

**At the podium or suffering on the Grid:
Postmodern politics and the affective carnivalesque in the encyclopedic novels of
David Foster Wallace and Thomas Pynchon**

by

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Abstract

Many critics of David Foster Wallace treat his encyclopedic novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) as an elaboration of his essay “E. Unibus Pluram,” in which he critiques his contemporaries for adopting the style of Thomas Pynchon’s “pop-conscious postmodern fiction” – epitomized by Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) – on the grounds that such fiction’s ironic relation to reality has been integrated into the status quo and, in this context, now privileges solipsism and inaction. In place of Pynchon’s ostensibly co-opted postmodernism, Wallace propounds an affect-rich aesthetic rooted in the utopian narrative principles of “sharing” and “identifying” at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings (Daverman; Raizman) that would interrupt the politically quiescent “waning of affect” that Fredric Jameson (1991) finds characteristic of postmodernity.

My study intervenes in the debate over the politics of postmodern affect in the critical aesthetics of Pynchon and Wallace by examining the nature and function of affect in each author’s treatment of carnivalesque images and the mode of grotesque realism (theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of the critical encyclopedism of the Renaissance novelist François Rabelais). I argue that although Pynchon’s parodic depiction of the carnivalesque, which points out the inefficacy of the traditional view of the carnivalesque’s subversive potential and the deeply problematic nature of the violent catharsis it privileges, may not provide a clear path to praxis, it does function as a placeholder for a systemic form of resistance; it also anticipates Wallace’s critique of the carnivalesque as a postmodern technique that has been co-opted by power. Moreover, I argue that not only does Wallace make the same critique of postmodernism that Pynchon made twenty years earlier, but Wallace’s positive project is also problematic because it

undermines any revolutionary potential belonging to carnivalesque affects by confining them within the scope of individual subject-formation, which moves *Infinite Jest* away from meaningful investment in macropolitics.

In chapter one, I summarize Bakhtin's theory, explore the formalist and Marxist readings of carnival as a cognitive mode of defamiliarization, and detail the role of affect in the Marxist critique of what I term the "cognitive carnivalesque." I then suggest that the role of affect in the carnivalesque might be rethought by exploring it in relation to Julia Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection. In chapter two, I investigate how Pynchon exemplifies the Marxist critique of carnival in satirizing both cognitive and affective carnivalesque resistance through the perversion of carnivalesque tropes, which he codes as unproductive. In chapter three, I draw connections between Wallace's account of metafiction in his essay "E. Unibus Pluram" and the cognitive dimension of the carnivalesque; illustrate how Wallace portrays the cognitive carnivalesque as one of the critical postmodernist concepts of Pynchon's era that has since been institutionalized by repressive, capitalist forces; and detail Wallace's employment of the affective grotesque to establish his novel's *Alcoholics Anonymous* narrative form. Finally, in the conclusion, I compare how Pynchon's and Wallace's carnivals operate as different forms of utopian space and gesture toward a way in which postmodern affect might gain true subversive potential.

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Introduction

Many cultural theorists find revolutionary potential in postmodernist art's ability to rupture or deconstruct the symbolic linkages associated with hegemonic power. Others, however, claim that this distancing effect, which characterizes not only postmodernist art but the postmodern condition as a whole, drains art of human emotion, and with it, praxis. Indeed, Fredric Jameson cites a "waning of affect" (11) that saps the political potential of postmodernist art and reveals that rather than opposing the system, postmodernist art is in fact complicit with the "cultural [...] logic of late capitalism" (48).

Carnavalesque fiction – literature that includes many of the grotesqueries Mikhail Bakhtin locates in the work of Renaissance novelist Rabelais – is an appropriate lens through which to explore the political potential of postmodernist art because it contains both a playful, cognitive aspect that seems to epitomize the postmodern condition and an affective component that challenges the veracity of Jameson's eulogy for postmodern emotion. The major question this paper will address is whether or not carnivalesque fiction can provide a powerful critique of postmodernity, and if so, what techniques it must employ; it will also address the role affect plays in determining an answer to this question.

Definitions of postmodernity vary wildly between disciplines and theorists. Most scholars, however, use the term as a periodizing concept to delineate the "supposed epoch that follows modernity," which itself follows the medieval period (Best and Kellner 2). The line between the two is blurred but one can make the general claim that whereas the grand narratives of social systematizing and Enlightenment rationality characterize

modernity, the privileging of multiplicity and fragmentation over any form of unity describes postmodernity (2). The move from modernist theory to postmodernist theory is one from the overarching binary oppositions of the “dialectic” to the local multiplicity of the “dialogic” (Docker xxi).

The privileging of fragmentation over unity appears not only in the realm of the social but also in the realms of subjectivity and culture. Indeed, some theorists conceive of postmodernity as entailing the death of the rational Cartesian subject in favour of reading subjectivity as purely a discursive phenomenon. Moreover, just as postmodernity exists only in relation to modernity, postmodernism “describe[s] movements and artifacts in the cultural field that can be distinguished from modernist movements, text and practices” (Best and Kellner 5). The means by which these movements can be differentiated is a site of critical debate: the primary questions revolve around “whether there is or is not a sharp conceptual distinction between modernism and postmodernism and the relative merits and limitations of these movements” (4). Indeed, if postmodernism is the “cultural [...] logic of late capitalism” (Jameson 48), many see “every position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatisation – as being also at one and the same time, and *necessarily*, an implicitly or explicitly political stance toward the nature of multinational capitalism today” (3).

One way in which postmodernist and modernist art – and politics – are differentiated is through their use of affect. Jameson represents the received view that “strong emotion is inconsistent” with postmodernity (Terada 1); Rei Terada, however, argues that emotion is not only present in postmodernity, but is actually more closely associated with the postmodern decentred subject than with the Cartesian *cogito*. Jameson

argues that postmodern art embodies a “waning of [the] affect” that imbued high modernist works such as Van Gogh’s “A Pair of Boots” and Munch’s “The Scream” (10). He therefore equates affect with modernist “alienation [and] anxiety” which necessarily “presuppose [...] a whole metaphysics of the inside and outside” (11). As a result, Jameson’s conceptualization of affect requires a “bourgeois ego, or monad” (15). The fragmented subject of the postmodern epoch, however, “liberat[ed] [...] from the older anomie of the centered subject,” is also freed from “every other kind of feeling, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling” (15). If emotion is aligned with “alienation and anxiety,” which lead to a resistant consciousness in the proletariat in the Marxist understanding of capitalism, this waning of affect is a victory of the capitalist, hegemonic order over any possibility for change (11).

Jameson does not claim that affect has disappeared entirely from postmodernity, but he does suggest that this emotion rooted in alienation, emotion with subversive potential, has been greatly reduced. Affects of individual anxiety have been replaced by affects that are “free-floating,” “impersonal” and “dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria” (Jameson 16). Jameson refers to this lingering affect in his discussion of Warhol’s postmodernist photo-negative “Diamond Dust Shoes” as having a “deathly quality” but also provoking “a strange, compensatory, decorative exhilaration” (10). Following Ceserani, Jameson charts “Diamond Dust Shoes” as linked to the terms “PLAY,” “IDLENESS,” “INDIFFERENCE,” and “PHOTOGRAPHY” and Van Gogh’s high-modernist “Boots” with “WORK,” “TRANSFORMATION,” and “SUFFERING” (10). Indeed, Jameson describes postmodern culture as embodying a “a new kind of superficiality” (10); five “fundamental depth models,” from dialectics to Freudian

psychology, have lost currency in postmodern theory, leaving nothing but multiple levels of surface with no connections between them (12).

In direct contrast with Jameson, Terada argues that affects beyond the “peculiar [...] euphoria” of endless superficiality (Jameson 16) still exist in postmodernity. She admits that postmodern emotion may appear to be a “symptomatic irruption, an unconscious contradiction,” but does not consider its existence a matter for debate (Terada 3). She states that “the classical picture of emotion already contraindicates the idea of the subject” (Terada 7) as emotion represents elements in classical philosophy that postmodern “theory argues fracture the classical model of subjectivity” (3). Historically, attributing emotion to the cognitive, Cartesian subject is far more of a theoretical outlier than attributing emotion to a decentred subject. Ultimately, then, in order to account for the existence of postmodern affect, emotion must be theorized as “nonsubjective” (3).

Indeed, Terada suggests that in the postmodern world of meta-everything, representations, even “deathly” representations (Jameson 10), can provoke emotion through “pathos” (Terada 13). Warhol’s “Shoes,” she claims, provoke pathos not directly, as Van Gogh’s peasant-worker’s “Boots” do, but on a second-order level, through their “inability to inspire sorrow” (Terada 14). Terada further unpacks this thorny postulation: “the less pathetic the end of pathos is, the more pathetic it is that it isn’t pathetic any more” (14). Any “ebbing of pathos” (14) or “waning of affect” (Jameson 10) creates more affect about the loss of earlier forms of affect. Ultimately, while Terada agrees with Jameson that emotional alienation effects can reveal the machinations of power, she

suggests that his eulogy is premature; affect still exists in postmodernity, both in the decentred subject and in a self-reflexive, second-order form, through representations.

Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival, connected, like Jameson's and Terada's formulations, to questions of art and politics, provides an optic through which to evaluate the political valence of representations of postmodern affect. Literary representations linked to the medieval carnival in Bakhtin's criticism can generate praxis. The carnival provides both a utopian space (the "Rabelaisian chronotope") and a means to break down power (inversion and laughter) (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 167). The Rabelaisian chronotope, rooted in agricultural language, describes a cyclical process in which death begets new life. Death, rather than being an abstract concept separated from life, as in the doctrine of the Medieval Church, forms part of a loose, organic unity. Decay produces fertilizer, which increases growth, and "everything that is good grows" (*Dialogic* 168). Bakhtin terms the literary technique that creates the Rabelaisian chronotope "grotesque realism" (*Rabelais* 21). A writer employs grotesque realism when mixing imagery of materiality – of the open body, sex, food, drink and death – which reinforces cyclicity and process. Carnival has a "negative," destructive aspect as well: the time of carnival is a time of inversion, of masquerade, when peasants dress as kings and all that is noble is satirized and brought down to the level of the bodily. While destructive, this "negative" aspect is politically positive and progressive.

Julia Kristeva is largely responsible for introducing postmodern theory to Bakhtin's work; she also provides a means by which to read the carnivalesque as affective. She theorizes a logic of "[a]mbivalence" that challenges Enlightenment rationality; Bakhtin's carnivalesque is the "only discourse integrally to achieve [this]

poetic logic” (Kristeva, *Desire* 65). More current theorists such as John Docker have used carnivalesque folk culture as a way to theorize the subversive political potential in entertainment mass media (284). Aligning the carnivalesque with postmodernist techniques such as metafiction, Docker focuses on their privileging of the surface, and their Derridean emphasis on play and opposition to any kind of centre: the “carnavalesque remains an always dangerous supplement, challenging, destabilising, relativising, pluralising single notions of true culture, true reason, true broadcasting, true art” (Docker 284). Kristeva’s concept of abjection, rooted in Lacanian psychoanalysis, reveals, moreover, that Bakhtin’s carnivalesque also has an affective strain; it opposes the symbolic order with anarchic and emotionally charged irruptions of the Real. This would suggest that the carnivalesque has subversive potential on both social/semiotic and psychoanalytic/affective levels.

Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) and David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) are two closely-related encyclopedic novels that employ carnivalesque images and the mode of grotesque realism to generate affect. Their aesthetics — which I will refer to as the “defeated carnivalesque” and the “narrative form of Alcoholics Anonymous” respectively — exemplify different moments and different critical responses to late twentieth-century hegemony. Thus far, critical appraisal of both works has followed Mendelson’s seminal claim that encyclopedic novels “originate in opposition to the cultures they later come to symbolize,” emphasizing the ways in which “oppositional” encyclopedic fictions are always at risk of co-optation by authority (“Encyclopedic Narrative” 1274). Many critics who compare Wallace to Pynchon thus treat *Infinite Jest* as a fictional elaboration of Wallace’s essay “E. Unibus Pluram,” in

which he critiques his contemporaries for adopting the style of Pynchon's "pop-conscious postmodern fiction" on the grounds that such fiction's ironic relation to reality has been integrated into the status quo and, in this context, now privileges solipsism and inaction (49). In place of Pynchon's ostensibly co-opted postmodernism, Wallace propounds an affect-rich aesthetic rooted in the utopian narrative principles of "sharing" and "identifying" at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings (Daverman; Raizman) that would interrupt the politically quiescent "waning of affect" that Jameson finds characteristic of postmodern political inertia and ideological mystification (Jameson 10).

Wallace locates the political within a psychoanalytic, humanist framework; in his view, human emotion is the only real subject for exploration in fiction:

I don't think I'm talking about conventionally political or social action-type solutions. That's not what fiction's about. Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being. ("An Interview")

Wallace disapproves of books like Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* that aspire to correct a slide into robotic consumerism merely by representing it ("An Interview"). Instead, he suggests that "[r]eally good fiction could have as dark a worldview as it wished, but it'd find a way both to depict this world and to illuminate the possibilities for being alive and human in it" ("An Interview").

This perspective illuminates not only Wallace's understanding of *American Psycho* but *Gravity's Rainbow* as well. Ellis's *Psycho* shows no emotion whatsoever; *Gravity's Rainbow* may incorporate significant emotional affect, but its "dark worldview" suggests that all possibilities are contained within the hegemonic System, and the novel therefore fails to fully "illuminate the possibilities for being alive and

human” (“An Interview”). Indeed, Pynchon turns all intense affect, which Wallace prizes, into parody, satire, and pornography.

Recent critical appraisals of Wallace, however, increasingly question the degree to which *Infinite Jest* functions as a radical example of the politicization of affect that Wallace endorses (Daverman; Holland; Theuwis). My study intervenes in this debate over the politics of postmodern affect in the critical aesthetics of Pynchon and Wallace by examining the nature and function of affect in each author’s treatment of carnivalesque images and the mode of grotesque realism. I argue that although Pynchon’s parodic, “defeated carnivalesque,” which points out the inefficacy of the traditional view of the carnivalesque’s subversive potential and the deeply problematic nature of the violent catharsis it privileges, may not provide a clear path to praxis, it does function as a placeholder for a broad, systemic form of resistance; it also anticipates Wallace’s critique of the carnivalesque as a postmodern technique that has been co-opted by power. Moreover, I argue that not only does Wallace make the same critique of postmodernism that Pynchon made twenty years earlier, but Wallace’s positive project is also problematic because it undermines any revolutionary potential belonging to carnivalesque affects by confining them within the scope of individual subject-formation, which moves *Infinite Jest* away from meaningful investment in macropolitics.

