2.2 The Desperate Medium in David Foster Wallace's "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" (1997)

As mentioned, David Foster Wallace made no secret of his motivation to create a form of literature that could confront the mass mediation of American society in either interviews or essays. However, Foster Wallace, who committed suicide in 2008, also left an exemplary body of work. While he is primarily known for his short fiction and his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* (1996),[1] written between 1992 and 2008, Foster Wallace also produced a substantial trove of innovative yet controversial reportage, essays, and commentary, which influenced and inspired other writers of literary journalism.[2] For John Jeremiah Sullivan, Foster Wallace "got his finger into a certain wound and was moving it around,"[3] and Leslie Jamison stated that the "multiplicity of [his] perspectives feels almost like an ethical stance; the refusal of the single view."[4] An experimental fiction writer, Foster Wallace had no journalistic training and he never claimed to be a reporter. Nevertheless, he was very interested in non-fiction literature. As a reader, he preferred the writings of George Orwell or Joan Didion to those of Tom Wolfe or Hunter S. Thompson, whose texts—except for *Hell's Angels* (1967)[5]—he found to be "naïve and narcissistic."[6] Foster Wallace seemed

1 Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*.

2 On Wallace's influence, see most recently and explicitly Roiland, "Derivative Sport: The Journalistic Legacy of David Foster Wallace"; See also Lorentzen, "The Rewriting of David Foster Wallace"; Kraus, "Viewer Discretion: The Trajectory of Writer-Worrier David Foster Wallace"; Sullivan, "Too Much Information."

3 Roiland, "Derivative Sport: The Journalistic Legacy of David Foster Wallace."

4 Roiland.

5 Thompson, *Hells Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*.

6 Jacob, "Interview with David Foster Wallace," 153–54.

uncertain about where and how he wanted to draw the line between fact and fiction, significantly and particularly in his early career.[7]

In general, Foster Wallace has been established as one of the most formative writers of his generation, due to his experimental approach to form and interest in affect. Robert Seguin has observed a:

> disparity one often senses between the scintillating intensity of Wallace's texts … and the weirdly earnest, unfashionable … ideas that they are often thought to espouse: how we must seek new ways to sincerely communicate our authentic selves, and be mindful and attentive to the world outside us, amidst the tornadic roar of an addictive culture of image and mass spectacle that seeks only to fortify our essential narcissism.[8]

In one of the most daring critical readings of Foster Wallace's work, Adam Kelly affiliated him with other writers such as George Saunders or Jennifer Egan and identified a new kind of sincerity in their texts. Kelly sees these texts as "defined by their undecidability and the affective response they invite and provoke in their readers"[9]. He observes in their writers' positions a "sturdy affirmation of non-ironic values, as a renewed taking of responsibility for the meaning of one's words".[10] This rather forward-looking sincerity acknowledges that it can never achieve purity, that it always has to be understood "in inextricable conjunction with ostensibly opposing terms, including irony and manipulation".[11] This awareness necessitates what Kelly calls the "aesthetically generative undecidability";[12] this is the insight that a text's affective power "cannot fully be separated from, and is in fact in large part constituted by, the appropriation of affect for manipulative ends".[13] There is no guarantee of the writer's sincerity in the written text either for the writer or for the reader, because either acceptance or rejection of the writer's authenticity happens "off the page, outside repre-

7 Roiland, "The Fine Print: Uncovering the True Story of David Foster Wallace and the 'Reality Boundary.'"
8 Seguin, "Form, Voice, and Utopia in David Foster Wallace," 220.
9 Kelly, "The New Sincerity," 206.
10 Kelly, 198.
11 Kelly, 201.
12 Kelly, 204.
13 Kelly, 204.

sentation"[14] and depends "upon the invocation and response of another".[15] In certain ways, then, Kelly even reads Foster Wallace's fiction as a kind of nonfiction, or at least as a fiction with nonfictional purposes.

Arguably, David Foster Wallace's most popular piece of actual nonfiction is his reportage titled "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again."[16] Marshall Boswell called it "one of Wallace's most beloved and widely read works" that contains "all the hallmarks of Wallace's inimitable style."[17] In the text, Foster Wallace tells the story of his becoming the alienated, and hence desperate, object of a produced, pre-fabricated experience of escape from everyday life while on a week-long cruise. Josh Roiland has noted that this trope of escape into fantasy is prominent in Wallace's nonfiction, which generally seeks to communicate an "imperative to be present."[18] According to Lukas Hoffmann, this imperative to be attentive and conscious is presented as a remedy for the despair and anxieties that mortality causes in humans in "A Supposedly Fun Thing."[19] Hoffmann classifies the text as post-ironic, partly because it emphasizes the ubiquitous mediation of experience in contemporary American society and culture.[20]

Importantly, however, Foster Wallace's (self-)reflections upon mediation are deeply intertwined with the text's primary theme; touristic experience and his emphasis of mediation clearly serve a larger critical cause. The anxiety and despair that Foster Wallace feels onboard the cruise is rooted in the particular experience of alienation brought about by capitalist drives in tourism, which essentially manufactures, manages and sells human experience. Foster Wallace juxtaposes the inauthenticity he perceives in both the produced experience of being pampered and this production's very interpretation (provided by the cruise company in PR brochures aboard) with an extensive display of self-reflection that encompasses the mediating aspects of his role as a human

14 Kelly, 205.

15 Kelly, 205.

16 Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." A shorter version of the story was first published in *Harper's* magazine in January 1996, entitled "Shipping Out."

17 Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 180.

18 Roiland, "Getting Away From It All: The Literary Journalism of David Foster Wallace and Nietzsche's Concept of Oblivion," 31.

19 Hoffmann, *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*, 165.

20 Hoffmann, 151.

medium. He emphasizes the very aesthetic and material qualities of his mediation that are absent, repressed, or disguised in the limiting objectification of human experience on the cruise ship, even as he details the ambiguities and pluralities of how he works, experiences, thinks, and tells. He embodies both symbolic and material meaning-making—human communing and communication—as deeply uncertain and mediated or shaped by forces that can both connect and alienate humans.

