nuclear war without the "corrupting influence" of Canada and Mexico, while still acknowledging that influence tangentially. Consequently, these children's nostalgia can be read as nostalgia for the nuclear trope itself. Even though the threat of global nuclear war is off the table in *Infinite Jest*, its absence is seen in the light of the "confin-

ing realities of the present," and being on the verge of adulthood, becoming capable of abstract thought, Eschaton's preadolescent participants need and desire this nuclear trope to persist (even in its now inverted form). The events of Eschaton structure and define the nuclear and narrative limits of *Infinite Jest* as a whole.

Further, Eschaton is a *textual* game, requiring a high level of mathematics not only to begin but to decide who will be the victor of the apocalypse. At the beginning of each game, the game master must establish who has how many nuclear warheads. This is done, according to Michael Pemulis's reported speech, by "using the Mean-Value formula for dividing available megatonnage among Combatants whose GNP/Military // Military/Nuke ratios vary from Eschaton to Eschaton [which] keeps you from needing to crunch out a new ratio for each Combatant each time, plus lets you multi-regress the results so Combatants get rewarded for past thermonuclear largesse [occasional verbal flourishes Hal's—HJI]" (*IJ*, 1023n123; brackets in original). The entirety of Eschaton relies upon various informational algorithms and recursively using itself as text. Each Eschaton is the result and development of various bits of random information put into an apocalypse algorithm. Code here reproduces itself, reproducing a simulation of disaster, which is then repeated for different simulations of disaster.

Not only does the game call upon higher-level mathematics than most twelve-to-fifteen-year-olds are usually familiar with, but these mathematics are given to us in reported speech by Hal Incandenza—the "protagonist" of the E.T.A. portion of the novel—in an endnote, further recursively layering the textuality of Eschaton. This is complicated even more when Pemulis, who is relating the mathematical grounding for determining initial megatonnage, says, "It's going to be interesting to see if [*sic*] Hal, who thinks he's just too sly trying to outline Eschaton in the 3rd-person tense [*sic*] like some jowly old Eschatologist with leather patches on his elbows [*sic*], if Inc can transpose [*sic?*] the math here" (*IJ*, 1024–25n123; brackets in original). Hal's "[*sics*]" here recursively signal his "authorship" of the novel through the production of a third-person point of view who transcribes Pemulis's words. Hal's encyclopedic textual memory—for instance, he had memorized the entire *OED* before age seventeen—emerges in his verbal flourishes and editorial emendations. He becomes a professor of Eschaton, "some jowly old Eschatologist with leather patches on his elbows," by editing the text that makes Eschaton possible. His role, both here and elsewhere, thus becomes almost wholly archival. Hal is a scholar of textual apocalypse, there to clarify and interpret Pemulis's at times ambiguous or

incorrect grammar. Eschaton is thus presented through a kind of meta-exegesis, requiring the added interpretive voice of someone thoroughly schooled in interpreting and editing (apocalyptic) text, whose role in the game as it is played is wholly observational with disastrous consequences.

Next, the novel presents a fairly fascinating description of how the game progresses, despite the fact that "Eschaton's tough to enliven, verbally, even for the [chemically] stimulated. Being generally too slow and cerebral" (*IJ*, 329). Various combatants are taking turns making strategic nuclear strikes, "artfully avoid[ing] the escalation to SACPOP [Sacrifice of Population]" (*IJ*, 330). During a cessation of hostilities between AMNAT and SOVWAR, when Otis P. Lord, the game's appropriately named game master, is distracted by attempting to convey information between the two superpowers, the lines in the game between the real and the virtual, between the actual and the simulated, are complicated by the fact it is now snowing: "J. J. Penn of INDPAK all of a sudden gets the idea to start claiming that now that it's snowing [in the space of the novel's "real" world] the snow totally affects the blast area and fire area and pulse-intensity and maybe also has fallout implications, and he says Lord has to now completely redo everybody's damage parameters before anybody can form realistic strategies from here on out" (*IJ*, 333). Pemulis responds that "'It's snowing on the goddamn *map*, not the *territory*, you *dick*!'" for he is "sensitive to any theater-boundary-puncturing threats to the map's integrity—threats that've come up before, and that as Pemulis sees it threaten the game's whole sense of animating realism" (*IJ*, 333).