In chapter one, I summarize Bakhtin’s theory, explore the formalist and Marxist readings of carnival as a cognitive mode of defamiliarization, and detail the role of affect in the Marxist critique of what I term the “cognitive carnivalesque.” I then suggest that the role of affect in the carnivalesque might be rethought by exploring it in relation to Kristeva’s concept of abjection. In chapter two, I investigate how Pynchon exemplifies

the Marxist critique of carnival in satirizing both cognitive and affective carnivalesque resistance through the perversion of carnivalesque tropes, which he codes as unproductive. In chapter three, I draw connections between Wallace's account of metafiction in "E. Unibus Pluram" and the cognitive dimension of the carnivalesque; illustrate how Wallace portrays the cognitive carnivalesque as one of the critical postmodernist concepts of Pynchon's era that has since been institutionalized by repressive, capitalist forces; and detail Wallace's employment of the affective grotesque to establish his novel's Alcoholics Anonymous narrative form. Finally, in the conclusion, I compare how Pynchon's and Wallace's carnivals operate as different forms of utopian space and gesture toward a way in which postmodern affect might gain true subversive potential.

Chapter 1

“A burst of laughter and a mark of death”: Affect and politics in Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque

In the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival is a time of play, of parody and mockery, when everything that is high and abstract is brought down to the level of the low and material. Carnival exists in two different moments: the real, historical performance of folk festivity and the representation of carnivalesque forms in literature. According to the received view, this second moment is a cognitive process that challenges power through semantic inversion. Although Marxist writers have critiqued the cognitive view as misattributing inherent revolutionary potential to what is in fact merely licensed release, the affective element of the carnivalesque “release” needs to be rethought. I will first examine the Formalist and Marxist readings of cognitive carnival, as well as the Marxist critique of the carnival as a release valve for affect, before constructing a psychoanalytic affect-based reading of carnival.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of “folkloric time” (*Dialogic* 218) and “grotesque realism” (*Rabelais* 21), based on his study of the Renaissance writer Rabelais, provide a framework for discussing the progressive potential of materiality. In the early modern era, Bakhtin claims, the social structure was held together by “false associations established and reinforced by tradition and sanctioned by religious and official ideology” (*Dialogic* 169), abstract connectors that regulated and hierarchized “natural” relationships and cycles. The progressive solution Bakhtin locates in Rabelais’s fiction is a return to “folkloric time” (218). In this natural, communal temporality, there is “no landscape, no immobile dead background; everything acts, everything takes part in the unified life of

the whole” (218). Whereas hegemonic power fractures natural connections, folkloric time reinforces the unity of life.

Bakhtin suggests that Rabelais attempts to recover folkloric time by returning “meaning to the body” (*Dialogic* 171). Rabelais, he claims, works to destroy “all of the habitual matrices [...] of things and ideas” and to “creat[e ...] unexpected” ones (169). He does so through freeing material objects from the strict, established connections of the dominant ideology and allowing them to “touch each other in all their living corporeality” (169). Bakhtin terms Rabelais’s focus on this material aspect of reality “grotesque realism” (*Rabelais* 21). Grotesque realism concerns “the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs” (21). Its major principle is “degradation, [...] the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; [...] a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body” (19). By “degradation,” however, Bakhtin means not “absolute destruction” but bringing the high and abstract down to the level of “the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth takes place” (21).

Bakhtin points out six “series” of materiality in Rabelais’s writing: the human body itself, food, drink, defecation, death, and copulation (*Dialogic* 170). Violent acts that physically open up the human body to the unity of life, such as those represented in Rabelais’s “precise anatomical descriptions” of stabbings, privilege materiality in this way (172). Similarly, “grotesque allegorization,” in which elements of the outside world enter the body through the mouth, also reinforces the unity of life (171). The food and drink series connect the body series to the defecation series. Taking food into the body and excreting it again is a primary part of the cyclicity of folkloric time. The defecation

series is intimately connected to the death series as well: the word “shit,” in fact, refers back to the same root as “schism”; to defecate is to separate living from dead matter. Rabelais also brings death back into the temporal world through laughter. He positions death “within the [...] life series” (*Dialogic* 194) through “highlighting [...] the comic aspects of death” (193). Whereas hegemonic power positions death hierarchically above and outside of life, Bakhtin sees death in Rabelais as “made out of the same stuff as life itself” (193). Death therefore becomes merely part of the material cycle that also includes birth. The strongest connection to fertility and life comes, however, from sexuality, the primary positive, constructive element in Rabelais’s work. Indeed, “no matter what themes are discussed,” sexual references “always find a place for themselves in the verbal fabric” (*Dialogic* 190).

All six of these series represent degradation in its cyclical capacity. When the body imbibes food or drink, its interior physical processes break down the nutrients and evacuate the rest; excrement then functions as fertilizer for other life. Likewise, after death, the body decays, releasing its nutrients into the soil. Depicting death as comic keeps it firmly planted within the material and prevents it from being abstracted and co-opted by hegemonic ideology. Finally, sex results in the creation of life. Therefore, all six series are intertwined in a natural cycle from which abstract, hegemonic thinking seeks to distance us – the utopian space of folkloric time.

The second major aspect of folkloric time is carnival laughter. Bakhtin claims that prior to the early modern period, parodic, unofficial forms were continuous with official forms: in the “early stages of preclass and prepolitical social order[...] the serious and comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally ‘official’”

(*Rabelais* 6). The Medieval Church, however, privileged the serious forms over the comic during quotidian life; the folk carnival became the only outlet for “forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter” (5). The carnival was “a second world and a second life outside officialdom” (*Rabelais* 6) in which laughter performed a similar function to the series of materiality: laughter degraded the abstract connectors of hegemonic power so that the mixing of the series of materiality could create new connections between the good, material things of the world (*Dialogic* 169-170).

Although Bakhtin refers to his positive project of “folkloric time” (*Dialogic* 170) as “utopia[n]” and wholly universal (*Rabelais* 265), his concept of carnival laughter also includes the potential for destruction, for historical resistance to hegemony. Indeed, Michael Holquist claims in his prologue to *Rabelais and His World* that the book is an “attempt to show the ways in which the Russian revolution had lost touch with its roots in the people and a valiant effort to bring the folk with its corrosive laughter back into the work of politics” (xxii). Although Bakhtin never mentions his own epoch, for obvious political reasons, Holquist reads into his writing an attempt to explode the “militant propriety” of the Stalinist conception of folk culture with its “diametric [. . .] oppos[ite]” (xix). Indeed, Bakhtin stresses that as carnival laughter is “linked with the bodily lower stratum” (*Rabelais* 20) its movement is one of “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (19). Carnival laughter’s displacement of the high to the level of the bodily and its destruction of “abstract associations” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 169) may be explicitly theorized as universal and utopian, but the underlying meaning is that its historical effect is parodic, “corrosive” (Holquist xxii), sapping the power of a specific official discourse.

The formalist cognitive reading of Bakhtin similarly suggests that the political valence of carnivalesque writing stems not from the creation of a utopian space but from the revelation of hegemonic ideology through defamiliarization. Indeed, formalism focuses on Bakhtin's demonstration of how Renaissance literature in particular borrows from the carnival, which "afforded a stock of themes and devices which permitted [...] the subversion of [the] fixed hierarchies" of dominant ideology through exaggeration, parody and inversion, or in other words, "defamiliarization" (Bennett 67). The shocking, grotesque formal elements of carnivalesque writing therefore have "concrete social, political and ideological determinants" (73) which make up "a firm material base" (67) – not a material base linked to the bodily, as Bakhtin ostensibly claims, but a material base linked to specific "social, political and ideological relationships" (74). According to the formalist tradition, carnivalesque writing is therefore nothing but good Marxist fiction, for it uses the semiotic vocabulary of carnival to make evident the contradictions ("fixed hierarchies") of historical power (67).

Just as in the formalist view, the main political effect attributed to the carnival in Marxist criticism is the exposure of hegemonic ideology, but Marxists ascribe this progressive potential more to the use of the theory of carnival as an optic through which to read texts, than to carnivalesque literature itself. In the Marxist view, defamiliarizing Renaissance texts are not inherently progressive; reading them through Bakhtin's framework is what lends them political weight. Carnival becomes "not simply [...] a ritual feature of European culture but [...] a mode of understanding, a positivity, a cultural analytic" (Stallybrass and White 6). The major significance of Bakhtin's study is "its broad development of the 'carnavalesque' into a potent, populist, critical inversion of

all official words and hierarchies in a way that has implications far beyond the specific realm of Rabelais studies” (7). Bakhtin then provides a lens for a concrete, historical mode of examination; it is a practice of “reading which aims to render [a] passage troublesome by discovering contradictions within the text is a political intervention” itself (Bennett 119). Unlike in the formalist view, such a reading “does not restore to the text contradictions which were ‘always there’ but hidden from view”; instead “it reads contradictions into the text” (19). For Marxists, the political potential of a cognitive theory of carnival as a critical framework is therefore far greater than that of carnivalized literature itself.

The Marxist cognitive reading of the carnivalesque also argues for the inefficacy of top-down “revolutionary” art that comes from the privileged. Stallybrass and White claim that political change is tied to “control of the major sites of discourse”; as a result, “the endless ‘rediscovery’ of the carnivalesque within modern literature is but a common trope within that particular site of discourse” (202). Because successful writers are by and large members of the middle class, their writing, carnivalesque or not, comes from a bourgeois site of discourse. Middle-class authorship therefore typically undermines the revolutionary potential of carnivalesque writing, regardless of form or content.

As Marxists see carnivalesque writing itself as at best politically neutral and at worst complicit with power, many believe that the most important political contribution to arise from Bakhtin’s work is, in fact, the example of Bakhtin’s work itself. In accordance with Holquist, who sees *Rabelais* as an attack on Soviet ideology, Robert Young and Terry Eagleton locate the book within its own historical and material context as “an attempt at direct political intervention” (Young 78). Bakhtin “pits against that

official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism whose unspoken name is Stalinism the explosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious” (Eagleton 144). That the book was suppressed by the authorities for many years “testifies to its potential political effectivity at a particular historical moment” which is “the real force of carnival in Bakhtin” (Young 79). When “[d]ehistoricized and extracted as a [...] general principle of revolutionary textual politics, carnival is unworkable and untenable” (79). In the Marxist reading, therefore, Bakhtin’s theory of carnival is progressive only if one casts Bakhtin as a carefully situated “Marxist” critic.

Furthermore, most Marxist critics align themselves with the claim that popular festivity actually functions as a release valve that perpetuates hegemonic domination; in this critique, however, they gesture toward an understanding of the affective as well as cognitive aspect of carnival and the carnivalesque. The release valve model views carnival as a “licensed affair, [...] a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off,” which implies a cathartic release of repressed emotion that could be extrapolated to characterize carnivalesque literature as well (Eagleton 148). Although no Marxists explore the affective portion of the carnivalesque beyond implicitly accepting that it must generate affect if it generates catharsis, the release valve model is widely accepted: many scholars question “whether the ‘licensed release’ of carnival is not simply a form of social control of the low by the high and therefore serves the interests of that very official culture which it apparently opposes” (Stallybrass and White 13). Regardless of this containment relation, the Marxist acknowledgement that there *is* an affective aspect to the carnival and the carnivalesque is theoretically very significant.

As both formalist and Marxist readings of the cognitive carnivalesque fail to fully explore the affective elements of carnivalesque literature, I turn to the psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva first to illustrate how the carnivalesque represents an alternate logic to Enlightenment rationality, the dominant organizing principle of Western civilization, and then to show that the horrific affects of the carnivalesque can be mapped onto Kristeva's concept of the abject, and carnival laughter mapped onto her apocalyptic laughter.

Kristeva supposes that there is a logic completely *other* to the rational, binary perspective of Western philosophy and hegemonic power, a logic that has roots in the carnival and is expressed in carnivalesque writing. In "Word, Dialogue and the Novel," Kristeva claims that Western philosophy is based on "God," "History," "Monologism," "Aristotelian Logic," "System," and "Narrative" (Kristeva, *Desire* 88). The other logic is characterized not so much by terms that directly invert this hegemonic set as by concepts that problematize them and make them ambiguous. Indeed, she pairs "Practice" with "God," "Discourse" with "History," "Dialogism" with "Monologism," "Correlational Logic" with "Aristotelian Logic," "Phrase" with "System," and "Carnival" with "Narrative" (88). The hegemonic side of each pair reflects totality and linearity while its partner suggests competing meanings, contradiction and ambiguity. Ultimately, Kristeva's logic is one of "[a]mbivalence" that challenges established forms of language, and therefore how society thinks of itself (88).

The intertextuality of literary language and its relation to the carnivalesque is the primary means Kristeva uses to explain this logic. Kristeva notes that the "poetic word" is "polyvalent and multi-determined, adher[ing] to a logic exceeding that of codified

discourse and fully com[ing] into being only in the margins of recognized culture” (*Desire* 65). She further claims that Bakhtin “was the first to study this logic” and that “he looked for its roots in *carnival*” (65). Indeed, the carnivalesque is the “only discourse integrally to achieve [this] poetic logic” (65). As carnival “transgresses rules of linguistic code and social morality” (65), there is “identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law” (70). Kristeva agrees with Bakhtin that the “polyphonic novel” is particularly well suited to representing this logic of ambivalence (71). From this perspective, carnivalesque writing has political power; it does not just reveal ideology in a specific historical text the way Marxists see the theory of carnival, but actually challenges the discursive basis of ideology as such by unsettling the entire symbolic system.

Trying to define this logic is challenging because of its very *otherness*. Indeed, “one of the fundamental problems facing contemporary semiotics is precisely to describe this ‘other logic’ without denaturing it” (Kristeva, *Desire* 89). John Jervis discusses the possibility of a similar, transgressive logic, but he leaves it in the domain of the cognitive. He refers to it as “a state of confusion, where the categories are mixed up, the boundaries blurred, showing how ‘contrasts dissolve at the point of origin’” (Duerr qtd. in Jervis 27). John Docker’s reading of carnival also sets ambiguity against Enlightenment rationality (283); and Mary Russo’s likewise sets the heterogeneous communal laughter of carnival against cold, ironic, individual laughter (333); but they too theorize the carnivalesque as unsettling hegemonic cognition with a different form of cognition. As the Marxist critique presents the cognitive carnivalesque as both contained and co-opted by hegemonic power, any solution that lies in the same domain is open to the same critique.