A Pseudojournalist

The most basic and decisive mediator of Foster Wallace's experience on the cruise, its subjective interpretation, and its transmission to readers is his professional role. In the text's very first paragraph, Foster Wallace writes that he had been on a "journalistic assignment."[21] The professional relationship between Foster Wallace and *Harper's* magazine shapes both his experience and the resulting text. Foster Wallace reflects, somewhat ambiguously, on the effects of this relationship in terms of the pressure it makes him feel about, and the ways in which his purported role as a journalist affects, his interactions onboard with the personnel and other passengers, not to mention the ways in which it influences his own behavior.

The assignment pressures Foster Wallace in two different ways. On the one hand, this pressure is due to the assignment's comparatively high financial stakes. Foster Wallace indicates that what he calls a "tropical plum assignment" by "a certain swanky East-Coast magazine" might be too much for him compared to a previous article about a state fair: "[T]his time there's this new feeling of pressure: total expenses for the State Fair were $27.00 excluding games of chance. This time *Harper's* has shelled out over $3000 U.S. before seeing pithy sensuous description one."[22] On the other hand, Foster Wallace also claims that the pressure he feels stems from a lack of specificity regarding the expected outcome of the assignment. "They say all they want is a sort of really big experiential postcard—go, plow the Caribbean in style, come back, say what you've seen."[23] By detailing these fundamentals of the text's genesis, Foster Wallace illustrates that his experience is intentionally

21 Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," 256.

22 Foster Wallace, 256.

23 Foster Wallace, 257.

produced within a capitalist framework that he associates with journalism. Furthermore, he indicates that this very framework has the potential to shape his very experience by affecting his mental well-being.

In addition, Foster Wallace repeatedly refers to rather concrete ways in which the capitalist framework manifests itself in the text. Several examples take us back to the financial dependency and uncertain expectations outlined at the beginning. For instance, after relaying an almost page-long litany of experiences, Foster Wallace asks the reader and himself: "Is this enough? At the time it didn't seem like enough."[24] Elsewhere, Foster Wallace admits to not being sure how many examples he needs to include to provide a sense of the pampering services onboard[25] or that he was actively looking for "some really representative experiences."[26] The assignment is more explicitly alluded to when he anticipates the process of editing and potential deletion of passages[27] or mentions discussions about the forwarding of a skeet-shooting bill to *Harper's*.[28] Taken together, these little asides signify that, in economic terms, Foster Wallace sees himself as being in the situation of a contract journalist and wants the reader to be aware that this has affected the resulting text.

According to Foster Wallace, the journalistic assignment also impacted the very nature of his experiences on board. In the text, both his own and other people's purported understanding of his role simultaneously creates and hampers direct experience. For example, Foster Wallace names two instances in which he was denied a demand as a result of his journalistic role. In the first episode, Foster Wallace describes how he asked the restaurant staff for kitchen leftovers to attract sharks, which:

> turned out to be a serious journalistic faux pas, because I'm almost positive the maître d' passed this disturbing tidbit on to Mr. Dermatitis [Foster Wallace's nickname for the ship's hotel manager, Ed.] and that it was a big reason why I was denied access to stuff like the ship's galley, thereby impoverishing the sensuous scope of this article.[29]

24 Foster Wallace, 257.
25 Foster Wallace, 290.
26 Foster Wallace, 320.
27 Foster Wallace, 293.
28 Foster Wallace, 344.
29 Foster Wallace, 262.

As Foster Wallace states, this incident is connected to a later interaction with the hotel manager in question, in which Wallace asks for permission to inspect the ship's sewage system. At the time, Wallace is unaware of a scandal involving another cruise ship that was found to have dumped garbage into the sea. The interaction is described in such a way as to create a sense of surprise about how his request is received:

> Even behind his mirrored sunglasses I can tell that Mr. Dermatitis is severely upset about my interest in sewage, and he denies my request to eyeball the V.S.S [acronym for what Foster Wallace calls the VACCUUM SEWAGE SYSTEM, Ed.] with a complex defensiveness that I couldn't even begin to chart out here.[30]

Later, having been made aware of the scandal at the dinner table, Foster Wallace assumes that the hotel manager really thinks that he might be "some kind of investigative journalist with a hard-on for shark dangers and sewage scandals."[31] Although potentially exaggerated and slightly ironic, all of these cases illustrate that, in Foster Wallace's view, the context of the journalistic assignment not only had the potential to affect the final product, but also the experiences he has already had on board in virtue of other people's—in this case the hotel manager's—perception of him.

Furthermore, Foster Wallace's purported self-understanding as a voluntary, albeit naïve journalist also affects his own dealings and perceptions. For instance, when waiting to board the ship before the cruise, Foster Wallace reflects on his own attention:

> A major advantage to writing some sort of article about an experience is that at grim junctures like this pre-embarkation blimp hangar you can distract yourself from what the experience feels like by focusing on what looks like items of possible interest for the article.[32]

Similarly, Foster Wallace notes that he repeatedly felt compelled to leave his cabin to actively create experience, as a result of his assignment on another occasion:

30 Foster Wallace, 305.
31 Foster Wallace, 305.
32 Foster Wallace, 274.

> I'd have to sort of psych myself up to leave the cabin and go accumulate experiences, and then pretty quickly out there in the general population my will would break and I'd find some sort of excuse to scuttle back to 1009. This happened quite a few times a day.[33]

By characterizing his "journalistic" attention as a distraction, Foster Wallace describes a conflict between the way in which he would behave under normal circumstances and the way in which he behaves as a journalist, who is intentionally looking for potential content for his article. The same principle might apply to the reflection on his general lack of willingness to leave the cabin, which was affected by the pressure of his assignment.