The crisis of Eschaton, this moment of procedural dispute, occurs when the simulation is threatened by the real, when the "real(ism)" of the game is threatened by the reality of the physical world. For Pemulis, maintaining the integrity of the game requires that it remain wholly within the realm of the simulated. Eschaton is a model of the real, so its map must remain a mere representation of the underlying algorithmic code on which the simulation's outcome depends. But Pemulis, though correct at a structural level, ignores a more basic fact. The "real" world's contingent environmental factors cannot be dismissed when considering the "whole" of the game. Yes, a large portion of the game is being run on a computer, taking analog data from the "real" and making it digitally meaningful, but this data is dependent upon a host of things that are neither digital, algorithmic, nor code-based, and are completely outside the parameters of the simulation. (For example, the snow affects the physics of the game itself: the trajectory of balls is slightly different in cold November air.) Eschaton is an assem-

blage of the digital and the analog. The inseparability between the real and the simulated not only metacritically questions the construction of nuclear war as an explicitly textual phenomenon by directly pointing to the thinking of Jean Baudrillard regarding simulation. This very metacritical (or metafictional) recursive doubling of the question of nuclear textuality serves to produce *more* mediated layering of the larger text and narrative in *Infinite Jest*, and thus further emphasizes Wallace's construction of the nuclear as textual.

Recall Baudrillard's famous opening discussion of Jorge Luis Borges's "On Exactitude in Science" regarding maps and territories in *Simulacra and Simulation*.[20] With Eschaton, Wallace is not merely aping Baudrillard, winking at the reader, and letting them in on a joke regarding representation and simulation. Eschaton simulates a nuclear war that not only did *not* happen in reality—indeed, perhaps could not happen in reality—but the basic parameters of the game do not represent any political reality that ever existed. At this level of nuclear recursivity, the nuclear threatens the map, the text, the simulation, and not the territory, not the real. The territory of O.N.A.N. is indeed shredding and slowly rotting, seen most clearly in Wallace's (de)construction of the Great Concavity—how it topographically and textually has been removed from the map through nuclear inversion. But as the nuclear becomes a simulacrum by threatening the very simulation which makes it possible (the text, the game), it consequently invades the narrative world of the novel and becomes real. Consequently, Eschaton stages the reality of the global risk of the novel.

The resulting events produced by the map/territory debate in the game highlight a final form of nuclear textuality and how these events ultimately structure the resulting narrative of the novel. The problem of real-world snow is set aside for the moment while AMNAT and SOVWAR attempt to come to terms to prevent SACPOP, meeting together in "Sierra Leone." Hal, watching the IRLIBSYR combatant Evan Ingersoll, "can almost visualize a dark lightbulb going on above [his] head" (*IJ*, 335) as Ingersoll realizes that the results of this summit will effectively eliminate him from the game, as SOVWAR will go SACPOP against him. In an unprecedented action in the history of Eschaton, Ingersoll hits a tennis ball directly at SOVWAR's

20. "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of the territory. It is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994], 1).

Ann Kittenplan. At this moment, the entire ordered, careful, algorithmic apocalypse breaks down. No one in the history of Eschaton has ever launched a strike against an actual physical combatant, as the players are understood to be representations of transnational nuclear capability rather than actual heads of state. At this moment, nuclear textuality invades the real world as representational nuclear weapons (tennis balls) are launched against the "real" (Ann Kittenplan). As a result, total chaos breaks loose, "a degenerative chaos so complex in its disorder that it's hard to tell whether it seems choreographed or simply chaotically disordered" (*IJ*, 341). Players completely abandon the game to hit tennis balls willy-nilly at other players and physically assault one another, causing many significant injuries.