Carnival can be understood not only as a more open form of cognition, however, but also, based on Bakhtin's concept of "unity-in-difference" (White 232), as a heterogeneous unity based on dialogue and its ability to evoke strong affects in readers. In Bakhtin's work, meaning arises only "between people, intersubjectively" – it arises through heterogeneity, but also always through the grounding notion of a common humanity (231). Bakhtin therefore privileges a kind of "unity-in-difference" in his concept of folkloric time (232). White claims that

an ultimate political perspective of humanity as a unity-in-difference, a complex of co-existing and mutually understanding cultures, is [...] important to any radical politics. A politics of pure difference which refuses to theorise the unity-in-difference of humanity ends by replicating the individualism of the self-sufficient bourgeois ego—a dangerous fiction if ever there was one. (233)

A "politics of pure difference" (233) could describe not only the bourgeois ego but also its major social correlate: free-market capitalism. Because of the dangers of both "pure difference" and "false universalism," it is as difficult to conceptualize Bakhtin's "unity-in-difference" as it is to conceptualize Kristeva's alternate logic (233).

Cognitive vocabulary cannot adequately express this unity-in-difference, and as a result, Bakhtin turns to a vocabulary of affect. Indeed, Bakhtin "is critically aware, throughout his life's writing, of the inadequacy of purely cognitive models to that grand narrative" (White 233). His response is to "reflect" words "from the traditional humanist vocabulary": "tone, emotion, evaluation, response, the music of intonation" (233). He therefore privileges works that "capture the heterogeneity of competing

evaluative-expressive forms and evoke response in a way that, as yet, 'theory,' overdetermined by the purely cognitive and a general linguistics, has not managed to achieve" (234). Therefore, Bakhtin's carnival constitutes a loose, organic unity based on a logic of dialogue and its ability to generate powerful affect in readers. How exactly this affect arises in Bakhtin's carnival becomes clear upon examining Kristeva's concepts of the abject and of apocalyptic laughter in her *Powers of Horror*.

Kristeva's abject has two major similarities to Bakhtin's grotesque, which forms a central part of carnival and the carnivalesque: the privileging of ambiguity and a focus on the material. Bakhtin's grotesque body is a body of open orifices; it is

not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed and completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 26).

The grotesque, then, like communal carnival festivities, threatens the Cartesian conception of the subject, which forms the basis for rationality's belief in the individual. It is a body of ambiguity, a body open to the cyclicity of nature, open to both elements of life and of death.

The abject performs a similar function, and also does so through a type of openness: it threatens the subject's security within the symbolic order. The strongest example of the abject Kristeva gives is that of the corpse because it functions as a powerful reminder of the fleeting nature of consciousness: it is "death infecting life"

(Powers 3). A corpse is abject because it is a person, but not a *conscious* person – it is a person whose consciousness has departed and whose body’s fluids are exposed, leaching out, its interior open to the recycling power of maggots and the bacteria which allow the processes of decay and putrefaction to take place, removing even the surface appearance of individuality from the cadaver.

As well as openness, materiality is also a shared attribute of the grotesque and the abject. The guiding principle of grotesque realism is “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of the earth and body” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 19); to the level of the human body, food, drink, defecation, death, and copulation (*Dialogic* 170). Likewise, the abject is concerned with “blood and pus [... and] shit” – with the body and its fluids (Kristeva, *Powers* 3). Its bodily connection, however, reaches beyond semantic inversion to Lacan’s Real – “the domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation” (Lacan qtd. in Evans 159).

The abject would be critical to the theorizing of politics and carnival because of its connection to the grotesque alone, but where it becomes integral is in the fact that even literary representations of the abject can cause a bodily affect in the reader. The portrayal of corpses in the work of Artaud causes abjection: it “provokes horror[;] there is a choking sensation that does not separate inside from outside but draws them the one into the other, indefinitely” (Kristeva, *Powers* 25). Encountering the abject, even the representation of the abject, can cause the reader to physically *feel*: they experience “spasms in the stomach, the belly; [...] all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire [... , a]long with sight-clouding dizziness” (3). Abjection has two articulations, which I will term “troubling”

abjection and “hegemonic” abjection. The experience of encountering a corpse, the irruption of the Real into the symbolic, is “troubling” abjection; the attempt by the Cartesian subject to then reject the elements that “trouble” it in order to maintain the illusion of subjectivity is “hegemonic” abjection.

Although the primary affect of Kristeva’s abject is horror, and Bakhtin’s carnival is more closely associated with laughter (Harpham 71), Kristeva theorizes a connection between the two; she details how the abject is inseparable from “*piercing laughter*” in the carnivalesque fiction of Louis-Ferdinand Céline (*Powers* 133). Her overall thesis is that Céline’s writing style “does not merely report but actually *produces* the abjection it so relentlessly explores” (Becker-Leckrone 51). The “carnival of [Céline’s] *Guignol’s Band*” (Kristeva, *Powers* 137), however, provokes not only terror but also “horrified laughter, the comedy of abjection” (204), which Kristeva also terms “apocalyptic laughter” (204). Indeed, laughter “is a way of placing or displacing abjection” (8). Kristeva cites the reader of *Guignol’s Band*’s inability to discern whether “Titus van Claben’s combination of orgy, murder, and fire express[es] the horror of a sickening human condition” or if it is “an extravagant farce about a few cookies who are more or less smart” (138). Bakhtin’s carnival laughter is equally “ambivalen[t]”; it is distinguished from the “pure satire of modern times” by being “also directed at those who laugh” whereas the modern satirist places herself *above* her target (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 12). Likewise, for Kristeva, in the absence of clear moral judgment, horrified “laughter bursts out, facing abjection, and always originating at the same source [: ...] the gushing forth of the unconscious, the repressed, suppressed pleasure, be it sex or death” (*Powers* 206). Apocalyptic laughter arises from the same space as the abject – the Lacanian Real.

Céline may have fallen out of fashion in contemporary criticism, but Kristeva's framework for interpreting it is still immensely valuable. As Megan Becker-Leckrone observes, "[f]or the exhilarating promise and power Kristeva persists in finding in Céline, [...] *Powers of Horror's* critical vision *itself* has more to offer than the writer she examines so exhaustively" (89). The laughter of carnival, according to this optic, not only mocks and parodies, bringing the high down to the low, but also penetrates through the symbolic order and accesses the disruptive powers of the Real. Ultimately, if Kristeva considers abject both the elements of Bakhtin's series of materiality and the form of laughter they provoke, one could reasonably claim that the carnivalesque itself is a phenomenon of abjection – "a burst of laughter and a mark of death" – and thus a phenomenon of affect that challenges the tyranny of the symbolic order (Kristeva, *Powers* 138).

As a result, if Bakhtin's "unity in difference" can be described only with a vocabulary of emotion, and carnival itself is a phenomenon of abjection, carnivalesque literature gains a rationale for its visceral affects – not horror at the mere transgression of social norms but horror of the abject, which threatens the bourgeois ego; not laughter of pure joy but ambiguous, apocalyptic laughter in the absence of moral absolutes (White 232).

While Kristeva's account of abjection illustrates how the subversive reading of carnival is deeply rooted in affect, it does not, however, embody the "solution" to the Marxist critique of Bakhtin any more than the formalist view does. The formalist view presents a cognitive carnivalesque that uses defamiliarization to expose hegemonic ideology; once the "stock of themes and devices" drawn from the carnival are no longer

shocking and instead appear in commercial art turned out by the capitalist machines against which Marxist theory aligns itself, the carnivalesque loses its subversive potential (Bennett 67). The Kristevan reading of carnival is troublesome for a different reason; it focuses on the psychological world *inside* the subject; while heightened readerly affect may have valuable political implications, it also risks containment within the private consciousness of the reader, which prevents its translation into meaningful action. The Marxist critique of carnival, which focuses on the macropolitics of production in the world *out there*, is therefore still valuable; its imagining of carnival as a contained popular blow-off provides both an explanation of Pynchon's satire of the carnivalesque mode in *Gravity's Rainbow* and a critique of David Foster Wallace's utopian use of the affective grotesque in *Infinite Jest*.

Chapter 2

Getting Fucked: Pornography as critique of carnivalesque resistance in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*

The Pulitzer Prize jury voted to award Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* the Pulitzer Prize in 1973, but their decision was overruled by the board, who deemed the novel "turgid," "obscene," and "unreadable" (Kihss qtd. in Stonehill 141). "Turgid" is an especially apt term to describe a novel that is preoccupied with phallic imagery, both in its depictions of human sexuality and in its thematic focus on the Nazi rocket program. Indeed, *Gravity's Rainbow's* most prominent plotline follows Tyrone Slothrop, a promiscuous American intelligence officer tracking rocketfalls in London near the end of the Second World War, as he deserts the military – under the impression that a vast, multinational conspiracy referred to as "The Firm" (Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* 14) is targeting him – and embarks on a hedonistic romp through the "Zone" (283) of Allied-occupied Germany, taking part in a wide variety of material indulgences. In accordance with the unrestrained behaviour that characterizes the Zone, Pynchon originally titled the book "Mindless Pleasures" (Siegel 120). *Gravity's Rainbow* may indeed be turgid, or at least, preoccupied with turgidity, but it is hardly a masturbatory paean to the unsettling pleasures it illustrates, which range from violent rape to pedophilia, incest, and coprophagia; the obvious admixture of the series of materiality in these examples suggests a carnivalesque oppositional energy to *Gravity's Rainbow*. Indeed, virtually all Pynchon scholars agree that *Gravity's Rainbow* is concerned with questions of political action; many suggest that Pynchon uses a cybernetic framework to set up an opposition between the rational, capitalist order epitomized by the Firm and the unpredictable cultural resistance embodied by the "Counterforce" (*GR* 727).

Although Pynchon depicts a binary in which one side is clearly systemic and the other revolutionary, he does not present the carnivalesque resistance of the Counterforce as a feasible solution to hegemonic technocracy. Indeed, the Counterforce does not oppose the Firm in the name of political change; it is instead motivated by a universalized, humanistic yearning for authentic experience in an affect-impooverished postmodern environment. Pynchon describes the Counterforce as a “green uprising” (*GR* 735), but although it is associated with life and therefore positioned as antithetical to the death-world of technocracy, its pretension to universality deprives it of any political traction; its performances take place in isolation and either have no historical effect on the power relations of material reality or actually support the hegemonic order. *Gravity’s Rainbow*, despite incorporating many carnivalesque tropes, is therefore not a carnivalesque novel in the same way as Rabelais’s *Pantagruel and Gargantua*. Instead, Pynchon’s work is a *satire* of the carnivalesque novel which follows the Marxist critique in highlighting both the inefficacy of the cognitive carnivalesque as well as the deeply problematic nature of carnival’s violent catharsis. It does so through the perversion of carnivalesque tropes into nonproductive pornography. Pynchon’s project is not wholly pessimistic, however; although his parodic “defeated carnivalesque” may not provide a clear path to praxis, it does function as a placeholder for the utopian possibility of a broad, systemic form of resistance to come.

This chapter will first set out the cybernetic Firm/Counterforce opposition, then explore how the Counterforce is associated not only with mathematical interference but also with the organic carnivalesque. Next, it will illustrate how several sexually explicit sections of *Gravity’s Rainbow* pervert both the cognitive and affective carnivalesque into

pornography, coding them as contained by hegemonic power, just as pornography itself is entrapped within a containment relation between the explosive transgression of social norms and the patriarchal male gaze (Prince; Mulvey). Finally, it will evaluate the political potential that still remains in the “defeated carnivalesque.”

The cybernetic influence in *Gravity's Rainbow*'s characterizations of the Counterforce and the Firm is unsurprising as Pynchon references the work of early cyberneticist Norbert Wiener in his introduction to *Slow Learner*, a collection of Pynchon's short stories written before, but collected several years after, the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon states that his early short story “Entropy” is “mostly derivative of what [Wiener ...] had to say” (*Slow Learner* 14). Indeed, “[a] pose [Pynchon] found congenial in those days [...] was that of somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline [; ...] Wiener's spectacle of universal heat-death and mathematical stillness [...] seemed just the ticket” (14). Knowing that Pynchon was familiar with Wiener's work makes the number of critics who read the Firm versus Counterforce dichotomy in cybernetic terms understandable. Before elaborating on how the opposition is constructed, however, I will briefly explain five terms in Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950) that are necessary to understanding the criticism: order, progress, entropy, variability and probability.

Wiener defines order as “a lack of randomness”; order is therefore comprised of repeating patterns (21). Information is the “measure of the regularity of a pattern” over time, and thus is used as a measure of order (6). The more regular a pattern, the less random it is, and the more information (and therefore the more order) it contains.

Progress is interlinked with order; it is “an assessment of the direction of change of the world according to certain values” (Wiener 20). In the modern era, change is seen as linear and following the rules of cause and effect (33). This conception of progress is reflected in the goal of Western society: “consistent and unrestrained exploitation [...] of natural resources; [...] conquered so-called primitive peoples; and finally, [...] the average man” (35). All of these forms of exploitation tend toward exhaustion; they actually increase disorder rather than creating order (5).

Entropy is the positive measurement for disorder; as order decreases, entropy increases (Wiener 22). According to the second law of thermodynamics, “an isolated system will tend to a state of maximum disorder; or in other words, to the greatest homogeneity possible” (22). Over time, entropy increases and order decreases until the system reaches “universal heat death” in which no more energy is being circulated (22). The universe, like the Western idea of progress, tends toward dissolution and exhaustion.

Although eventually entropy will reach a maximum, some physicists claim that local pockets of resistance can temporarily reverse the trend toward disorder (Wiener 25). One way in which this local resistance can occur is through variability. The kinds of “permanent individual restrictions” that make up order “condemn the human race to [...] throw [...] away the greater part of our variability and [with it ...] our chances for a reasonably long existence” (61). Variability and fluidity of function and experience create the “new and interesting” (23) which temporarily reverses the trend toward absolute dissolution (61). If we are to embrace variability, we must replace the binary logic of cause and effect with a different structure – probability. Cooper quotes another of Wiener’s works:

Boltzmann in Germany and Gibbs in the United States ... convincingly applied the idea of statistically probable or ‘contingent’ courses of a system: one certain past does not lead inevitably to one certain future, and physics now no longer claims to deal with what will always happen but rather with what will happen with an overwhelming probability. (qtd. in Cooper 113)

Overall, then, Wiener pins the hope for a different future on the open forms of variability and probability over tightly controlled binaries and the logic of cause and effect.