Elsewhere, Foster Wallace relates that his own interpretation of his role affected his interaction with crew members. When meeting and chatting with a Polish waiter named Tibor, for instance, Foster Wallace admits that he would rather not act as a journalist in these interactions:

> He doesn't know I'm on the *Nadir* [Foster Wallace's nickname for the cruise ship, Ed.] as a pseudojournalist. I'm not sure why I haven't told him – somehow I think it might make things hard for him… I never ask him anything about Celebrity Cruises… because I feel like I'd just about die if Tibor got into trouble on my account.[34]

Similarly, Foster Wallace states that he refrained from treating Winston, his table tennis opponent and the ship's DJ, in a journalistic way:

> As with good old Tibor, I don't probe Winston in any serious journalistic way, although in this case it's not so much because I fear getting the 3P [another one of Foster Wallace's nicknames, Ed.] in trouble as because (nothing against good old Winston personally) he's not exactly the brightest bulb in the ship's intellectual chandelier, if you get my drift.[35]

For both Tibor and Winston, Foster Wallace anticipates the potential consequences of his journalistic work, which is why he treats these two differently and admits to meeting them on a mere human level that allows for more gen-

33 Foster Wallace, 297.

34 Foster Wallace, 322.

35 Foster Wallace, 329.

erosity. In this way, they serve as another indication of Foster Wallace's awareness of the effect of his assignment on his experiences onboard.

All in all, Foster Wallace reflects deeply on the ways in which the professional parameters of his participation in the cruise potentially affect the outcome of his work. If one accepts his own declarations, Foster Wallace acts simultaneously as a journalist and as a non-journalist. Economically speaking, Foster Wallace presents himself as a journalist, although he is certainly not a professional. He openly admits to not being able to conduct research or to treat all of the objects of his research with the same distance. These episodes can appear ironic precisely because they show legitimate issues deriving from the intentionality that the economic framework of journalism creates, but that are not usually mentioned in works of journalism. The only possible irony then is that, rather than being concerned with the question of whether or not what he is telling his readers is true, Foster Wallace instead focuses on the issues of what, in the context of an assignment, might affect any textual representation of reality as it is experienced.

The Recording Human

The main demand of Foster Wallace's assignment, as mentioned previously, is to deliver "a sort of really big experiential postcard."[36] In the text, Foster Wallace interprets this task literally. Yet, he also sees it as his duty to reflect upon what it means to write literally about human experience. Foster Wallace obsessively details not only the basic physical and sensory qualities of his experiences, but also their occasional physical effects and interconnectedness. He also misses almost no opportunity to point out how human experience is mediated by other human beings or by Foster Wallace himself. Most importantly, however, Foster Wallace characterizes his own ways of experiencing reality as plural and decidedly human, thereby criticizing the reductive aspects of the visual media dominating touristic experience.

Although Foster Wallace laments the vagueness of the instructions he has been given, in fact, his task is rather specific. In his words, it is his job to "go, plow the Caribbean in style, come back, say what you've seen."[37] This of course

36 Foster Wallace, 257.

37 Foster Wallace, 257.

limits experience to its visual manifestation and Foster Wallace does not hesitate to ignore his job description, by almost mockingly reporting on more than what his eyes have perceived. For example, in the paragraph immediately following the description of his task, Foster Wallace presents a collage of things he has seen, only to suddenly break with sight itself altogether:

> I have seen a lot of really big white ships. I have seen schools of little fish fins that glow. I have seen a toupee on a thirteen-year-old boy. (The glowing fish liked to swarm between our hull and the cement of the pier whenever we docked.) I have seen the north coast of Jamaica. I have seen and smelled all 145 cats inside the Ernest Hemingway Residence in Key West FL. I now know the difference between straight Bingo and Prize-O, and what it is when a Bingo jackpot "snowballs." I have seen camcorders that practically required a dolly.[38]

Notably, Foster Wallace starts each of the first five sentences of this paragraph by dutifully stating what he has seen, as if to argue that seeing alone is not enough for him to do his job properly; however, he adds that he has also smelled the cats in the fifth sentence. In the sixth sentence (not counting the bracketed one), Foster Wallace then moves on to include knowing into the scope of human experience, which suggests a connection to consciousness. The paragraph is remarkable not for its imagery, but for both its initial foregrounding and subsequent abandonment of, and ultimate return to, what is *seen*. Visuality, Foster Wallace seems to suggest, forms a vital part of human experience, but by no means can the latter be reduced thereto.

This stance is manifested in Foster Wallace's critique of cameras and camcorders, whose enormous size he alludes to in the final sentence of the passage cited above. In particular, Foster Wallace makes a point of his dislike of the ubiquity of cameras both on and off the boat. When he describes the bus transfer from the airport to the pier, for example, he observes "a tremendous mass clicking sound in here from all the cameras around everybody's neck. I haven't brought any sort of camera and feel a perverse pride about this."[39] After arriving at the pier, the mass of cameras again catches his attention. "I count over a dozen makes of camera just in the little block of orange chairs within camera-discernment range. That's not counting camcorders."[40] On the follow-

38 Foster Wallace, 257.

39 Foster Wallace, 271.

40 Foster Wallace, 275.

ing page, Foster Wallace proudly states: "I have now empirically verified that I am the only ticketed adult here without some kind of camera equipment."[41]

At first glance, the cameras may help Foster Wallace differentiate himself from the other image-recording passengers as media and help him position himself as a writer who relies on the use of pen, paper, and memory. However, Foster Wallace undermines this initially clear distinction in his character study of a passenger he calls Captain Video. In Foster Wallace's telling, Captain Video is a "sad and cadaverous guy" who "camcords absolutely *everything*."[42] However, Foster Wallace also admits to having observed similarities between himself and Captain Video that "tend to make me uncomfortable, and I try to avoid him as much as possible."[43] This observation further cements Foster Wallace's self-characterization as being primarily human. Despite his aversion to the constant use of cameras, he can relate to an actual human being behind one of them. Once again, the issue is general ubiquity, not singular use.