The breakdown and the resulting fallout of this Eschaton constitute *the* significant moment of change in this half of *Infinite Jest*'s narrative. The narrative rupture that the crisis of Eschaton causes cannot, however, be said to constitute a "proper" or familiar apocalyptic event, a *peripeteia*.[21] The Eschaton debacle constitutes the primary crisis of the E.T.A. narrative, but it should be emphasized that the common fantasmatic peripeteia of the twentieth century—global nuclear annihilation—here is miniaturized, simulated, domesticated. The simulation of a world-historical rupture recursively becomes a moment of crisis in the "real" space of the narrative. More than simply domesticating the major crisis of the twentieth century and structurally inscribing such an event into *any* moment of narrative crisis, thereby suggesting a kind of nuclear narratology, Eschaton's peripeteia marks a crisis in the very materiality and textuality of literature itself. When Pemulis rages against the transgression of the limits of the coldly axiomatic Eschaton, the subject of his rage might be said to be less the actions of Penn and Ingersoll than a fundamental realization on his part that even such a formally logical and abstract system as Eschaton defines is incomplete, that there are things that this system simply cannot represent or contain. Pemulis's rule book, by converting nuclear textuality into a mathematical axiom, attempts to lay the basic parameters, both analog and digital, for the nuclear text to become ordered and codified, a mathematical text without "natural" language's attendant ambiguities. The nuclear trope approaches throwing off the aporias of language and attempts to trace a direct relationship between signifier and signified. Pemulis dangerously desires the

21. Frank Kermode uses this term to designate the moment of change, rupture, or dissonance in narrative. See *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

nuclear trope to asymptotically approach a "pure text." (To put this another way, he desires the emergent singularity of Cyberdyne NORAD.) During Eschaton, however, this ordered and elegant nuclear textuality generates *mathematical* peripeteia. Unexpectedly, the route taken by such a totalized nuclear textuality is an encounter with a kind of Gödelian incompleteness.[22]

Eschaton enacts a complex crisis of textuality. Information, no matter how defined, codified, materially embodied, or systematically archived, is not only always already incomplete, but this incompleteness, this inability for the nuclear trope to be wholly contained within the text, *can then spontaneously produce, out of nothing besides the very materiality of its systematicity, more text, narrative, crisis, and the threat of national and global catastrophe*. This is *precisely* how the Entertainment should be understood. The film is so engrossing that its viewers never want to do anything again except watch it at the expense of *all* other activities, including fulfilling basic bodily needs, eventually leading to its viewers' death from dehydration or starvation. The apocalyptic implications of the Entertainment are clear and derive from an American media culture taken to its extreme—a media object that completely absorbs and reifies its viewers, eventually resulting in mass death. The Entertainment, more than simply a critique of contemporary televisual viewing practices, should be understood *as an emergent phenomenon of archived textuality*, as a textual eschaton emerging from a network of archival distribution. In constructing such a text within the space of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace clearly defines the danger of not attempting to articulate an anti-eschatological imagination; the Entertainment emerges when alternative forms of the imagination are foreclosed.

To begin to demonstrate this, we should consider one of the most important aspects of the textual and technological underpinnings of the world of *Infinite Jest* in which virtually any piece of information is immediately available. Quite presciently foreseeing in 1996 how advances in communication and information technology would make a nearly limitless supply of television, film, text, and other forms of information instantaneously accessible through the Internet, *Infinite Jest* is a world where "a viewer could more or less *100% choose what's on at any given time*" (*IJ*, 416) over "InterLace TelEntertainment." *Infinite Jest* imagines the myth of complete and total access, whenever one wants, to a "total" archive, a

22. And this is not surprising given Wallace's understanding of Gödel and transfinite mathematics. See David Foster Wallace, *Everything and More: A Compact History of Infinity* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2003).

*hyperarchive*.[23] It is in the light of this formal, if fantasmatic, projection of an infinite archive with unlimited user access that the Entertainment should be understood, and with regard to the system—the distributed network—that makes possible the fantasmatic projection of such an archive.

The basic formal structure that *Infinite Jest* relies upon for its realization is the *distributed network*. Alexander Galloway, in his excellent book on how control functions in what he, following Gilles Deleuze,[24] calls "control societies," defines the distributed network as follows: "Each point in a distributed network is neither a central hub nor a satellite node—there are neither trunks nor leaves. . . . Like the rhizome, each node in a distributed network may establish direct communication with another node, without having to appeal to a hierarchical intermediary. Yet in order to initiate communication, the two nodes must *speak the same language*."[25] Though *Infinite Jest* is paginated sequentially, proceeds in a mostly linear manner, and contains over one hundred pages of "Notes and Errata," any foray into the novel must agree with N. Katherine Hayles's assessment of it: "For such a novel any starting point would be to some extent arbitrary, for no matter where one starts, everything eventually cycles together with everything else."[26] Wallace constructs a narrative web where each node in the narrative, each scene, character, setting, and time period can be connected to any other through a minimum of steps. In a Borgesian sense, *Infinite Jest* attempts to be an encyclopedia for a world that does not exist. He uses snippets of letters, plagiarized reports on the origins of the A.F.R., film clips, a filmography, indirect and direct speech, first-person and third-person perspectives, calendars, and multiple dialects to achieve this. Every section of the novel attempts to communicate with every other section, and many