Although Pynchon admits that he “happened to read Norbert Wiener” and used some of his ideas in an early short story, one cannot use this fact as conclusive evidence that Pynchon’s project in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is similarly aligned (SL 14). Indeed, he notes that “people think [he] know[s] more about the subject of entropy than [he] really do[es]” (12). Many of the critics do seem to use a Wienerian framework to read *Gravity’s Rainbow*, however: readings presented by David Porush, Peter Cooper, Mark Richard Siegel, Molly Hite, and Steven Weisenburger apply the five elements of Wiener’s theory to Pynchon’s work with remarkable consistency. The Firm’s adherence to order and progress is often demonstrated with reference to the Pavlovian scientist Edward Pointsman; the Counterforce’s commitment to variability and probability often appears in connection with the statistician Roger Mexico.

The Firm – the military-industrial complex, the various “tech-cartels for who[m] the Second World War was only a profit venture” (Porush 132) – represents the latest iteration of the Enlightenment desire for totalizing order. The British Pavlovian scientist Edward Pointsman epitomizes the shadowy group: “Pointsman cannot live with

uncertainty on an emotional or an intellectual level[;] he is an obsessive-compulsive personality who seeks to control his environment” (Siegel 77). Indeed, Pointsman, “who’s even explicitly named after the binary switcher at a railroad junction” (Stonehill 1-2), can see life only in terms of “one and zero” (Pynchon, *GR* 56). Pointsman and the members of the Firm, then, represent the certainty of order, of binaries, of the “digital domain of on or off” (Stonehill 9).

The Firm is also associated with the capitalist conception of progress; in accordance with Wiener’s beliefs, it increases entropy under the guise of establishing order. Just as Western civilization privileges “consistent and unrestrained exploitation” (Wiener 35), the Firm “steals vital energy from the rest of the world to increase Their own power” (Siegel 102). Life within the rational system of Pointsman and his compatriots is similarly characterized by a line from Rilke: “‘Once, only once ...’ One of Their favorite slogans. No return, no salvation” (Pynchon, *GR* 420). Although the Firm is associated with hegemonic power, “even Their control may be out of control” (Cooper 62). The “System may or may not understand that it’s only buying time” and that “sooner or later [it] must crash to its death, [...] dragging with it innocent souls all along the chain of life” (Pynchon, *GR* 419).

Understandably, the parabolic arc is a recurring metaphor throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “the arc of the V-2 rocket, [...] with its sharply defined origin and terminus, could claim to be the twentieth century’s model of linearity” (Hite 97). Indeed, the arc “symbolizes disease, dementia and destruction” (Weisenburger 11). Ultimately, then, the Firm’s ordered system of linear exhaustion is inherently negative as it hastens the trend

toward entropy and heat death. The obvious connection between the Firm and hegemonic thought makes Western civilization complicit in its own demise.

Following a Wienerian model, whereas the Firm is characterized by order, binaries, progress and exhaustion, the Counterforce is characterized not by total entropy but by variability and probability – by the “excluded middles” that lie “between the hyperbolic extremes of an absolute, externally imposed [...] order and total chaos” (Hite 16). Indeed, Pointsman’s coworker, statistician Roger Mexico, and the other members of the Counterforce challenge the Firm by “violating the behaviour that They would predict, by creating uncharacteristic patterns within the regimen They have set up – hopefully initiating singularities, interference (‘noise’ in Their information system)” – in essence, through variability (Siegel 19). Indeed, Mexico quite literally “piss[es] on Their rational arrangements” by getting up on the table during a Firm meeting and urinating all over the guests (Pynchon, *GR* 651).

If Mexico’s behaviour reflects variability, his vocation embodies the logic of probability: as a statistician, he calculates the distribution of rocket-falls around London. Mexico’s “Poisson equation,” Pynchon’s narrator notes, “will tell, for a number of total hits arbitrarily chosen, how many squares will get none, how many one, two, three, and so on” (*GR* 56). This equation is of course a probability equation, and what Pointsman refers to as Mexico’s “symbols of randomness and fright” (57). Mexico lives in the “domain between zero and one,” the realm between total improbability and certainty (56). It is therefore natural for the narrator to term Mexico the “antipointsman” (56). Ultimately, Mexico embodies “our civilization’s latent possibilities for reversing the trend” toward entropy; in probability thinking, everything is contingent: “things do not

have to be the way they are” (Cooper 73). If things do not have to be the way they are, as Mexico’s probability analysis implies, there is hope for a different future.

Although in some ways compelling, a purely cybernetic reading of the Firm/Counterforce opposition in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, rooted in mathematics, fails to account for the materiality associated with the Counterforce’s connection to life, as it reads grotesqueries such as Mexico’s Rabelaisian urination on members of the Firm as no more than “noise” or “interference” (Siegel 19). Significantly, however, the Counterforce is described as a “Green uprising” (Pynchon, *GR* 735) that is “at least as strong as our death-dealing civilization” (Cooper 57), which suggests that it should be theorized in agricultural language, the language of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque folkloric time. Likewise, the hegemonic power of the Firm can be theorized according to the same model; the Firm’s domination operates through “false associations established and reinforced by tradition” that are “sanctioned by [...] official ideology” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 169). The Firm’s “progressive” exhaustion of the system recalls Bakhtin’s assertion that whereas “everything that is good grows,” the “bad [...] degenerates, thins out,” and “in this process, its real-life diminution is compensated by false idealization in the other world” (168). Viewed through a Bakhtinian optic, the Counterforce’s subversive potential is derived from its association with the cognitive aspects of positive, utopian materiality and destructive laughter, as well as the affective aspect of cathartic release.

Indeed, if the linear system of the Firm can be represented by an arc – “according to the general theory of relativity, the Euclidean straight line is warped into a curve by the presence of a gravitational field” (Hite 97) – the Counterforce’s system is seen as its

opposite: fully cyclical. As in the natural, communal temporality of folkloric time, there is “no landscape, no immobile dead background; everything acts, everything takes part in the unified life of the whole,” and death and decay always beget new life (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 218). There is a cyclical materiality in the Counterforce that opposes the Firm’s exhaustion of the world.

The Counterforce’s “Green uprising” (Pynchon, *GR* 735) involves not only cyclical movement, however, but also material, cyclical movement, which is embodied by the recycling of waste, by “salvation in [...] filth and garbage” (Cooper 91). Indeed, the bananas grown by Counterforce member Captain Prentice that grow in sows’ manure and soldiers’ vomit suggest “a kind of gentle phallic procreativity” that tells death ““to fuck off”” (Siegel 81). In this instance, the series of food (bananas), excrement (manure), drink (vomit), death (soldiers) and sex (phallic procreativity) all “touch in all their living corporeality” to illustrate a growth that challenges the abstract view of death as outside of the cycle of life (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 169). Pynchon’s “junkpiles” oppose “the linear motion of entropy and exhaustion with the circular motion of recycling” (Cooper 217). Ultimately, “the members of the Counterforce want to recover that which is most important to most of us – a sense of everyday reality that is not debased by Their touch” (Siegel 117). Therefore, the Counterforce embodies a positive, utopian descent into the series of materiality.

The Counterforce also incorporates the destructive aspect of the carnivalesque in its resistance against the Firm. Counterforce members Roger Mexico and Pig Bodine manage to “disrupt the most official of dinner parties with the most nauseous and unofficial language” (Mendelson, “Gravity’s Encyclopedia” 189); they effect their escape

by voicing various grotesque food suggestions which in a “gross violation of [both] literary and social decorum” (173) are sexual, bodily, and defecatory, such as “menstrual marmalade,” “afterbirth appetizers,” “vegetables venereal,” “toe-jam tarts,” and “diarrhea Dee-lite” (Pynchon, *GR* 731). All the while, “they are grinning at each other like fools,” “fe[e]l[ing] high in the good chances of death,” (729), talking in a “light sing-song,” and “playfully hounding the holdouts” (730). Clearly the Bakhtinian conjunction of the food, sexuality, body, and defecation cognitively violates the hegemonic matrix of associations; the “Disgusting Duo”’s comic language and laughter mock the elites and drag them down to the level of the material, even as characters dramatize the abject affect such noxious conjunctions produce (731). Indeed, the names of the dishes cause the attendees to be incapacitated due to copious “spasms of yellow bile foaming out of [their] nose[s]” (731) among the sounds of “well-bred gagging” (730). One guest, “Lady Mnemosyne Gloobe[,] ha[s] a seizure of some kind” (731). Their bodily reactions are similar to Kristeva’s model of abjection, which includes “spasms in the stomach [and] the belly” (*Powers* 3).

The affects of *Gravity’s Rainbow* are not performed purely within the text, however; affects are evoked in the reader as well. While not as *visceral* as the abject affects experienced by Lady Mnemosyne Gloobe and her compatriots, the novel’s representations of the carnivalesque also generate limited joyful affects. All of the comic forms associated with Bakhtin’s cognitive carnivalesque “structure for the reader feelings of escape, possibility, future life, potential redemption” (McHugh); indeed, *Gravity’s Rainbow* contains

many elements of plenty of sex and drugs and jazz, a surfeit of wildly imaginative skits about giant adenoids and trips down the toilet, slapstick

scenes replete with pillows and seltzer water and cream pies, numerous witty rhymes, silly songs, and “Rocket Limericks” mockingly celebrating the dark side of the fun. (McHugh)

The narrative voice, similarly “fooling around with language ‘a-and’ mocking the characters with wry editorial interjections” is “playful, mischievous, erudite, [and] often obviously delighted” (McHugh). Clearly the Counterforce is associated with the oppositional energy of both the cognitive and affective carnivalesque, but a closer analysis of Pynchon’s treatment of affect reveals the problematic nature of carnivalesque forms.

Indeed, a close reading of several carnivalesque sections of *Gravity’s Rainbow* suggests that the novel in fact *satirizes* the techniques of the Counterforce by perverting them toward exhaustion and hardcore pornography. In doing so, Pynchon aligns himself with the Marxist critique of carnival; he portrays carnivalesque forms as a type of licensed release that not only dissipates energy that could otherwise challenge hegemonic power in historical ways but also does so in a manner that can be dangerous and politically counterproductive.

The cognitive perversion of cyclicity occurs in two ways: through pure, undisguised exhaustion and through an overabundance that also leads to entropy. Representations that mix the series of materiality in unexpected and grotesque ways, unless they connect to growth and conception, have no positive potential. Mixing imagery of food, drink, violence, sex, death, and excrement without any actual conception and growth taking place perverts folkloric time into exhaustion; these depictions become nothing more than deeply disturbing fetishes. Second, although in

Bakhtin, “everything that is good grows” (*Dialogic* 168), the political potential of this growth and abundance can be contained by the logic of progress. The actions of 1960s counterculture movements, on which Stefan Mattessich claims the Counterforce is modeled, “no matter how outrageous” actually “express [...] the deepest superfluous tendencies of the society they outraged” (Roszak qtd. in Mattessich 3). Indeed, the “principle political mode of the day” was an “‘overstuffing’ farce or folly, [...] an escalation in culture of freedom, of pleasure, of innocence” (3), which describes the Bakhtinian carnival perfectly. Progress is an overabundance that leads to exhaustion, a linear growth without any negative-feedback mechanism that ends in a slide toward entropy. The depiction of positive feedback loops rather than negative-feedback loops ironically represents not the cyclicity of folkloric time but the straight line (or arc) of official death and exhaustion.

Carnavalesque forms can be perverted not only cognitively toward linear exhaustion, but also affectively into pornography — which itself, as sex without procreative potential, is also aligned with linearity. Depictions of sexuality in literature can generate pleasure from transgression but that transgression can be contained, as in filmic pornography, by the patriarchal, hegemonic “male gaze” theorized by Laura Mulvey:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and

displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (33)

Mulvey points out how in film in general, women are shown in fragments, an arm here, an eye there, a leg here, as “(passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man” (38). When men are portrayed, however, they are seen as “figure[s] in a landscape,” always in control, representing “the so-called natural conditions of human perception” (Mulvey 34), or, in other words, bourgeois subjectivity.

This equation is especially clear in filmic pornography, which is predominantly “made and consumed by men” and is thus “heavily reflective of male desires and fantasies” (Prince 33). The etymological root of “pornography” is, tellingly, “writing on the bodies of whores” (Ferguson 14). Indeed, the “fetishization of the female body is also frequently cited as evidence of the dominance of the male gaze in pornography” (Prince 34), which, “[i]n its more hardcore manifestations [...] degrad[es] and humiliat[es] women,” in an “aggression [which] reaffirms the power of the phallus” (Ellis qtd. in Prince 31).

Just as hardcore pornography is often associated with male violence against women, so too is carnival, which illustrates how its cathartic aspect is extremely problematic. Indeed, Stallybrass and White point out that the rape of women and degradation of minorities were common during carnival: they therefore critique it for “its uncritical populism” as “carnival violently abuses and demonises weaker, not stronger, social groups – women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who ‘don’t belong’” (19), a fact that many who claim progressive potential for carnival overlook, just as many who

claim progressive potential for pornography overlook both its implicit messages about female worth and the conditions of its production.

Accordingly, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop's role in the carnivalesque Thursday festival embodies an overt linkage of the series of materiality in a folkloric context, but his actions fall under significant political limitations. Slothrop is convinced to wear a pig costume when he visits a small German town on the date of the festival: the children of the village "prod [Slothrop's] stomach and ask him to be 'Plechazunga, the Pig-Hero'" (Pynchon, *GR* 577) because they think he is "the fattest man in the world" (578). He is given "liquid brain damage" to overcome his nervousness, as well as enough food that he feels a "tight aching across his asshole" (579). He then enjoys an "hour's game of hammer-and-forge with [...] TWO healthy young ladies" (579). Here Pynchon represents the convergence of the bodily, food, drink, and sex, all within a folkloric environment.

There are several elements that contain the potential of this carnival, however. Since the previous pig-costume-wearer "got drafted [...] and never came back" (Pynchon, *GR* 577-578), the pig-hero, symbol of the low and the material, is helpless in the face of authority: he may be the hero of the carnival but he must obey the higher calling of the war machine as "the Man has a branch office in each of our brains" (727). Slothrop is no hero either; when the police arrive and break up the carnival, "busting the proceedings" as "the White Market" of capitalism "must be protected" from the organic, folk marketplace, Slothrop flees (580). There is no Bakhtinian growth from this episode nor any historical political effect: the carnival is contained in short order by the police,

and Slothrop, a pig but not a hero, merely enjoys material pleasures and departs. He takes from the community, and is therefore complicit with exhaustion.