In place of visual impressions and the use of a camera, then, Foster Wallace explores and emphasizes the interconnected and complex interdependencies of sensuous impressions. For instance, Foster Wallace describes the feeling of physically being on a moving ship in detail:

> Even in heavy seas, 7NC Megaships don't yaw or throw you around or send bowls of soup sliding across tables. Only a certain subtle unreality to your footing lets you know you're not on land. At sea, a room's floor feels somehow 3-D, and your footing demands a slight attention good old planar static land never needs. You don't ever quite hear the ship's engines, but when your feet are planted you can feel them, a kind of spinal throb—it's oddly soothing.[44]

In this passage, touch, balance, and hearing are all interwoven to form a kind of sensory collage located and centered in Foster Wallace's body, where the impressions coalesce. Consequently, the workings of body and brain are impossible to separate, as Foster Wallace more explicitly describes in the following paragraph about walking:

> When heavy waves come straight at a Megaship's snout, the ship goes up and down along its long axis – this is called *pitching*. It produces a disorient-

41 Foster Wallace, 276.

42 Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again."

43 Foster Wallace, 308.

44 Foster Wallace, 283.

> ing deal where you feel like you're walking on a very slight downhill grade and then level and then on a very slight uphill grade. Some evolutionary retrograde reptile-brain part of the CNS is apparently reawakened, though, and manages all this so automatically that it requires a good deal of attention to notice anything more than that walking feels a little dreamy.[45]

In both passages, Foster Wallace notes how different perceptions contribute to the sense of being on a cruise ship. In the first description, he observes the interconnectedness of touch and hearing that is related to balance, and he observes the unfamiliarity of the fact that walking demands attention. In the second description, Foster Wallace emphasizes how the brain apparently synchronizes sensory impressions to such a degree that walking no longer demands attention. Rather, it is the unfamiliarity itself that can only be perceived with extra attention. As this juxtaposition seems to suggest, Foster Wallace emphasizes the mere existence of inter-sensual connections and their potentially different and contradictory effects as something notable in itself.

As much as Foster Wallace highlights and almost celebrates these connections, he also observes the weirdness of their absence. Following his observation that his cabin's bathroom smells like artificial lemon, for instance, he notes that:

> [the] cabin itself, on the other hand, after it's been cleaned, has no odor. None. Not in the carpets, the bedding, the insides of the desk's drawers, the wood of the Wondercloset's doors: nothing. One of the very few totally odorless places I've ever been in. This, too, eventually starts giving me the creeps.[46]

The very absence of smell, as disconnected, has an emotional resonance as it elicits a kind of anxiety in Foster Wallace. He seems to argue that there is no way for a human being to shut off their senses. Thus, apart from the complexity and plurality of the senses, he also emphasizes their ubiquity.

In addition to these rather general considerations about human perception, Foster Wallace points to its specific physical mediation almost tirelessly. The sensory perceptions in the text are mediated either by other human beings, or by Foster Wallace himself. After hearing about various cruise incidents from

45 Foster Wallace, 283.

46 Foster Wallace, 303.

a couple at the airport prior to departure, for example, Foster Wallace notes that "the lady (kind of a spokesman for the couple) isn't sure; it turns out she sort of likes to toss off a horrific detail and then get all vague and blasé when a horrified listener tries to pump her for details."[47] Here, Foster Wallace adds a qualifying observation that puts what he had heard earlier into a new context. He leaves the actual content uninvestigated, however—namely, whether or not what the woman said was correct. The focus is less on the impression itself than on its mediation, which is a recurring theme in the text.

Foster Wallace makes this concern with mediation particularly apparent in his examination of the sincerity of other passengers or staff members. For instance, he develops a particular affection for Tibor, the Polish waiter, who simply means what he says.[48] He is, however, repulsed by Mona, a teenaged passenger who lies to the staff and shows a lack of gratitude towards her grandparents.[49] By carefully characterizing and examining other characters as media in this way, Foster Wallace once again emphasizes the mediated nature of human interaction in general. In order to make his point, he even focuses his attention on a particular facial expression, the professional smile:

> You know this smile – the strenuous contraction of circumoral fascia w/ incomplete zygomatic involvement – the smile that doesn't quite reach the smiler's eyes and that signifies nothing more than a calculated attempt to advance the smiler's own interests by pretending to like the smilee.[50]

Similar to what occurs in his analyses of sincerity, Foster Wallace here analyzes a particular way of smiling or, rather, of seeing a particular smile. The problem with this type of smile is not that it is just a basic expression of human joy; it is mediated by a particular intention which objectifies its addressee. Foster Wallace's respect for Tibor, however, indicates that the professional smile also affects the smilers themselves. In her famous study *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983),[51] Arlie Russell Hochschild argued with regard to the professional smiles of flight attendants that they, too, lose the authenticity of their selves. Beyond this specific critique of the commercialization of human emotion and interpersonal connection, Foster Wallace's analysis also

47 Foster Wallace, 269.

48 Foster Wallace, 321–322.

49 Foster Wallace, 282–283.

50 Foster Wallace, 289.

51 Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*.

points to the very general potential of the mediation of human communication and its experience.

Significantly, Foster Wallace's sensory perceptions are mediated by previous experience. More specifically, Foster Wallace describes instances in which earlier experiences on the ship influence the ways in which he perceives. For example, when another cruise ship lines up alongside Foster Wallace's ship in a Mexican port, Foster Wallace starts:

> to feel a covetous and almost prurient envy of the *Dreamward*. I imagine its interior to be cleaner than ours, larger, more lavishly appointed. I imagine the *Dreamward*'s food being even more varied and punctiliously prepared, the ship's Gift Shop less expensive and its casino less depressing and its stage entertainment less cheesy and its pillow mints bigger.[52]

Of course, the envy that Foster Wallace describes feeling here is based on his experience on his ship. Whether or not this envy is merited does not seem important to Foster Wallace, only that it is the effect of the experience of looking at the other ship, after having spent a few days on a similar cruise. It is he himself who has mediated the impression of this other ship through the memories that he has accumulated over the course of the previous days. Another episode in which Foster Wallace mediates his own experience occurs when he drinks more coffee than usual:

> I normally have a very firm and neurologically imperative one-cup limit on coffee, but the Windsurf's coffee is so good… and the job of deciphering the big yellow Rorschachian blobs of my Navigation Lecture notes so taxing, that on this day I exceed my limit, by rather a lot, which may help explain why the next few hours of this log get kind of kaleidoscopic and unfocused.[53]

In this passage, Foster Wallace speculates about how his consumption of coffee might have affected his perception and, ultimately, the text he writes. He also provides two reasons for having drunk more coffee than usual, thereby indicating that even the coffee-drinking was mediated by an earlier bout of coffee-drinking and the attendance of a lecture.