23. The nearly limitless supply of available information is also an issue Wallace takes up in his posthumous novel: "I think part of what was so galvanizing was the substitute's [teacher's] diagnosis of the world and reality as already essentially penetrated and formed, the real world's constituent info generated, and that now a meaningful choice lay in herding, corralling, and organizing the torrential flow of info. This rang true to me, though on a level that I don't think I even was fully aware existed within me" (David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* [New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2011], 240).

24. See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 177–82.

25. Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 11–12.

26. N. Katherine Hayles, "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*," in "Ecocriticism," special issue, *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 684–85.

times the narrative conflicts that arise are the result of the novel's inability to "speak the same language" to itself.

Consequently, to approach a discussion of the Entertainment, not only should the distributed, networked form of how texts are disseminated in the projected world be considered—how all texts within the world of *Infinite Jest* have the capability to be connected to any other text—but the rhizomatic, networked fabric of the text itself should be emphasized in accounting for the appearance of the film. The novel, in this way, should be read as a kind of cybernetic machine.[27] As such, the Entertainment represents a much longer history of apocalyptic fear associated with information technology and intelligent machines, and a more basic fear than the anxious projections of a US culture turned vapidly toward the television, literally enjoying itself to death.

In his groundbreaking book *Cybernetics* (1948), Norbert Wiener already perceived the potential dangers of computing and highlights how information technology, even at an early stage in its development, is thoroughly understood in terms of its disastrous potential:

> Those of us who have contributed to the new science of cybernetics thus stand in a moral position which is, to say the least, not very comfortable. We have contributed to the initiation of a new science which, as I have said, embraces technical developments with great possibilities for good and for evil. We can only hand it over into the world that exists about us, and this is the world of Belsen and Hiroshima. We do not even have the choice of suppressing these new technical developments.[28]

Closer to our own moment, Steven Shaviro is equally disturbed by the disastrous potential of information technology: "The threat of self-destruction is palpable to everyone, even if the event never materializes. The danger is part of the atmosphere. The apocalyptic prospect (however improbable) of Cultural Fugue seems to be—as much as the Web, or the information form itself—a defining condition of life in the network

27. In one of the first serious critical discussions of Wallace, Tom LeClair suggests as much: "I believe these young writers more thoroughly conceive their fictions as information systems, as long-running programs of data with a collaborative genesis" (Tom LeClair, "The Prodigious Fiction of Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and David Foster Wallace," *Critique* 38, no. 1 [Fall 1996]: 14).
28. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics; or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, 2nd ed. (1948; repr., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1961), 28.

society."[29] Both Wiener and Shaviro highlight, on two sides of the historical spectrum defining the development of what Shaviro and others call the "network society," that, despite the democratic and utopian coloring information technology is often given, within the history of cybernetics there is an acknowledgment of its potential to pose a catastrophic threat. This is no mere paranoid projection of artificial intelligence getting out of control. It represents an anxiety that exists at a much more structural level, a level that understands this apocalyptic threat to be tied to the simple fact that "a network is a self-generating, self-organizing, self-sustaining system. It works through multiple feedback loops. These loops allow the system to monitor and modulate its own performance continually and thereby maintain a state of homeostatic equilibrium. At the same time, these feedback loops induce effects of interference, amplification, and resonance. And such effects permit the system to grow, both in size and in complexity."[30]

Throughout *Infinite Jest*, Wallace explores how aesthetics functions within such a self-generating, self-organizing, self-sustaining system. The network he is principally concerned with throughout the novel is a system of *aesthetic dissemination*. And if networks by their very definition are self-generating, and if a significant amount of US cultural output is obsessed with the end, what role does the imagination play in such a network? How might we think about both the aesthetics of networks and the networks of aesthetics within the perspective of not just projected disaster but a disaster that is perhaps desired? The Entertainment is the node in Wallace's network around which these questions are constantly revolving. Rather than trying to discern any "origin" to this work of art, let alone an authorial intention that brought it into being, the novel everywhere asks us to consider the structural conditions that made it possible for the Entertainment to *emerge*.