For the reader, the scene is comic in its absurdity, but any carnivalesque potential is contained by its use of the pornographic mode; the reader finds pleasure in the actions of a man who hides from authority by having sex with a girl who is “seventeen, fair, easy to hurt” (581), a girl who says “I want to go with you” when he leaves and to whom he gives the “drifter’s lie,” “Maybe I’ll be back” (583). Indeed, while Slothrop’s “sex and drug trek” through the carnivalesque atmosphere of the Zone may “combine [...] pleasure and transgression acted out in the fashion of the postmodern avant-garde, in the public sphere, at times in direct confrontation with the authorities,” Slothrop “also faces evidence that he is complicit” with “the patriarchal power of the Rocket” (McHugh). Early in the novel, Slothrop keeps a map of all of his sexual conquests throughout London that matches up exactly with Roger Mexico’s map of rocketfalls (Pynchon, *GR* 22); Slothrop gets an erection in advance of each rocket strike and manages to find a sex partner each time. McHugh asks, however, “What happens to the women Slothrop desires after he leaves and the Rocket arrives?” His analysis reveals that Slothrop’s behaviour is “evidence of [...] hippie life and [...] free love as just another flavor of male vanity and power” (McHugh). If the reader enjoys Slothrop’s travels, they are also complicit with the hegemonic tendency toward death and exhaustion. Even if they are unsettled by Slothrop’s behaviour, which because of its linkage of fluids and death transgresses the norms of the symbolic order, the subversive political effect is limited. Slothrop’s romp does not defamiliarize or draw attention to the machinations of hegemonic social structures; it presents “Mindless Pleasures” (Siegel 120) for their own sake, as an escape

from the real historical inequalities of both postwar Germany and capital-happy 1970s America that ends up complicit *with* them.

This theme is further developed in another slapstick scene that combines the series of sex, violence, drink and defecation when Margherita Erdmann disciplines her pre-teenage daughter Bianca, and sets off a convoluted orgy on the ship “Anubis” (Pynchon, *GR* 469). She first “yanks down white lace knickers [so ...] little-girl buttocks rise like moons [and] the tender crevice tightens and relaxes” (474). Margherita then proceeds to lash Bianca with a ruler, “the skin so finely grained that white centimeter markings and numerals are being left in mirror-image against the red stripes with each blow” (475). The maximalist attention to anatomical detail recalls Rabelais (and therefore Bakhtin), and this style continues in the following section, in which everyone on the ship becomes “kind of aroused” by Bianca’s punishment and, in a 250-word sentence, begins to have sex (467). This scene includes, for instance, “two adorable schoolgirls [...] with each of the banker’s big toes inserted now into a downy little furrow as they lie forward along his legs kissing his shaggy stomach, pretty twin bottoms arched to receive in their anal openings the cocks of the two waiters[...]” (467).

Clearly in this instance the series of bodily violence begets sex, which could be read as the progressive co-option of violence toward growth, but the important aspect here is the focus on ejaculation in or on sites other than vaginal openings: “as for Slothrop, he ends up coming between the round shuddering tits of a Viennese girl [...] his sperm surging out into the hollow of her arched throat” (475). Satirically, it is the toes of a banker, associated with patriarchal capitalist power, who is stopping the two girls’ “downy little furrow[s]” (467) from receiving any life-promoting semen. The sex here,

even if it seems to resist control through an overflowing of pleasure, is barren and complicit and thus coded as “decadent.” Furthermore, the ship itself is called the “Anubis” (469); it is named for the jackal-headed guardian of the Egyptian underworld, which associates it with the Kingdom of Death. The orgy is literally contained within a structure promoting death.

Again, this scene is comic, but it is also designed to trap the (male) reader who finds pornographic pleasure in barrenness, in the fragmentation of women into “round shuddering tits” and “arched throats” and “downy little furrows” in an exercise of false freedom that is contained within a structure representing exhaustion (Pynchon, *GR* 475). Indeed, the narrative voice of *Gravity’s Rainbow* specifically suggests the male reader’s complicity in enjoying the pornographic mode: it “can be almost as pained and accusatory as a Greek chorus, as in th[e] comment on Bianca addressed [...] to the reader, particularly the male reader, who may have enjoyed Slothrop’s sexual adventurism, including his S/M pleasures and nymphet fetish” (McHugh). Indeed, twelve-year-old Bianca is said to favour “you, alone, [...] chuckling *count me in*, unable, thinking *probably some hooker* ... She favors you, most of all. You’ll never get to see her. So somebody had to tell you” (Pynchon, *GR* 480). The reader is therefore complicit when, shortly after the orgy, adult Slothrop and pre-teen Bianca have violent sex, and he “pulls Bianca to him by her nipples and bites each one very hard” (478). Ultimately, the carnivalesque and abject behaviour on the Anubis is separated from the possibility for historical action by the river upon which the ship floats. With no witnesses, the irruptions of the Real have no impact on the social structures linked to the patriarchal symbolic order.

The defecation, death, food and sexual series also touch each other in the representation of Brigadier Pudding's fetishistic sexual relationship. Brigadier Pudding is a senile British officer who is kept out of the way of interfering with the Firm's plans by Pointsman, who has employed a woman to urinate and defecate on him in order to keep him sexually satisfied. Again, in true Rabelaisian style, Pynchon describes one of the Brigadier's trysts with the woman in stomach-churning, abject detail:

He leans forward to surround the hot turd with his lips, sucking on it tenderly, licking along its lower side [...] The stink of shit floods his nose [...] It is the smell of Passchendaele [...] mixed with the mud, and the putrefaction of corpses [...] The turd slides [...] down to his gullet. [...] She orders him to masturbate for her. [...] The Brigadier comes quickly. (Pynchon, *GR* 238)

Later on, Brigadier Pudding dies of an E. Coli infection (Pynchon, *GR* 542). In Pudding's story, four of the series of materiality touch and interpenetrate but they do so in a *spinning-backwards* of the cycle of folkloric time. Instead of food transforming into excrement, which becomes fertilizer for new life, Pudding's coprophagia illustrates excrement transforming into food during the act of barren sex, which results in death. The mixing of series has been co-opted as Pointsman set the backwards cycle in motion; the only historical, political effect of Pudding's coprophagia is that the Brigadier, who could conceivably interfere in Pointsman and the Firm's operation, is out of the way.

The effect on the reader is undeniable here: abject terror of the intersection of death and life. Indeed, the narrator later notes that "[s]hit is the presence of death, not some abstract-arty character with a scythe but the stiff and rotting corpse itself in the

whiteman's [...] own asshole" (Pynchon, *GR* 701). This equation of excrement and death expresses the irruptions of the Real into the symbolic order that abjection describes; bourgeois subjectivity and the social hierarchies it privileges are threatened by representations of the body fluids that remind the reader of mortal limits. Regardless, a private *memento mori* does not necessarily lead to praxis. Exposure to intense affect leaves Pudding in the realm of the affective; the woman asks him to tell stories from the Great War, but she does not want to hear about the sociopolitical implications as much as the private, psychoanalytic ones: she "doesn't seem to care for mass slaughter as much as for myth, and personal terror" (236).

Personal terror is also generated materially in the film *Alpdrücken* to ambiguous political effect. The German scientist Pökler sees Margherita Erdmann's *Alpdrücken*, in which she is violently raped and tortured by men in animal masquerade, then proceeds to go home and impregnate his wife, thinking "bitch [...] I'll whip you again whip you till you bleed," which mixes the series of bodily violence and sex (Pynchon, *GR* 403). In fact, he is fantasizing that it is "Margherita Erdmann underneath him" (403). Later, he wonders "[h]ow many other men [...] carried the same image back from *Alpdrücken* to some drab fat excuse for a bride? How many shadow-children would be fathered on Erdman that night?" (403). His daughter Ilse was conceived through Pökler's violent fantasy, much as Margherita's daughter Bianca was conceived during the filming of *Alpdrücken* – her father is the "Grand Inquisitor" who "tortured" Margherita (401).

Unlike in the far more comic and carnivalesque orgy on the Anubis, the violence here does lead to life force in the conception of Bianca and Ilse, but it is a problematic life force within historical limits, which is alluded to by Pynchon's use of the term

“shadow-children” (GR 403). *Alpdrücken* illustrates how even the positive life force embodied in conception can be always already contained by patriarchal, hegemonic discourse – the cathartic blow-off of affect during carnival can be released in extremely unproductive ways, such as violence and rape. Furthermore, Ilse’s and Bianca’s births are contained within the hegemonic system; indeed, Bianca is killed by the Firm (Pynchon, GR 492). Ilse is used for slave labour to build rockets – machines promoting control and death – in the “re-education camp” Dora, likely “beaten and violated” in the same way in which Margherita is treated in the film (435).

The narrative voice implicates the reader in enjoying the horrifying violence against women that takes place in the film: “of all her fathers, Bianca is closest to you” (Pynchon, GR 480). Since the film falls under the category of hardcore pornography, Pökler and the other male audience members quite literally “project [their] fantas[ies] onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 33), imagining their wives, whom they characterize as “drab” and “fat” (Pynchon, GR 403), as beautiful images they can torture without fear of recrimination. This is far from the utopian life of Bakhtin’s folkloric time, which is predicated on an image of the “fruitful earth and the womb[, ...] always conceiving” (*Rabelais* 21).

The rocket songs sung by American soldiers who have taken over Nazi rocket factories similarly embody a Bakhtinian combination – laughter, sex and death – in a problematic manner. Most of these are limericks about young men who are in sexual love with various parts of the V-2 rocket. As the rocket and its gravity-curved path are symbols of death and destruction, most of the young men accordingly suffer damage to their reproductive organs. Here the drive toward sexual pleasure is converted into pure

death drive, into a drive toward linear exhaustion. An example is the “fellow named Slattery / Who was fond of the course-gyro battery. / With that 50-volt shock, / What was left of his cock / Was all slimy and sloppy and spattery” (Pynchon, *GR* 315). These songs, though sexual, and invoking laughter, represent sexuality so barren that it destroys the young men’s capacity to procreate. Of course, the act of physical union with a rocket represents complicity with rocket power, with the linear path of exhaustion. The fact that these songs are sung by those who, in supporting rocket development, are on the side of the Firm, illustrates the co-optation of carnivalesque strategies by powerful interests.

On an emotional level, the rocket songs do produce a comic affect; McHugh describes them as “mockingly celebrating the dark side of the fun.” The reader soon realizes, however, that it is not in fact pleasure in “the dark side of the fun” (McHugh) that he or she is experiencing; it is pleasure in self-annihilation, pleasure in complicity with hegemony, pleasure in The Bomb, pleasure in the containment of all growth. Ultimately, like Pudding’s late-night rendezvous, the rocket songs represent the generation of an intense affect linked to political quiescence. Perhaps carnivalesque elements in the rocket songs generates an intense affect that can be described as apocalyptic laughter, but the creators come from a bourgeois site of discourse; they represent the hegemonic project that led to the possibility of mutually assured destruction. Any irruptions of the Real into the symbolic order lead not to a politically-charged defamiliarization of the social structures aligned with rocket power and material action but to either private enjoyment of sexual mutilation and the fetishization of death-machines, or doomed terror without the possibility of action.

Although the major political force of Pynchon's work is his echoing of the Marxist assertion that both the utopian positivity of grotesque realism and the satiric potential of destructive laughter are complicit with exhaustion and therefore have no historical effect on hegemonic power, *Gravity's Rainbow* also alludes to the existence of a political postmodern affect that is compatible with that same critique with the story of "Byron the Bulb" (Pynchon, *GR* 660). Byron's "story is an allegory of the conflicts of discourse and power that the novel as a whole explores more fully and historically" (McHugh). Byron is a lightbulb who becomes aware of his entrapment in and dependence on the hegemonic system that "uses Enlightenment as a ruse in service of social control" (McHugh). The allegory of Byron is a very transparent one – he is quite literally dependent on power in the form of the corporate electric "Grid" he must plug into in order to generate the light needed for human progress (Pynchon, *GR* 663). McHugh charts how Byron moves through Romantic (revolutionary), modernist (alienated), and postmodernist (fragmented) forms of resistance and discovers that each form is just as impotent as the last. In the postmodern moment, Byron "succeeds in exploring new identities, new frequencies[; ... n]o longer restricted to a single, unified, integrated Bulb in solidarity with other Bulbs, he is liberated to a multiple, fragmented identity" (McHugh). Now Byron is "condemned to go on forever, knowing the truth and powerless to change anything. [...] His anger and frustration will grow without limit, and he will find himself, poor, perverse bulb, enjoying it...." (Pynchon *GR* 668). Indeed,

Byron goes further, into the realm of postmodern affect[. ... He] knows, and feels the pain of knowing, that the power of the multi-nationals is inescapable; yet he himself has eluded that power. [...] Potential

liberation rests with his own futility and frustration. His continued oppression is the indication of his potential freedom, his failure the ground for his hope, his anger and frustration the condition of possibility for his perverse pleasure. (McHugh)

Byron therefore experiences Terada's form of postmodern affect which exists in the *absence* of a subjectivity. It is not an affect associated with the enjoyment of pornography, as is evoked elsewhere in the novel; if it is related to any fetish, it is related to masochism. Unlike Brigadier Pudding, however, Byron enjoys the struggle *against* power, not his repression by it. Byron no longer follows the Cartesian *cogito*; he does not exist (and resist) because he forms individual, subjective thoughts; he exists (and resists) because of the intense affect he feels, based on an understanding of the injustice of the hegemonic relations of production.

Byron, who appears at first a nonsensical aside as the book deconstructs itself into fragments, is the true hero of *Gravity's Rainbow*; his final understanding of the situation mirrors Pynchon's own. Byron, "through his immortality" gains a Marxist "historical consciousness" (McHugh) akin to the encyclopedism of Pynchon's novel, which "implies the existence of a new international culture, created by the technologies of instant communication and the economy of world markets" (Mendelson, "Encyclopedia" 165) – the capitalist technocracy of the Firm. Byron can likewise "see more clearly the pattern of repression" in this environment "in its full breadth" (McHugh). Even though the current state of affairs, in which "the Grid is wide open [and] all messages can be overheard" (Pynchon, *GR* 668) and "there is no material and no cultural outside" (McHugh), prevents any concrete political action, Byron remains, *feeling* the contradictions in the

system, waiting for the conditions to be suitable for material intervention. Byron, with his postmodern affect, his masochistic “pain of knowing” (McHugh), is therefore a *placeholder* for future resistance.