Foster Wallace's attempts at depicting both the complexities and ways in which human experience is mediated can be read as intense and occasionally

52 Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," 315.

53 Foster Wallace, 335–336.

theatrical exhibitions of the self-reflection of a human medium. If they potentially appear theatrical, this is because Foster Wallace's concern with self-awareness presses into almost every niche of his perception. His ambition to gather material for an experiential postcard occasionally almost blows up the postcard itself. However, this is not to say that Foster Wallace is being ironic. Rather, in these instances, he seems to be adamant about simply telling a story that is different from the one his readers might expect to read.

The Objectified Human Subject

As a human medium, who ultimately also delivers a text to be read, Foster Wallace exhibits a clear awareness of how he, as a writer, reflects upon the material that he has gathered and how he shapes it into a comprehensive argument. This is manifested on at least two different levels in the text. On the one hand, Foster Wallace makes the subjective assessments and intentions (or lack thereof) that he brings to the experience as a human being comparatively transparent. On the other hand, he presents an explicit meta-argument as a result of his reflections and deliberations. The arguments on both levels are connected in the text's main narrative conflict, as the display of Foster Wallace's very human subjectivity is juxtaposed with the objectivity he laments on the meta-textual level.

On the level of his concrete experience onboard, Foster Wallace makes a point of emphasizing his own humanity, since he exhibits the subjectivity that he brings to the experience by referring to his memory, taste, and values. His subjective memory, in particular, as he repeatedly shows, mediates his experience. As Foster Wallace waits to board a bus at the airport, for instance, he observes that a

> crowd-control lady has a megaphone and repeats over and over not to worry about our luggage, that it will follow us later, which I am apparently alone in finding chilling in its unwitting echo of the Auschwitz-embarkation scene in *Schindler's List*.[54]

Of course, the comparison of the two scenes, one the prelude to a cruise, the other a part of a filmed representation of the Holocaust, are utterly subjective.

54 Foster Wallace, 270.

Foster Wallace here, early on in the narrative, asserts that he holds a particular, singular view, which is different from that of the mass of other passengers, and which is manifested in his particular memory of having watched a particular movie. However, Foster Wallace also reflects on the particular workings and potential pitfalls of memory as a mediator of experience when, after having observed that a lot of people look Jewish to him, he adds that he is "ashamed to catch myself thinking that I can determine Jewishness from people's appearance."[55]

What might be called "subjective taste" serves as another mediator of Foster Wallace's experience. While pre-boarding, Foster Wallace looks at the other passengers, bluntly judging the appearance of older men in shorts:

> Men after a certain age simply should not wear shorts, I've decided; their legs are hairless in a way that's creepy; the skin seems denuded and practically crying out for hair, particularly on the calves. It's just about the *only* body-area where you actually want *more* hair on older men.[56]

In contrast to other similar passages in which Foster Wallace frequently comments on his reasons for particular judgments, here he simply comments that he has "just decided" to view the hairlessness of older men's legs as problematic and worthy of commentary. Additionally, this passage is a commentary on the meaning of human experience itself. The hairless-legs observation has no connection to Foster Wallace's argument about the cruise as such. As a spontaneous question of taste, however, it appears worthy of inclusion simply because it is part of his overall human experience.

Much to the contrary, Foster Wallace's absolute prioritization of sincerity over other values characterizes the personal value system that he brings to the experience as a key interpretative frame. Furthermore, it also decisively shapes his argument about the cruise experience. One of the clearest expressions of this is Foster Wallace's critique of the writer Frank Conroy's own experiential essay about a cruise. After reading it twice, Wallace contends that it is "sinister and despair-producing and bad"[57] because both its content and its contextualization are insincere. With regard to content, Foster Wallace argues that the essay's:

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55 Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," 272–273.

56 Foster Wallace, 272–273.

57 Foster Wallace, 286.

> real badness can be found in the way it reveals once again the Megaline's sale-to-sail agenda of micromanaging not only one's perceptions of a 7NC Luxury Cruise but even one's own interpretation and articulation of those perceptions.[58]

In Foster Wallace's view, the essay is insincere because its intention is not to speak the truth, but rather to influence the clients' perception of a product that has already been sold to them. What irks Foster Wallace even more, however, is that this agenda of control extends into the essay itself, and that even the very perception of the essay is influenced:

> [the] really major badness is that the project and placement of 'My Celebrity Cruise…' are sneaky and duplicitous and far beyond whatever eroded pales still exist in terms of literary ethics. Conroy's 'essay' appears as an insert, on skinnier pages and with different margins than the rest of the brochure, creating the impression that it has been excerpted from some large and objective thing Conroy wrote.[59]

Both content and context, in Foster Wallace's view, create the impression that the text's main function is artistically argumentative when, in actual fact, it is a commercial. In effect, it not only betrays the reader, but also, in Foster Wallace's view, "messes with our heads and eventually starts upping our defenses even in cases of genuine smiles and real art and true goodwill."[60] Foster Wallace deems such textual insincerity particularly dangerous, precisely because it has the potential to affect not merely a single experience, but rather the entire perception of a human being taken cumulatively. In these passages on the "essaymercial,"[61] Foster Wallace describes how his ethical sense, as a human reader, influences the experience, since it directly affects his interpretation of the experience and leads him to judge it quite decisively. Moreover, his ethical deliberations also inevitably connect to other levels of the text and consider how awareness itself might be shaped and influenced, much in the same way as Foster Wallace's overall argument about the experience of being on the cruise.