One of the most fascinating moments in the novel regarding how the Entertainment may have come about (putatively "authored" by James O. Incandenza,[31] Hal's deceased father, who goes by the nickname "Himself") is the long endnote that gives us its creator's filmography. Covering nine pages with seventy-eight entries, this archive of Himself's work is both exhaustingly detailed and maddeningly incomplete. For the entries on films that are readily available to the public and generally known, Wallace gives

29. Steven Shaviro, *Connected; or What It Means to Live in the Network Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 243.
30. Shaviro, *Connected*, 10.
31. Wallace was also familiar with poststructuralism's authorship debates. See "Greatly Exaggerated," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again*, 138–45.

us precise details regarding all aspects of the films. For other films, however, very little to no information whatsoever is given. For example, there are six films that appear in this filmography as "Unfinished. UNRELEASED" (*IJ*, 989–93n24). Himself's films that do exist and whose content is clear range across a wide spectrum of different filmic practices: public relations productions, documentaries, the experimental "*après-garde*," infomercials, genre pieces, and attempts at commercial film. Himself's work is so prodigious and theoretically complex that the novel practically begs for an academic article to be written on his work.

Such an article, however, would have to confront the same interpretive aporia that the Entertainment presents: with the few exceptions when Himself's films are described elsewhere in the novel, the majority of the aesthetic objects in this archive cannot be approached *as* objects. Whether exactingly described or simply unseen, unfinished, and unreleased, they arrive at some kind of presence within the novel only through their archivization. More than presenting a mystery to be solved vis-à-vis Himself's archive, these entries emphasize the network that exists between these texts. Not a single entry can really be considered without all the others, as details in each serve to point toward other entries and other moments in the novel. Consequently, more than drawing attention to any single film of Himself's, this catalog of films emphasizes itself as an *archive*, as an accumulation of texts that must be understood in light of the filmography as a whole and the entire projected world of the novel.[32]

Understood in this fashion, the entry on the Entertainment, Himself's fifth or sixth attempt at *Infinite Jest* the *film*, deserves specific attention:

> *Infinite Jest (V?)*. Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar. Poor Yorick Entertainment Unlimited. "Madame Psychosis"; no other definitive data. Thorny problem for archivists. Incandenza's last film, Incandenza's death occurring during its post-production. Most archival authorities list as unfinished, unseen. Some list as completion of *Infinite Jest (IV)*. . . . Though no scholarly synopsis or report of viewing exists,

32. I also cannot help but think here of Fredric Jameson's recent discussion of Stanislas Lem's imaginary book reviews in "New Literary History and the End of the New," *New Literary History* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 375–87. Significantly, Jameson also twice mentions *Infinite Jest* in asides during the course of his argument, suggesting he views the novel as an alternative formation to the "new" he is discussing: "texts that, whether by fragmentation and imperfection or by a dizzying multiplication of presences on the page, somehow evade form and reification—I guess I'm thinking of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" (383).

> two short essays in different issues of *Cartridge Quarterly East* refer to the film as "extraordinary" and "far and away [James O. Incandenza's] most entertaining and compelling work." West Coast archivists list the film's gauge as "16 . . . 78 . . . *n* mm.," basing the gauge on critical allusions to "radical experiments in viewers' optical perspective and context" as *IJ (V?)*'s distinctive feature. Though Canadian archivist Tête-Bêche lists the film as completed privately and distributed by P.Y.E.U. through posthumous provisions in the filmmaker's will, all other comprehensive filmographies have the film either unfinished or UNRELEASED, its Master cartridge either destroyed or vaulted *sui testator*. (*IJ*, 993n24; brackets in original)