Byron’s postmodern affect arising from historical knowledge is more political in Pynchon’s view than the universal social resistance embodied in folkloric culture, which can be, at best, apolitical and a distraction from the relations of production and the technocratic project of exhaustion, and at worst, complicit with the inhuman degradations implicit in power. Indeed, Byron is a good Marxist: he understands the inequalities of the system and he is *enraged* by it. His lack of political action comes from its physical impossibility at one historical moment, not an inherent problem with the mode of encyclopedic knowledge and the intense affect it evokes. Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* therefore not only provides a Marxist critique of the carnivalesque mode, both in its cognitive and affective incarnations, but alludes to the possibility of future fiction that generates affect not through stock carnivalesque tropes but through encyclopedic knowledge of the relations of production.

Chapter 3

“In nose-pore range”: The affective carnivalesque in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*

Whereas *Gravity’s Rainbow* is set three decades before its publication date, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* takes place a decade after. In the early years of the new millennium, Canada, America and Mexico have amalgamated into the Organization of North American Nations, or O.N.A.N., under the leadership of a germophobic president. Johnny Gentle runs on a campaign promise of creating “A Spotless America that Cleaned Up Its Own Side of the Street” (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 383); once he is elected, however, he turns New York State and Vermont into a giant toxic dump, and then, as part of “Interdependence” (394), pressures Canada to take ownership of it.

Within this environment, the novel follows three major interlinked story lines. The first involves Quebecois separatist insurgents searching for the master tape of “Infinite Jest,” a video that is so addictive that its watchers cannot stop viewing it until they die from dehydration (Wallace, *IJ* 993). Their plan is to reproduce it on a grand scale as a terrorist weapon, aiming to provoke the United States into threatening retaliation against Canada, which would give the separatists more leverage against the federal government. The deadly effect of the tape was not foreseen by its creator, Dr. James Incandenza, who made it to draw his son Hal out of what he saw as a descent into solipsism (but which Hal saw as a parental delusion), before committing suicide due to the psychic pain of alcohol withdrawal. The second storyline follows Hal, now a 17-year-old, as he grapples with life at a prestigious tennis academy in Boston after giving up his daily marijuana habit. The final narrative strand centres on Don Gately, an ex-con and recovering oral narcotics addict who works at the Ennet House Drug and Alcohol

Recovery House (located at the bottom of the hill upon which the tennis academy sits) and the house residents under his care.

The novel begins at its chronological end, after Hal has lost the power to speak; although he can think clearly and articulately, he can communicate only with “marginally mammalian” noises (Wallace, *IJ* 15). The narrative then skips a year to fill in the events that led to this state of affairs, but none of the three story lines reach any form of closure. The opening, which is told from Hal’s point of view, implies that Gately and Hal find “Infinite Jest” together in the grave of Hal’s father, but the two never even meet within the text. This implication is supported by Gately’s premonition of himself and Hal digging at the physical end of the novel, while he is also unable to vocalize his thoughts while recovering from a gunshot wound in the hospital. Why Hal loses the power to speak is also never explained; the three main options suggested in the critical literature are that Hal accidentally viewed “Infinite Jest,” he ingested a potent and dangerous hallucinogen, or experiencing life without the buffer provided by substance abuse eventually caused a mental breakdown. Finally, whether the Quebecois gain access to the master tape is never resolved either; all the reader knows is that in Gately’s vision, Hal and Gately are trying to avoid something extremely unfavourable happening.

Buried within *Infinite Jest’s* encyclopedic complexity is an attempt to intervene in the situation that Pynchon depicts – to explode the limits that restrain the liberating power of the affective grotesque. Pynchon’s novel posits an “us vs. them” relationship between the transgressive, anarchic (and ultimately futile) Counterforce and the technocratic rationality of the military industrial complex; Wallace instead takes a psychoanalytic approach, locating the same conflict on the plane of individual subject-formation. *Infinite*

Jest seems to work from the claim, late in *Gravity's Rainbow*, that "The Man has a branch office in each of our brains" (Pynchon, *GR* 727) to develop, first, how The Man's hegemonic power operates in the media-saturated environment of the 1990s, and second, what alternatives exist to it.

Wallace's poetics are widely recorded; most critics point to his 1993 essay on television and subsequent interview with Larry McCaffery as forming the mission statement for his entire oeuvre. In both texts, Wallace argues that the self-reflexive techniques of the "patricidal" works of the pioneers of metafiction, among them Thomas Pynchon, have been co-opted by dominant media institutions ("An Interview"). Wallace therefore suggests that Pynchon's work at one time *did* have political potential but, problematically, aligns its political potential with the cognitive carnivalesque representations of the Counterforce, which Pynchon actually parodies, no matter how sympathetic he is to its aims.

Operating under this problematic assumption, Wallace claims that contemporary metafiction does no more than recycle the same ironic, self-reflexive tropes of writers like Pynchon without any positive effect. Furthermore, he suggests that metafiction is complicit with hegemonic power, trapping readers in self-reflexive loops symptomatic of the wider solipsism and apolitical inaction which he diagnoses as a serious problem facing American culture today. According to Wallace, then, two decades after the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, postmodern irony has replaced Enlightenment rationality as the major method by which "the Disease [Wallace's term for rationality mixed with self-reflexivity] makes its command headquarters in the head" (*IJ* 272). Any

narrative form of resistance must therefore oppose not only Wienerian notions of control and progress, but also the ironic distance that nullifies any affect that could lead to praxis.

Wallace locates this resistance in a seemingly paradoxical addition to the carnivalesque: the tenets of narratives presented in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Although several critics (Raizman; Boswell; Daverman) do discuss the role of Alcoholics Anonymous as a narrative solution to postmodern irony in *Infinite Jest*, none connect the grotesque elements of the AA narratives to either Bakhtin's carnivalesque or to the Lacanian Real that underlies the carnival's power, and has been repressed by both rational and metafictional discourses.

Several scholars do link Wallace and Bakhtin (Nichols; Raizman; Cioffi), but, like most theorists of carnival, frame their analysis within the realm of the cognitive. My own reading builds on Catherine Nichols' argument that the cognitive carnivalesque elements of *Infinite Jest* (those elements that unmask power and are linked to parody) are synonymous with the ironic distance and apolitical play of metafiction, against which Wallace positions himself. As I argue, however, Wallace attempts to locate beneath the cognitive carnival of postmodernity a resistant consciousness rooted in abject affect; this resistant consciousness becomes visible in the narratives of speakers at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, which utilize carnivalesque representations to privilege a humanistic affect of egoless "Identification" (*IJ* 345). AA narrative ultimately runs against the principles of Wallace's nonfiction, however; it functions not as a recuperation of carnivalesque resistance but as a further critique of the affective carnivalesque – in fact, the same critique Pynchon makes. Wallace attributes a political valence to affect in his nonfiction that Pynchon explicitly challenges in *Gravity's Rainbow*, but its fictional

expression in *Infinite Jest* belies that claim; whether consciously or not, both Pynchon and Wallace ultimately suggest that carnivalesque resistance is possible, but only in private, psychological terms. Carnavalesque representations may generate a burst of affect but it is incapable of rupturing the Man's stranglehold at the political level.

This chapter will first examine how Wallace portrays hegemonic power and solutions to it in his nonfiction manifestos, then determine how the critics read *Infinite Jest* through the lens of Wallace's nonfiction. It will then examine the cognitive carnivalesque in *Infinite Jest* in general, before specifically evaluating the affective carnivalesque in the explicitly "Irony-free" narratives of Alcoholics Anonymous members (Wallace, *IJ* 369).

Most critics use the debate over the political valence of postmodern irony as a framework within which to read *Infinite Jest*. The reason for this unanimous thematic approach to Wallace stems from the confluence of his 1993 essay "E. Unibus Pluram" and an interview with Larry McCaffery, in which he sets out with remarkable consistency his creative manifesto, which opposes the apolitical stasis which he claims is engendered by the empty irony of contemporary metafiction with affect. Wallace's diagnosis of the problem can be reduced to three major claims that depict the co-option of metafictional techniques by powerful interests. First, in the 1960s, postmodern fiction writers used irony and self-reflexivity to break down the monologic associations of power. Then, by the 1980s, commercial television (and the larger discourses of power embodied in contemporary media) had co-opted these techniques, bankrupting their liberating potential. Finally, self-reflexivity is now associated with contemporary American solipsism and political inaction, and thus complicit in a repressive system.

Wallace follows postmodern theorists like Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon in detailing how the pioneers of metafiction employed ironic distance and self-reflexivity to break down the repressive, monologic depictions of America perpetuated by 1950s television. According to Waugh's seminal study, metafiction is "fictional writing which self-consciously [...] draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2). This negative capacity of irony is related to Bakhtin's carnivalesque, which "permit[s ...] the subversion of [the] fixed hierarchies" of hegemony through the process of "defamiliarization" (Bennett 67). Metafiction itself, therefore, can be seen as a form of the cognitive carnivalesque.

As well as exploring the constructed nature of narrative, "such writings [...] also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (Waugh 2). Because of the massive perspective shift these writings engendered, which Wallace likens to the introduction of "divid[ing] by zero" into mathematics, "stuff like [Nabokov's] 'Pale Fire' [...] was valuable as a meta-aesthetic breakthrough the same way Duchamp's urinal," a carnivalesque example itself, "had been valuable" ("An Interview").

Metafiction and self-reflexivity are also inextricably linked to irony, Wallace's chief theoretical target. Indeed, Wayne points out that Paul de Man's definition of irony is "'the recurrence of a self-escalating act of consciousness' [...]; the ironic consciousness [...] 'dissolves in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and it can find no escape from this spiral'" (qtd. in Wayne). Metafiction has therefore long been criticized for "being only interested in

narcissistic, self-reflexive games” even though “these devices had very real political and historical applications” (McCaffery qtd. in Wallace, “An Interview”). This description echoes Eagleton’s conception of the carnival as an escape valve for energy that could have led to a resistant consciousness and praxis, as a “licensed affair, [. . .] a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off” (148). Furthermore, the political applications of metafiction may now be more limited than they were in early postmodernist literature since “we now accept metafiction – that is, we have institutionalized it” (Hutcheon 2). From Wallace’s perspective, metafiction is no longer a means of breaking down the codes of hegemonic power; it is a hegemonic code itself.

Wallace does respect the groundbreaking work of his early postmodern forbears, whose “self-consciousness and irony and anarchism” were “indispensable for their time,” but, in line with Hutcheon’s claim that their work has been integrated into the networks of the status quo, he argues that writers who continue to use these techniques are politically bankrupt (“An Interview”). For “at least ten years now,” Wallace states in 1993, “television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of Low, over-easy mass-marketed narrative” (“E. Unibus Pluram” 52). Television is therefore complicit in the “institutionalization of [the] irony, narcissism, nihilism, stasis, [and] loneliness” that prevents political action now but once had political potential in American fiction (73). TV is synecdochic of a widespread cultural slide away from political action; Wallace is “convinced that television today lies, with a potency somewhere between symptom and synecdoche, behind a genuine crisis for U.S. culture and literature” (38). Indeed, Wallace’s overall project opposes the distance that “some

modes of television work to create between people and their emotions, a hip, knowing, safe ironic distance that allows us to watch and sneer at the same time” (Fitzpatrick 5). Like Pynchon’s technocratic Firm, Wallace’s conception of contemporary solipsistic ironic distance therefore seems to operate in the same manner as the hegemonic power of the Church in Rabelais: it prevents natural connections and reduces everything to the plane of the abstract.

Wallace terms contemporary metafiction “Image-Fiction,” which connects it with televisual discourse (“Pluram” 52). Although Image-Fiction may have a laudable aim in some cases – “the rescue from a passive, addictive TV-psychology” – the problem is that “most Image-Fiction writers render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness that [...] the literary insurgents of Beat and postmodernism [...] used [...] to rebel against their own world and context” (52). Therefore, the reason the use of these techniques fails to “transfigure TV is simply that TV has beaten the new Imagists to the punch” (52). Wallace condenses the struggle to break out of this cycle into two claims: a “subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction” has “lately arisen and made a real attempt to transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television” but “televisual culture has somehow evolved to a point where it seems invulnerable to any such transfiguring assault” (49). Or, in other words, the ethic of populist play and parody inherent in Bakhtin’s carnival has been co-opted by the postmodern hegemony of capitalist mass media.

Indeed, now that the negative work of destroying established codes has been completed and its techniques embraced by mass media discourses, continuing to use postmodern techniques in fiction to self-reflexively pick apart narrative has no positive

effect. Wallace notes that “after the pioneers always come [...] the little gray people who take the machines others have built and just turn the crank, and little pellets of metafiction come out the other end,” not literary rebels anymore but producers complicit with the capitalist system (“An Interview”). Ultimately, Wallace admits that if he had “a real enemy, a patriarch for [his] patricide” it would “probably [be] Barth and Coover and Burroughs, even Nabokov and Pynchon [...] [b]ecause [...] their aesthetic’s absorption by the U.S. commercial culture has had appalling consequences for writers and everyone else” (“An Interview”). This characterization of Pynchon’s writing as prototypical of metafiction is problematic, however, for as I demonstrated in the last chapter, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, at least, critiques carnivalesque resistance, which can be equated with the postmodern gamesmanship Wallace attacks.

Wallace’s project is not only negative and patricidal, however; it is also positive and constructive: he aims to reproduce the “genuine connections” (“An Interview”) that Bakhtin privileges in his criticism. As well as his tripartite diagnosis of contemporary metafiction’s complicity in power, Wallace’s collected manifesto makes four humanist-inflected claims that define politically charged fiction after postmodernism: an emancipatory text must concern human emotion, require authorial emotional investment, generate readerly affect, and privilege the loss of ego in both the author and the reader.

When Larry McCaffery asks Wallace if he is “saying that writers of [his] generation have an obligation not only to depict our condition but also to provide the solutions to these things,” Wallace’s response forms the most concise articulation of his psychoanalytic, humanistic focus: “I don’t think I’m talking about conventionally

political or social action-type solutions. That's not what fiction's about. Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being" ("An Interview"). Indeed, he continues:

What's engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections [...]? And can these capacities be made to thrive? And if so, how [...]? ("An Interview")

An oft-quoted passage from "E. Unibus Pluram" suggests a way forward, indicative of Wallace's humanism:

The next literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels [... w]ho treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction [...] willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes [, ...] accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. (Wallace, "Pluram" 81-82)

In other words, Wallace sees in the future of fiction a move away from the "hip, knowing, safe ironic distance that allows us to watch and sneer at the same time" (Fitzpatrick 5), away from rational analysis and abstraction and toward a confluence in emotional space of the reader, the writer, and the characters – toward human interconnection.