On the text's third page, Foster Wallace concedes that his own value system might be off when he judges other passengers who are enjoying themselves.

58 Foster Wallace, 287.
59 Foster Wallace, 287.
60 Foster Wallace, 289.
61 Foster Wallace, 288.

Looking back on his experience, Foster Wallace states that he has "filled almost three Mead notebooks trying to figure out whether it was Them or Just Me."[62] The result of this process of figuring out is a central argument that Foster Wallace makes about his experience in general. In this meta-narrative argument, Foster Wallace expresses his conclusions about his experience onboard and, thus, transmits the awareness that his experience is mediated and how it is processed in his mind. In the argument itself, in ways similar to Boorstin, Foster Wallace claims that a cruise makes for an insincere experience, because it objectifies the passenger while it aims to produce an impossibly pleasurable feeling of being human that represses the existence of time and human desire.

Foster Wallace develops this argument in various bursts of retrospective general comments about the cruise that are interspersed throughout the text, while nonetheless remaining connected. In a first comment, Foster Wallace claims that the cruise company offers a specific product, a feeling, "a blend of relaxation and stimulation, stressless indulgence and frantic tourism, that special mix of servility and condescension that's marketed under configurations of the verb 'to pamper.'"[63] This pampering, as Foster Wallace explains, includes not only the production of pleasantness, but also the repression of unpleasantness. On the cruise, this is manifested in "the construction of various fantasies of triumph over just this death and decay."[64] Here, Foster Wallace goes into more detail, identifying three different ways of triumphing: self-improvement, play, and the active construction and evocation of fantasy through the ads and brochures on the ship.[65]

Invoking personal experience, Foster Wallace denounces these fantasies as flawed. Time, for instance, cannot be overcome, he argues, reflecting on the general choices and narrowing of options time demands from him. "It's dreadful. But since it's my own choices that'll lock me in, it seems unavoidable."[66] Foster Wallace counters the promise of micromanaged pleasures that enable the passengers to do "Absolutely Nothing" with a reference to the embryonic state:

62 Foster Wallace, 258.
63 Foster Wallace, 260.
64 Foster Wallace, 263–264.
65 Foster Wallace, 264–268.
66 Foster Wallace, 268.

> I know how long it's been since I had every need met choicelessly from someplace outside me, without my having to ask or even acknowledge that I needed. And that time I was floating, too, and the fluid was salty, and warm but not too-, and if I was conscious at all I'm sure I felt dreadless, and was having a really good time, and would have sent postcards to everyone wishing they were here.[67]

Almost forty pages later, Foster Wallace connects the embryo's lack of self-awareness to what he calls the "Dissatisfied Infant part of me, the part that always and indiscriminately WANTS."[68] While the unborn embryo, by nature, has every need met, the infant, also by nature, is constantly dissatisfied. Foster Wallace, thus, argues that the cruise promises to make its passengers feel like embryos, even though they have already been born and are insatiable. "The thing to notice is that the real fantasy here isn't that this promise will be kept, but that such a promise is keepable at all. This is a big one, this lie."[69] Potentially accepting this lie, then, could turn Foster Wallace into a merely consuming object, one totally devoid of agency. However, Foster Wallace clings to his subjectivity as a force of resistance by invoking his own memory and taking ownership of his desires as weapons against objectification. Consequently, the argument laid out by means of these instances of aestheticized self-reflection details the concrete conflict within a human subject embedded in a system driven by objectifying forces, such as the tourism industry.

The Desperately Dialoguing Narrator

In opposition to the ads, commercials, and brochures onboard, Foster Wallace seeks to communicate his experience sincerely by exhibiting an awareness of at least three different aspects of his own transmitting function as a medium. He indicates that he is aware of his taking part in a larger conversation with readers. In different asides, he cautiously comments on experiencing and narrating, distancing himself from both actions in the process. However, Foster Wallace also productively engages with the potentially distancing aspects of his

67 Foster Wallace, 268.
68 Foster Wallace, 316.
69 Foster Wallace, 316.

narrating and experiencing functions as a reporter by creating immediacy effects and acting as an experiential stand-in for readers. Furthermore, he plays with various formal elements of text itself, thereby emphasizing its mediated character.

Foster Wallace's display of his own awareness of his communicative relationship with readers includes reflections on the difference between himself and his readers. His comments about narration and experience, in particular, can create a distancing effect. When waiting in line to board the cruise ship, for instance, Foster Wallace observes certain fellow passengers and elaborates about his uncertainty regarding one particular group in a footnote, namely the men identified as working for the Engler Corporation:

> I was never in countless tries able to determine just what the Engler Corporation did or made or was about, but they'd apparently sent a quorum of their execs on this 7NC junket together as a weird kind of working vacation or intracompany convention or something.[70]

Foster Wallace almost celebrates his own uncertainty here. He emphasizes his inability to determine anything about the Engler Corporation, as well as how this inability leads him to speculate cautiously. Elsewhere, having supposedly had too much coffee, Foster Wallace is blunter about his inability to make sense of an experience:

> I seem now to be at the daily Arts 6 Crafts seminar in some sort of back room of the Windsurf Café, and aside from noting that I seem to be the only male here under 70 and that the project under construction on the table before me involves Popsicle sticks and crepe and a type of glue too runny and instant-adhesive to get my trembling overcaffeinated hands anywhere near, I have absolutely no fucking idea what's going on.[71]

Here, Foster Wallace admits to not trusting his own perception to the degree that he denies that he understands anything. In both passages, Foster Wallace suggests that he sees it as his job to tell the reader not only about what he has experienced, but more importantly about what he has been unable to either experience or make sense of.