This description of the Entertainment reveals its inability to be incorporated into the archive and the network. We can more or less be sure that Joelle van Dyne/Madame Psychosis appeared in the film, that it was Himself's last film, and that it definitely exists, but that is about it. The scholars who are writing about this film in *Cartridge Quarterly East* clearly could not have seen the film, for, quite simply, they are still noncatatonic and writing. We cannot be sure what the film is *called*, whether *Infinite Jest (IV)*, *(V)*, or *(VI)*. It is both the obscene supplement to this archive, what excessively and chaotically overflows the attempt to capture it as an aesthetic object, and simultaneously absent. It is defined by a highly developed desire for order while being chaotic, unapproachable, unknowable, incomplete. Whatever the Entertainment *is*, whatever it is "about," cannot be known; the basic structures that would permit such knowledge keep one away from that knowledge.[33]

So rather than attempt to "understand" the Entertainment, Wallace is constantly asking us to consider its impossible textuality, something that defines a highly complex level of aesthetic order in that the film has achieved a kind of "pure" aesthetic by becoming the only possible object of desire. It achieves "what we really want, when we think that we love a work of art . . . for it to overwhelm us, trample us, crush us into bits. We hate and resent creators, above all, because they see right through us: they understand our secret lust for annihilation, and they offer to fulfill it."[34] The Entertainment fulfills the "secret lust for annihilation" everywhere marking

33. This is also to suggest that Marshall Boswell's reading of the film as "Wallace's most visible emblem of his Lacanian program" (*Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 130) is wanting for the simple fact that the film is not, in any real sense, "visible."
34. Shaviro, *Connected*, 60.

the world of *Infinite Jest*, and it does so by achieving a kind of pure aesthetic mode. It is through archivization, through the complexly ordered and chaotically enumerated network of Himself's films, grounded upon the network of entertainment within the novel's world, that it is able to achieve this mode.

The Entertainment is presented as a phenomenon of *aesthetic emergence*. No intentionality, no recourse to the auteur's oeuvre, no hermeneutic practice can explain it. Its perfection of aesthetics, its complete fulfillment of aesthetic desire, is clearly a fantasmatic limit, but a limit that can be reached emergently. (In this sense, it reaches and redefines *Gravity's Rainbow*'s final delta-T.) The film is an aesthetic object that has reached a higher level of aesthetic order than any single node in the entertainment network of the novel. Yes, the network of InterLace TelEntertainment, taken as a whole, may almost totally absorb American audiences, but viewers of "regular" entertainments can still choose to turn their "teleputers" off. The Entertainment cannot be turned off. Grounded in the network, it is a moment of aesthetic self-organization, of morphogenesis, of autopoiesis.

Steven Johnson, writing on the science of studying self-organization, defines emergence quite simply: "the movement from low-level rules to higher-level sophistication."[35] Emergent systems are everywhere, from the patterns found in chaotic matter, to the intelligence shown by ant colonies, to specific formations in communication networks themselves. For the purposes of thinking about the Entertainment, it is significant that Johnson focuses on *media* emergence near the end of his book. Such media emergence occurs when

> suddenly, every miniseries, every dance remix, every thriller, every music video ever made, is available from anywhere, anytime. The grid shatters into a million free-floating agents, roaming aimlessly across the landscape like those original slime mold cells. All chaos, no order. And then, slowly, clusters begin to form, shapes emerging out of the shapelessness. . . . The Web will contribute the metadata that enables these clusters to self-organize.[36]

The Entertainment readily suggests itself as just such a cluster emerging out of the chaos of both Himself's archived network of texts/

35. Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 18.
36. Johnson, *Emergence*, 219–20.

films and the greater chaos of InterLace TelEntertainment and the world of O.N.A.N. What appears shapeless and chaotic—the archive of Himself's filmic output—becomes ordered *not* by Wallace's highly ordered, academic list but by the final, emergent entry into that list. And, like distributed networks themselves, "emergent systems can work toward different types of goals: some of them admirable, some of them destructive."[37]