Wallace therefore suggests that not only should fiction concern emotion, it should also require emotional investment from the author and generate emotional affect in the reader. Wallace points out that all "great fiction-writers [...] 'give' the reader something" ("An Interview"). Progressive fiction "probably comes out of a willingness to

disclose yourself, open yourself up in spiritual and emotional ways that risk making you really feel something” (“An Interview”). Wallace acknowledges the difficulty of this tactic in contemporary, irony-laden society: “[e]ven now I’m scared about how sappy this’ll look in print, saying this. And the effort actually to do it, not just talk about it, requires a kind of courage I don’t seem to have yet” (“An Interview”). Indeed, the author has to “be willing to sort of die in order to move the reader, somehow” (“An Interview”).

Naturally, readerly affect is also necessary to Wallace’s model; McCaffery and Wallace agree that the emotional affect generated by Wallace’s fiction could be described as “defamiliarization” or “making the familiar strange” (Wallace, “An Interview”). The fact that the cognitive carnivalesque “permit[s . . .] the subversion of [the] fixed hierarchies” of hegemony through the same process (Bennett 67) implies a political potential in Wallace’s affective carnivalesque. Wallace elaborates that for

our generation, the entire world seems to present itself as “familiar,” but since that’s of course an illusion in terms of anything really important about people, maybe any “realistic” fiction’s job is opposite what it used to be—no longer making the strange familiar but making the familiar strange again. It seems important to find ways of reminding ourselves that most “familiarity” is meditated and delusive. (“An Interview”)

Such a program is reminiscent of the ethos behind the pioneers of metafiction, with one major difference: it is a new type of “realistic” fiction that is necessarily to defamiliarize subjects drained of life by the ironic distance and narcissism of metafiction (Wallace, “An Interview”). Narcissism and solipsism are the main threats to political action in Wallace’s worldview; the Cartesian ego is complicit with power.

Indeed, for Wallace the final aspect of successful fiction is that it privileges the loss of subjectivity in the writer and the reader, which aligns his project with the Kristevan abject. Wallace finds that the “tricky discipline to writing” involves not “getting overcome by insecurity or vanity or ego” – in short, by individual aspects of the author as a human subject (“An Interview”). As a writer, you have to “talk out of the part of you that loves the thing, loves what you’re working on. Maybe just plain loves [...] sappy or no, it’s true”; you have to talk out of both an emotional space and a space that is focused outside the self (“An Interview”).

Wallace extends this idea beyond the writing process to reflecting on one’s writing as well. He used to think the “click” (what he calls the indescribable feeling that tells a writer that a piece of writing is good) happened when he wrote something that made him think “‘Holy shit, have I ever just done something good’” (Wallace, “An Interview”). His understanding shifted, however; he now believes

the real click’s more like, ‘Here’s something good, and on one side I don’t much matter, and on the other side the individual reader maybe doesn’t much matter, but the thing’s good because there’s extractable value here for both me and the reader.’ Maybe it’s as simple as trying to make the writing more generous and less ego-driven. [...] It’s yourself you have to be estranged from, really, to work. (“An Interview”)

The loss of ego in the reader is evidenced by Wallace’s claim that the “magic of fiction is that it addresses and antagonizes the loneliness that dominates people” (“An Interview”). Indeed, he continues that “serious fiction’s purpose is to give the reader, who like all of

us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves” (“An Interview”). He explains the role of emotion in creating access thusly:

we all suffer alone in the real world [and] true empathy’s impossible[;] if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character’s pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside.”

(“An Interview”).

Overall, Wallace’s description of the writer echoes Kristeva’s explanation of the “*deject*,” the “one by whom the abject exists,” who experiences the horrific affects of threatened subjectivity and no longer “sound[s ...] himself as to his ‘being,’” – but does so “not without laughter” (*Powers* 8). Wallace’s positive project can therefore be summarized as humanistic and psychoanalytic, thematically focusing on postmodern affect, generating readerly and writerly emotion, and positioned against Cartesian subjectivity; his project is therefore aligned with both the positive, utopian aspect of Bakhtin’s folkloric time and the apocalyptic laughter of Kristevan abjection.

The question of whether Wallace succeeds or not in following his own model in *Infinite Jest* is the most prevalent theme in the critical literature. Most of the critics evaluate *Infinite Jest* using terminology related to the two texts that make up his manifesto. Mark Pritchard, Paul Giles and Marshall Boswell believe that the novel succeeds, either because Wallace has taken “the effort actually to do it, not just talk about it” and found the “kind of courage [he didn’t] seem to have yet” when talking to McCaffery (“An Interview”). Toon Theuwis and Mary Holland, however, believe that *Infinite Jest* cannot overcome the inertia of postmodernism’s ironic mode. One popular

perspective suggests that just like “E. Unibus Pluram,” *Infinite Jest* “show[s] the possibilities for human communication” (Pritchard iii) in “a solipsistic and televisual social environment” that “interferes jarringly with the lives of American citizens” (Giles 341). This form of sincere communication in an affect-less postmodern mediascape of course recalls Wallace’s yearning for “genuine interconnection” (“An Interview”). Others also see Wallace’s work as representing the problem of how, trapped within the codes of bourgeois subjectivity, “human consciousness responds to this environment by harnessing the self-centred nature of being as a way of mapping itself onto the wider world” (Giles 341).

Rather than seeing Wallace as “harnessing” solipsism (Giles 341), another viewpoint suggests that Wallace’s meditation on solipsism is a critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis, linking contemporary American culture with a desire to return to the infancy of before the mirror stage (Boswell 131). *Infinite Jest*, preoccupied with infancy and infantilized states, forms an “attack [on] Lacan right at the jugular” (Boswell 131). As Kristeva draws heavily on Lacan, this perspective alludes to the potential political bankruptcy of both “poststructuralist psychology” (Boswell 132) and a politics rooted in abjection.

The two critics who argue that *Infinite Jest* fails, Theuwis and Holland, both do so on the basis that the novel itself does not escape from the pitfalls of postmodernity. Based on a checklist of the defining characteristics of postmodernism, *Infinite Jest* fits within that mold: “*Infinite Jest* [...] belongs to postmodernist poetics in the sense that it shares with other postmodernist texts postmodernism’s ontological dominant” (Theuwis). Indeed, “[a]ll strategies Wallace employs in his novel have their ontological

consequences,” strategies such as “incorporating the concept of infinity, the peculiar construction of space in the novel, the intertextual references, the technique of ‘misattribution’, drawing attention to the constructedness of the text, exposing the reader to paranoia and the construction of Chinese-box worlds” – all cognitive, structural strategies (Theuwis). Theuwis concludes that “*Infinite Jest* is thus a postmodern encyclopedic novel.” *Infinite Jest* is certainly encyclopedic, but analyzing a book that specifically thematizes emotion on a purely cognitive plane is ultimately reductive.

Holland, however, does take emotion more fully into account; she argues that “Wallace’s greatest accomplishment in the novel [is] to construct not a character strong enough to escape the ironic trap that the novel has set, but rather one earnest enough to suffer the irony and brave enough to struggle heroically to escape it [Don Gately], but still doomed, almost sadistically so, by an author who cannot overcome his own ironic ambivalence” (220). If this is the case, the Gately plot line has significant parallels to Pynchon’s story of Byron the Bulb, the lightbulb who becomes aware of his entrapment in and dependence on the system of power. Although she does not make the comparison explicitly, Holland therefore seems to suggest that Gately, like Byron, “feels the pain of knowing, that the power of the [system] is inescapable; yet he himself has eluded that power” (McHugh). Reading Gately as the hero of *Infinite Jest* in the same way that one can read Byron the Bulb as the hero of *Gravity’s Rainbow* does not fit neatly within Wallace’s manifesto: both novels end with the two characters in states of total solipsism – Byron trapped in the Grid and Gately mute in a hospital bed; any political potential does not stem from “genuine connection” with others (Wallace, “An Interview). This discrepancy between Wallace’s attack on solipsism and his most sympathetic character’s

solipsism illustrates that considering whether Wallace is successful *on his own terms* is besides the point; the negative aspect of his project, a critique of the cognitive carnivalesque, has been anticipated by Pynchon twenty years before, and his positive project of a utopian community based on the use of the affective carnivalesque contains its resistant energy within individual psychology.

Overall, *Infinite Jest* incorporates three major elements of the cognitive carnivalesque: instances of inversion, a privileging of the bodily lower stratum, and the grotesque aspect of the characters. Indeed, Nichols notes that initially, “Wallace’s novel appears to be a rather straightforward [...] text that uses bodily and linguistic grotesques to satirize contemporary culture” (4). As an instance of “classic Bakhtinian inversion of the hierarchical distinctions between high and low,” O.N.A.N. (the Organization of North American Nations) is “presided over by a former Las Vegas crooner named Johnny Gentle” (4). Furthermore, “the thrust of the novel’s action takes place in the ‘Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment,’” which is “the ideal milieu for a culture where the lower stratum of the body is emphasized” (4). Finally, Nichols lists several of the most classically grotesque characters in the novel. The three Incandenza boys all have “exterior physical deformities”: Mario’s “entire body was deformed at birth,” Hal “has a distended forearm from training for professional tennis,” and Orin “has an unusually large knee from repetitive punting” (5). Other main characters are also grotesque: Don Gately has an “unnaturally large head” (Nichols 5) and Joelle van Dyne always wears the veil of the “Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed” (Wallace, *IJ* 226). Her masquerade is possibly on account of her entire face having “been deformed with acid” (Nichols 5). In a horrifying intersection of the series of food and death, James Incandenza

commits suicide “by sticking his head in a microwave oven” (Nichols 5); Hal discovers him after thinking ““golly, something smells delicious”” (Wallace, *IJ* 256). As well as the human grotesques, Nichols lists the inhabitants of O.N.A.N.’s toxic waste dump:

“‘Rapacial feral hamsters,’ ‘insects of Volkswagen size’ and [...] ‘giant infants who roam the republic and occasionally crush houses underfoot’ [...] are among the litany of grotesque creatures peppering the text” (Wallace, *IJ* qtd. in Nichols 5).

Nichols, however, rightly decides that the novel *could* be viewed this way, not that it *should*. As is reflected in the theorization of Wallace’s account of self-reflexive postmodern art, the carnivalesque is aligned with the postmodernist techniques of metafiction and therefore with hegemonic power. Nichols notes that in spite of Wallace’s “ample use of [...] postmodern carnivalesque techniques, closer investigation makes clear that Wallace’s text does not draw a direct correlation between human liberation and the mere transgression of bodies, language, and cultural signs” (6). She extrapolates Wallace’s position against postmodernist metafiction into a political position against carnivalesque representations as well: “in *Infinite Jest*, [Wallace] exposes the potential of the postmodern carnivalesque to become a sort of literary Prozac that alters perception rather than attends to the alienation, despair, and isolation that the unmedicated perceive” (Nichols 6). Therefore, in line with Wallace’s description of “the new literary rebels” (“Pluram” 81-82) she states that “countenancing, rather than fleeing, this sober reality becomes an even more revolutionary act than deliberately seeking out its distortions” (Nichols 6).

The use of masks and disguises by hegemonic and patriarchal interests forms a major part of Wallace’s critique of the carnivalesque. Indeed, “masks are used to conceal

identities that are already rendered as grotesquely ‘open’” (Nichols 9), which could be equated with the mode of the Bakhtinian grotesque, in which “stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 26). In *Infinite Jest* the “use of masks to hide rather than to address what appears monstrously open takes a dark turn in a scenario involving a ‘catatonic’, ‘soggy’, ‘invertebrate’ girl referred to only as ‘it,’ whose father finds it more stimulating to rape her after pinning a Raquel Welch mask on her face” (Nichols 9). Nichols suggests that “this image, perhaps more than any other, implies that embracing the mask’s ‘joy of change’ and ‘metamorphosis’ without regard for human sensitivity and dignity, achieves an end considerably less than liberating” (9).

Disguises are also “less than liberating” within Wallace’s novel: although in Bakhtin “costumes and disguises are part of the festive imagery used in carnival to interrogate the stable identity-constructions of the official culture,” *Infinite Jest*’s “official culture is perpetuated by the use of grotesque costumes” (Nichols 9). Indeed, as “part of their routine operations” agents of O.N.A.N.’s equivalent to the FBI “are required to take on carnivalesque identities” (Nichols 9). The group casts “‘men as women, women as longshoremen or Orthodox rabbinicals, heterosexual men as homosexual men’” (Wallace, *IJ* 419). Disguises then hide government agents that work for a capitalist régime so money-hungry that it even sold the rights to name years to multinational corporations: most of the novel takes place in the “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment” (17). Because of its direct association with incestuous rape and

government operations, masquerade clearly marks the complicity of the cognitive carnivalesque with power.

Nightmares and annular fusion, however, illustrate that there is an affective element to the carnival with a more ambiguous political valence. Wallace's carnivalesque incorporates a darkness around the edges – a darkness which Nichols theorizes as repressive, reducing the joyful energy of the carnival:

Perhaps the first indication that Wallace's polyphonic, heterogeneously peopled textual universe falls short of Bakhtin's utopian ends is the troubling presence of a dark chasm that lurks around its kaleidoscopic edges. Wallace weaves a dense skein of carnivalesque intertextuality only to rupture it with glimpses of a fearful Otherness that cannot be assimilated into its cacophonous dialogue. (Nichols 6)

Here I depart slightly from Nichols; I argue that these irruptions are not so much “troubling” (6) to Wallace's self-professed project as they are evidence of Wallace's critique of the cognitive carnivalesque; evidence comes from Wallace's depiction of both nightmares and annular fusion.

Many of the characters are beset with nightmares similar to those of Kate Gompert and Ken Erdedy. The two reference a “*large, dark shape [...] billowing [... and] flapping*” that embodies “total psychic horror: death, decay, dissolution, cold, empty black malevolent lonely space” (Wallace, *IJ* 650). Indeed, this “encounter with fear is perhaps best articulated by an anonymous ‘I’” (Nichols 7): “I am coming to see that the sensation of the worst nightmares, a sensation that can be felt asleep or awake [...] is identical to those worst dreams' form itself: the sudden intra-dream realization

that the nightmares' very essence and center has been with you all along, even awake: it's just been *overlooked*" (Wallace, *IJ* 61). This "horror is everywhere, yet unseen[...] suppress[ed] beneath a postmodern mosaic so dazzling that it can blind readers to what lies below its surface" (Nichols 7). Nichols therefore reads the "postmodern mosaic" of the cognitive carnivalesque as part of the distracting, abstracted symbolic order that prevents access to the affective Real (7).