70 Foster Wallace, 270.

71 Foster Wallace, 337.

Along the same lines, Foster Wallace comments on instances in which he was unable or unwilling to narrate. While observing another cruiser in a Mexican port, Foster Wallace states that he "cannot convey to you the sheer and surreal scale of everything,"[72] hereby emphasizing the difficulty of separating signal from noise in his transmission. Later, when anticipating a formal dinner, Foster Wallace also reflects on the possible effects of his telling: "Look, I'm not going to spend a lot of your time or emotional energy on this," he tells a potentially male reader before advising him to "*bring Formalwear.*"[73] These two instances display Foster Wallace's awareness of the potential limits of his own basic narrating function as medium; namely, its potential to convey inaccuracies or simply to bore the reader. Overall, the display of such limits makes Foster Wallace appear aware of the differences between him and his surroundings and that of his readers, thereby producing potentially distancing effects.

However, Foster Wallace also attempts to close the distances that he exposes in these passages, by repeatedly invoking the possibility of immediacy. On a narrative level, this happens in those passages in which he aims to create spatial and temporal immediacy, by merging his experiencing and telling. One example is the text's very opening line:

> Right now it's Saturday 18 March, and I'm sitting in the extremely full coffee shop of the Fort Lauderdale Airport, killing the four hours between when I had to be off the cruise ship and when my flight to Chicago leaves.[74]

By placing a claim to temporal immediacy at the very beginning of the text, Foster Wallace implies that he wrote the entire piece at the Fort Lauderdale airport and that readers are reading it at the same time that he is writing it. This integration becomes unsustainable, however, when he later starts another paragraph about an experience on the ship that necessarily happened earlier: "Right now it's Thursday 16 March 0710h., and I'm alone at the 5C.R.'s Early Seating Breakfast, Table 64's waiter and towering busboy hovering nearby."[75] Foster Wallace allows the two timelines to collide, by applying another "right now" to a different time, thereby creating an impasse that ironically highlights his undertaking's inherent temporality. These attempts at creating immediacy

72 Foster Wallace, 310.
73 Foster Wallace, 347.
74 Foster Wallace, 256.
75 Foster Wallace, 320.

can be read as contradictory images. They are also critical comments by Foster Wallace about the bare possibility of his task of delivering an experiential postcard, since they emphasize the experiential gap between writer and reader.

Foster Wallace also engages with a potential solution to the experiential gap between himself and his readers by addressing them directly, invoking the potentially similar experience they would have in his place. When describing the sea off the Mexican coast, for instance, Foster Wallace suggests what the reader sees: "You can see why people say of calm seas that they're 'glassy.'"[76] Here, through a simple reference to the reader's vision and the common experience of seeing, the inversion of writer and reader appears to work. However, it gets more complicated when Foster Wallace describes his interaction with Winston, suggesting that the reader feels what he feels:

> Interfacing with Winston could be kind of depressing in that the urge to make cruel sport of him was always irresistible, and he never acted offended or even indicated he knew he was being made sport of, and you went away afterward feeling like you'd just stolen coins from a blind man's cup or something.[77]

Here, Foster Wallace describes a more complex feeling. By emphasizing this irresistible urge—which is understood to be universal—and Winston's reaction to that urge, Foster Wallace evokes a very specific feeling in the reader. Compared to the more objective phenomenon of sight in the passage above, this invocation of the reader's feelings appears to be more difficult. The very complexity of feeling highlights its intrinsically subjective character, one that could not be attributed to the objective seeing examined in the earlier passage. Here, the implication of the subjective nature of experience is more powerful than the potential closure of the experiential gap between writer and reader.

Foster Wallace's engagement with his transmitting function in his relationship with readers extends to the text's formal dimension, as Foster Wallace plays with the mediating specifics of text itself; he refers to or even analyzes other texts in order to highlight his text's intertextuality. With his footnotes, he points to his main text's supposed context. Furthermore, his idiosyncratic capitalization and italicization reflect any text's potential to emphasize and communicate prioritization.

76 Foster Wallace, 307.

77 Foster Wallace, 330.

At least some parts of Foster Wallace's text are not directly informed by his experience onboard, but by other texts. Foster Wallace mentions, for instance, that he has written papers on Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* and that he teaches Stephen Crane's short story "The Open Boat."[78] He lists both works because they appeared to have informed his association of the ocean with death and fear, thereby referring to a text's potential power to influence experience.[79] In the same vein, acknowledging the possible effects of texts on their readers, Foster Wallace addresses the aforementioned essaymercial by the writer Frank Conroy in a PR brochure.[80] The essaymercial's genesis is, in turn, rooted in another text. Conroy was commissioned to write the PR text for the cruise company, after having published a different article in a travel magazine.[81] Intertextuality is also alluded to by means of the generic forms of other texts that Foster Wallace imitates or quotes, such as the experiential log that he writes,[82] the label on the porthole's glass in his cabin that he provides,[83] or in the invitation to the hypnotist's presentation that he quotes.[84] He provides further context for this text by foregrounding different aspects of his own text's intertextuality. However, and more importantly, he also demonstrates the interplay between text and context, showing how they can be difficult to separate when text itself is the object of the experience conveyed through text.

This concern with the interplay of supposed text and context is also reflected in Foster Wallace's extensive use of footnotes. Applied to various ends, the use of footnotes suggests a commentary on the possibility of a kind of intertextual context. For instance, Foster Wallace uses them to communicate factual background,[85] his capability to memorize information about shark attacks,[86] the explanation of a word's meaning in brackets,[87] a simple rhetorical question directed at the reader,[88] a comment on his own propensity towards prejudice,[89]

78 Foster Wallace, 262.
79 Foster Wallace, 261.
80 Foster Wallace, 285–290.
81 Foster Wallace, 288.
82 Foster Wallace, 320–353.
83 Foster Wallace, 301.
84 Foster Wallace, 349.
85 Foster Wallace, 259–260.
86 Foster Wallace, 262.
87 Foster Wallace, 263.
88 Foster Wallace, 264.
89 Foster Wallace, 272.

the characterization of his fellow passengers through the narration of scenes at the dinner table,[90] or even a footnote within a footnote.[91] That these examples cannot be reduced to mere meta-narrative commentary, such as a reference, but instead include all kinds of narrative modes on different diegetic levels suggests that Foster Wallace at least partly uses footnotes in order to comment on their potentially arbitrary relationship to the main text. In fact, they mostly fulfill the particular meta-textual function that their formal difference suggests that they should. However, the occasional break with their reduction to this particular function suggests their openness to all sorts of potentially different textual functions. Once again, text and context—or meta-text—are difficult, if not impossible, to keep apart.