In a sense, the "self-annihilation" that Himself spent most of his career working on—nuclear weaponry, annular fusion, a tennis academy that gets its kicks from Eschaton, and, of course, alcoholism—aesthetically emerges in the Entertainment. The nuclear trope, having been textually inverted through the Eschaton scene, textually emerges, ordering the incompleteness of the mathematical apocalyptic simulation. Text itself becomes nuclear and disastrous, a point of "real-world" crisis. The Entertainment is the crisis of Eschaton writ large. It is the emergence of the nuclear, not as an "event," a moment where the bomb explodes, a moment of destruction and indetermination, of a nothingness violently introduced into the real, but rather as an *accumulation*, semiotic ordering, network distribution, and rhizomatic assemblage of the real itself, of materiality and the materiality of text becoming catastrophic. Wallace's construction of the Entertainment emphasizes the destructive capacity of what happens when the archive threatens to become a hyperarchive, accumulating toward infinity, every entry connected to every other entry. If the American eschatological imagination continues to desire annihilation, Wallace quite presciently warns us throughout *Infinite Jest* that even without the "presence" of the nuclear bomb, or indeed, even without the teleological end to America's Cold War narrative, we should be wary of disaster—even in "progress" or accumulation—remaining a dominant form of cultural representation. *Infinite Jest* subtly suggests that an "anti-Entertainment" was produced to negate the effects of the original. Through the novel's asymptotic explosion of the very nuclear trope it relies upon, and its sustained, rigorous attempts to imagine ways of living and thinking not defined by the eschatological horizon of its own nuclear textuality, *Infinite Jest* very much attempts to *be* such an alternative text.

Narratives staging megahazards have proliferated in US popular culture since David Foster Wallace published *Infinite Jest*. For those of us who find this proliferation concerning (or embarrassingly fascinating), it has become almost de rigueur to include some passing reference to a famous

37. Johnson, *Emergence*, 137.

quip from Fredric Jameson: "It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations. I have come to think that the word *postmodern* ought to be reserved for thoughts of this kind."[38] What the oft-repeated invocations of Jameson's statement fail to mention, however, is that the dominant mode of imagining the end of the world during the twentieth century—global nuclear exchange—has become curiously anachronistic. For example, is there not something strangely hyperbolic in Slavoj Žižek's recent "apocalyptic turn"?[39] Or, even more in line with a certain brand of the contemporary eschatological imagination, Evan Calder Williams's provocative call: "What we need, then, is an apocalypse"?[40] Granted, both Žižek and Williams are responding to the 2008 economic crisis and the continuing evidence that disasters are being produced by climate change, but the narrative and discursive totality of MAD should, and for good reason, belong to another age. Hence Jameson's later revision: "we can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world."[41]

The Entertainment represents the asymptote of this imagination. And I think Wallace perceives in Jameson's original statement something many have not: it is not enough to bemoan the disaster of contemporaneity; one must attempt to *rectify* the weakness in our imaginations, to imagine something *else*. *Infinite Jest* thus stages a self-consciously impossible task. Imagining a narrative that is anti-eschatological is impossible for the simple fact that narratives *end*. (Wallace's refusal to provide narrative closure in *Infinite Jest* does not prevent it from ending.) Wallace's career is a testament, however, to the value of pursuing such an impossible, and con-

38. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii; emphasis mine. This collects Jameson's Wellek Library Lectures, delivered at the University of California, Irvine, in 1991. The above is often paraphrased, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism."
39. See Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009), where he says that "if this sounds apocalyptic, one can only retort that we live in apocalyptic times" (92). In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, he begins this apocalyptic turn through an analysis of the 2008 financial crisis, and more fully develops his apocalypticism in *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2010).
40. Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 5. I find Williams's notion of "salvagepunk" particularly useful, and it shares something with the Wallace of *The Pale King*.
41. Fredric Jameson, "Future City," in *The Ideologies of Theory* (New York: Verso, 2008), 573.

sequently *ethical*, task; and I think this aspect of his fiction, his repeated attempts (and failures) to carve out a place for the literary imagination during the second nuclear age, has sustained the continuing impact and resonance of his unique voice. Exhausted by its addictive self-referentiality and solipsism, awash in a sea of self-organizing data, immersed in a kind of digital "oceanic,"[42] if the contemporary novel has any continuing relevance, narrative fiction must wake up on the beach where Wallace leaves Don Gately at the end of *Infinite Jest*: the tide way out, unable to see the edges of its subject matter, no longer able to see its own, or the world's, demise.

42. "It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of 'eternity,' a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic'" (Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey [New York: W. W. Norton and Co. 1961], 11).