Foster Wallace not only highlights the potential sameness of text; he also points to its inherent difference and potential for subjective emphasis and judgment. His use of capitalization and italics are two particular areas in which this phenomenon is manifested. Italics, for instance, appear to be used to specify one particular aspect of a word's meaning. Early on, Foster Wallace writes that he has "learned that there are actually intensities of blue beyond *very, very bright* blue."[92] The emphasis achieved through the use of italics here evokes the color's intensity. The emphasis occurs in relation to other kinds of blue. Similarly, he foregrounds the effects of the reassurances on the part of the cruise staff that everybody is having a good time. "It's more like a feeling. But it's also still a bona fide product – it's supposed to be *produced* in you, this feeling."[93] Here, Foster Wallace emphasizes the conscious choice of the verb "produce" over and against other possible verbs and, thus, the impact of his argument.

By contrast, the unusual capitalization of a word's first letter signifies a generalization. When, as noted above, Foster Wallace writes that he was "trying to figure out whether it was Them or Just Me"[94] he alludes not to a specific conflict between him and other cruise passengers, but rather to the more fundamental dilemma of subjective judgment. This also applies to indirect capitalization, when Foster Wallace quotes and acknowledges something. For instance, he quotes from the room service menu "Thinly Sliced Ham and Swiss

90 Foster Wallace, 280–283.
91 Foster Wallace, 296, 306.
92 Foster Wallace, 257.
93 Foster Wallace, 260.
94 Foster Wallace, 258.

Cheese on White Bread with Dijon Mustard" and comments that "the stuff deserves to be capitalized, believe me,"[95] thus pointing to the general idea of a tasty sandwich. By highlighting such different formal features of text, Foster Wallace communicates an awareness of text's plural and ambiguous character as a technical medium, one that nevertheless remains permanently open to dialogue with itself. Foster Wallace further displays the capability of text to communicate the very subjective richness and complexity of human consciousness that he sees as being repressed in the objectifying PR brochures on board.

This case can also be made in relation to the overall communicative interaction that Foster Wallace envisions as taking place between himself and his readers. His excessive invocation of a dialogue, which is open to differences of meaning and its potential absence, can be read as a desperate urging on the part of an isolated subject to make and uphold human connection through dissemination.

Self-Reflection Against Alienation

The intense, occasionally even hyperbolic, ways in which Foster Wallace seeks to display an awareness of the different aspects of his role as a medium transmit an urgent concern with authenticity in which self-reflection has a relieving function. Importantly, he positions this display of self-reflection as human medium in contradistinction to the absence of the authentic experience on the ship. His detailing of his construction of an authorial self-identity engaging in a communal act of meaning-making with readers introduces a multifaceted critical perspective on the cruise experience that, in effect, appears both symbolically and materially inauthentic. The self-reflection of his mediate subjectivity functions as a potential means by which to cure the despair—the bodily manifestation of existential inauthenticity—that Foster Wallace describes feeling while onboard. This despair, in turn, stems from a feeling of alienation caused by the capitalist forces of the cruise industry. Having read Frank Conroy's essaymercial as "an ad that pretends to be art," Foster Wallace draws the following conclusion:

> This is dishonest, but what's sinister is the cumulative effect that such dishonesty has on us: since it offers a perfect facsimile or simulacrum of good-

95 Foster Wallace, 296.

> will without goodwill's real spirit, it messes with our heads and eventually starts upping our defenses even in cases of genuine smiles and real art and true goodwill. It makes us feel confused and lonely and impotent and angry and scared. It causes despair.[96]

As hinted at previously, the despair that Foster Wallace feels is a result of the experience of being turned into an object by being lied to. Foster Wallace argues with the entire cruise experience, which promises an unachievable "respite from unpleasantness,"[97] and claims that this objectification is a characteristic of the cruise economy and tourism more generally. For him, it is also a deep-seated aspect of American culture. In a port in Cozumel, Mexico, Foster Wallace describes how he feels ashamed of being associated with the mass of other passengers and how this has led him to try to distance himself in various ways. However, as he admits, this does not quite work:

> But of course all this ostensibly unimplicating behavior on my part is itself motivated by a self-conscious and somewhat condescending concern about how I appear to others that is (this concern) 100% upscale American. Part of the overall despair of this Luxury Cruise is that no matter what I do I cannot escape my own essential and newly unpleasant Americanness.[98]

Here, Foster Wallace indicates that the objectification he experiences onboard can also lead to a loss of self-esteem. This loss of self-esteem, the loss of interpersonal trust, and the loss of self-confidence, along with the suspicion that all of these losses cause, are the main problems with objectification in Foster Wallace's view. This loss, at least in Foster Wallace's case, leads to a feeling of alienation. The experience of existential inauthenticity has both inter- and intrapersonal roots and is reinforced by the ways in which the two interact.

The secondary display of self-reflection in the text, then, must be read as a reaction against Foster Wallace's primary experience of alienation. Thus, the form operatively *unveils* the content in Foster Wallace's text, right as his exposure to the aesthetics and contradictions inherent in every aspect of his role as medium make the cruise economy's narrowed and limited aesthetic and contradictory character apparent. As Foster Wallace suggests, the contradictions and weaknesses that he desperately experiences, exposes, and names, are not

96 Foster Wallace, 289.

97 Foster Wallace, 263.

98 Foster Wallace, 311.

to be lamented as objective disconnections, but, if acknowledged, instead contain the potential to produce connections between subjects, be it in the form of self-confidence or interpersonal trust.