Nichols is clearly familiar with Kristevan abjection, or at least its precursor, the Lacanian division between the Real and the symbolic; she claims that "most of the characters in *Infinite Jest* [...] never consider [...] that [their] fear might be the actual state of facing life without the aid of synthetic compounds that replace [their] emotional vulnerability with a chemically induced callousness" (8). The nightmares could be seen as abject irruptions of the Real into the symbolic, affective elements that actually explode the unemotional ironic distance of the carnival of metafiction.

In fact, Erdedy's dark shape perfectly describes the affect of Kristeva's abject. He describes it as "more horrible than [he has] the power to convey" (Wallace, *IJ* 650); the analogy to Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* is very clear. The affect of the abject is "horror[;] a choking sensation that does not separate inside from outside but draws them the one into the other, indefinitely" (Kristeva, *Powers* 25) – in other words, "dissolution, cold, empty, malevolent lonely voided space" (Wallace, *IJ* 650). That Erdedy points out how "[s]hapelessness was one of the horrible things" about the shape reflects its alignment with a loss of subjectivity (Wallace 649). Indeed, Kristeva's abject "does not *signify* death"; instead, it "*show*[s ...] what [subjects] permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva, *Powers* 3). Abjection "is a resurrection that has

gone through death (of the ego)[; ... i]t is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance” (15). From a psychoanalytic perspective, Nichols is therefore correct in stating that “fear might be the actual state of facing life” (8).

Kate Gompert agrees with Erdedy when he describes the black shape, but she experiences it in a more bodily manifestation, akin to Kristeva’s “spasms in the stomach, the belly,” when “all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire” (*Powers* 3). Gompert feels it in her “head, throat, butt. In [her] stomach. It’s all over everywhere (Wallace, *IJ* 73). She “can’t get enough outside it to call it anything. It’s like horror more than sadness” (73). The fear that is more like horror is “hegemonic” abjection – Gompert’s attempt to abject the elements of the Real that rupture the symbolic order and threaten her subjectivity. When the abject disturbs the semantic/symbolic order, the system abjects the filth; it casts it out in order to maintain “the illusion of autonomy” (Hayles 676). One can consider abjection

as an attempt to preserve the autonomy of the self in the face of an unavoidable confrontation with interconnection. Instead of acknowledging the coproduction that binds together the subject and the environment, the self clings to its precious autonomy and creates a liminal space in which the distinction between inside and outside, self and other, momentarily blurs. (Hayles 686)

Wallace therefore not only critiques the cognitive carnivalesque, representing it as a “postmodern mosaic so dazzling that it can blind readers to what lies below its surface” (Nichols 7), the distracting, abstracted symbolic order that disguises the Real; he also makes extensive use of “troubling” abjection against the shifting symbolic and depicts the

response to it of “hegemonic” abjection. That Nichols cites an “anonymous I” who experiences the nightmare (8) indicates that Wallace’s true target is the symbolic order itself; metafictional ironic distance is only the current incarnation of Cartesian subjectivity .

Annular fusion is another instance of the co-option of the cognitive carnivalesque: it is not only a perversion of natural cyclicity complicit with power, as Nichols suggests, but represents abjection in its *hegemonic* articulation. Indeed, although “Bakhtin’s grotesques were meant to evoke nature’s constant state of renewal, Wallace replaces these images of regeneration with those of thinly veiled redundancy” such as “the ‘annular fusion’ energy system that fuels [O.N.A.N.’s] environment” (Nichols 7). In essence, annular fusion is a triangular system: the main plant, as well as generating energy, produces plutonium fluoride and UF4 fractional waste; a second plant refines the plutonium fluoride to generate waste U-239; finally, a third plant combines the waste U-239 and UF4 fractional waste to produce “hellacious amounts of highly poisonous nuclear waste” which is then used as the fuel for the main plant (Wallace, *IJ* 571). As a result, “[w]hereas Bakhtin viewed bodily emissions such as urination and defecation as evidence of the human form in a constant state of growth and change, Wallace’s annular fusion produces waste that only perpetuates stasis” (Nichols 7) . The upshot of this “right-triangular process of interdependence and waste-creation and utilization” (Wallace 571) is that larger and larger amounts of toxic waste are required and the concavity, in which this all takes place, “grow[s] like crazy when the fusion process is sucking toxic wastes out of the surrounding territory, giving rise to ‘insects of Volkswagen size and infantile gigantism”” (Wallace qtd. in Hayles 688). As “the cycle continues and the

waste builds up that will fuel the next stage of the process, this environment ‘so fertile lush it’s practically unlivable’ dies off, going from ‘overgrown to wasteland to overgrown several times a month’” (Wallace qtd. in Hayles 688). Ultimately, “a theory that appears to celebrate ‘excess’ actually insulates and perpetuates stagnation” (Nichols 7).

Like the carnivalesque surface of *Infinite Jest* and the abject nightmares that rupture it, however, annular fusion actually has a double articulation within Wallace’s work; it represents not just a critique of the cognitive carnivalesque but also depicts the process of “hegemonic” abjection. In fact, just as Erdedy and Gompert attempt to abject that which reminds them of mortality, the O.N.A.N. administration, under the leadership of a president who is so germophobic that he showers fourteen times a day in a “Hypospectral-Flash-Booth-that-actually-like-burns–your-outermost-layer-of-skin-off” (Wallace, *IJ* 381), tries to abject its own filth by exporting it all to Canada during the creation of Interdependence. Gentle runs on the platform of cleaning up America, but once he is elected, he does so by covertly dumping all of America’s waste in the Northeast and then discovering it, designating the entire area a toxic dump, and forces Canada to annex it during the amalgamation of the three North American nations (391). Indeed, there is not

real “inter” in this version of Interdependence, only a pretense of hygiene created by the refusal to recognize those parts of oneself which are considered unclean, a process that, when it takes place in the psychological realm, is known as abjection. (Hayles 685)

The administration tries to get rid of America's waste but "the abjected always returns in recursive cycles of interconnection that inexorably tie together the sanctified and the polluted" (687). Wallace's positive project is this *real* interconnection, the idea that "everything is connected" (Pynchon, *GR* 703), not as Pynchonesque paranoia but as sincere "genuine connections" (Wallace "An Interview") that *blend* grotesque materiality and "troubling" abjection toward a utopian end.

To be sure, while the presence of both "troubling" and "hegemonic" abjection signals an affective component to Wallace's work, it is not specifically a carnivalesque affect: Wallace uses abjection *against* the cognitive carnivalesque. Frank Louis Cioffi, however, refers directly to an affective carnivalesque with notions of the disturbing text and the novel's lingering grotesque scenes. Indeed, discussion of affect in *Infinite Jest* must include not only the abject affect experienced by the characters but also the impact on the reader. *Infinite Jest* is an intensely affective novel; it has been categorized as belonging to the genre of the "disturbing text," which describes texts that "inhabit a generic interstice" and are "defined more by emotional reaction of reader or viewer than by formal features" (Cioffi 164). Indeed, *Infinite Jest* "stimulates what has been called Einfuhling or 'empathy'" (162). Cioffi's own experience is that the book's "scenes of exquisite horror and pain [...] haunted [him] for days, its images invaded or prevented [his] sleep, and [he] at once tried not to think about it and then found [himself] recurring to various passages" (162-163). Overall, disturbing texts can "stimulate complex emotions remarkably similar to those experienced in nontextual realms, emotions that might involve mixed, elaborate, sometimes even contradictory feelings, for example" (174-175). As a result, the disturbing text could therefore also be theorized as the

affective defamiliarizing text. Just as Renaissance literature borrows from the carnival, which “afforded a stock of themes and devices which permitted [...] the subversion of [the] fixed hierarchies” (Bennett 67), Wallace draws on the affective carnivalesque to generate his sincere emotion – even though, like Pynchon, he critiques the cognitive carnivalesque.

The scenes that generate this power to disturb further reveal how *Infinite Jest* generates an affect that is both abject and carnivalesque. After reading *Infinite Jest*, “what continues to disturb [...] is a [...] series of descriptions, [...] so graphic, so detailed, that they linger in consciousness, in memory. [...] They are so vividly performed by the characters, by the author in conjunction with the reader, in a sense, that they have a psychological actuality similar to that of ‘actual’ things” (Cioffi 176). Indeed, “disturbatory art [...] provide[s] an existential spasm through the intervention of images into life” (Danto qtd. in Cioffi 164). This “existential spasm” recalls Kristeva’s abjection: “‘Reality’ makes up a portion of disturbatory art, and usually the portion of reality included is itself somehow threatening or ugly: ‘obscenity, frontal nudity, blood, excrement, mutilation, real danger, actual pain, possible death’” (121). All of these examples are carnivalesque and abject: the material series of the open body, sex, and defecation; and the blood, pus, filth and shit, and corpses of the abject that threaten Cartesian subjectivity. This kind of art that moves into reality “is a kind of art in which ‘the contract that defines our rights as an audience is cancelled’” (Danto qtd in Cioffi 176). Accordingly, and again alluding to abjection, *Infinite Jest* “break[s] this contract by making readers go places psychologically whither they would not ordinarily venture” (Cioffi 176).

Three of the most affecting scenes throughout *Infinite Jest* referred to by Cioffi evoke emotion through the use of the abject carnivalesque. All three involve death: a choking death; a death from massive, traumatic internal hemorrhaging; and a death from the injection of an extremely toxic substance. During the botched robbery that sends Don Gately to jail and rehab, Gately gags the homeowner, but since the man has a cold and cannot breathe through his nose, he suffocates. The homeowner's death incorporates grotesque allegorization, the insertion of foreign items into the body, in the introduction of a "balled-up [...] kitchen towel" into the man's mouth (Wallace, *IJ* 58). It also includes Rabelaisian anatomic descriptions of violence: the "rhinovirally afflicted man" tries so hard to "partially clear one clotted nasal passage that he t[ea]r[s] intercostal ligaments in his ribs" (59). Masquerade and laughter also play a part: Gately is wearing a "clown's mask" during the robbery and the man, right before "pass[ing] bluey from this life," thinks about the apocalyptic, abject comedy in his situation: "he could think only [...] of how what a truly dumb and silly way this was [...] to die, a thought which the towel and tape denied expression via [a] rueful grin" (59). Finally, a focus on the role of "mucus" and its "implacable lava-like flow" in the man's death recalls the part that bodily fluids being exposed to the outside world plays in generating abject affect, in penetrating the symbolic with the Real (59).

The scene in which Quebecois terrorists skewer Lucien Antitoui with a broomstick similarly incorporates several series of materiality. Grotesque allegorization takes place as "the pale wicked tip of the broom [Lucien] loves is inserted, the wood piney-tasting [...] as the broom is shoved in and abruptly down" (Wallace, *IJ* 488). Anatomical violence appears throughout: the "tendons in his jaws tear audibly," "the fibers that

protect the esophagal terminus resist and then give with a crunching pop,” and the “handle navigates the inguinal canal and sigmoid” (488). The series of sex appears and mixes with the series of defecation when the broomstick “completes its passage and forms an obscene erectile bulge in the back of his red-sopped johns” (488). Again, the relentless description of bodily fluids during death, particularly the “splat of red that bathes Lucien’s teeth and tongue and makes of itself in the air a spout,” reflects abjection (488).

Finally, a drug addict named “C” injects himself with what he thinks is heroin, but is really Drano. Again, the insertion of Drano’s “blue like glittershit” into his bloodstream is an instance of grotesque allegorization (Wallace, *IJ* 134). Although the first-person narrator at this point does not know the highbrow medical terminology of Wallace’s main narrator, he still describes the man’s death in anatomic detail: “blood and bloody materil is coming out of Cs’ mouth and Cs’ nose,” and then “Cs’ eyes get beesly and bulge and [...] one eye it like allofa sudden pops outof his map, [...] with all this blood and materil and a blue string at the back of the eye and the eye falls over the side of Cs’ map and hangs there” (134). Cioffi, in the language Wallace’s narrator would use elsewhere, describes this process as “spontaneous [...] enucleat[ion]” (178). C then “die[s] for keeps and shit[s] his pants instantly with shit so bad the hot air blowergrate [...] blow[s] small bits of fart and blood and missty shit up into [the other addicts’] maps”; this detail emphasizes both the series of defecation and the role of a corpse’s bodily fluids in abjection (Wallace, *IJ* 134).

While elements of the affective carnivalesque such as these appear throughout the book, and could be seen as privileging the low and material over the high and abstract in

the creation of a utopian folkloric space in which the series of materiality intermix – and as providing irruptions into the symbolic order of the Real – the specific use of the affective carnivalesque in the Alcoholics Anonymous narratives presented at the meetings attended by the residents of Ennet House aligns exactly with the tenets of Wallace’s plan for future fiction. Examining the affective carnival of AA as a fictional elaboration of “E. Unibus Pluram” and the McCaffery interview, however, reveals major flaws in the political valence of Wallace’s overall project.

In *Infinite Jest*, Alcoholics Anonymous is not just an ideology but also a narrative form; it “forms a language that can permeate and affect the voices of the characters” (Raizman). Indeed, AA is “a forum for members to meet and tell their story” (Daverman). When a new addict “Come[s] In” to AA (Wallace, *IJ* 354), they “learn [. . .] to reorganize [their] autobiography by internalizing the AA narrative pattern so that it is in line with the examples [they] hear” (Daverman).

AA is also intimately connected to subject formation. If Wallace’s target is “the presumption of autonomy that is the founding principle for the liberal humanist self, then nothing less than a reconceptualization of subjectivity can offer a solution” (Hayles 693). AA valorizes a subject who has “shed the illusion of autonomous selfhood and accept[ed] citizenship in a world in which actions have consequences that rebound to the self because everything is connected with everything else” (693). In short, like the hegemonic abjection entailed by annular fusion and the shocks of abject fear encountered by the recovering addicts, AA represents “recursive cycles of interconnection that inexorably tie together the sanctified and the polluted” (687).

Indeed, Don Gately, the recovering oral narcotics addict and ex-burglar who is now a live-in staffer at Ennet House, has internalized the norms of AA: “Gately, the closest Wallace comes to giving us a hero, is a disciple of just that ideology” (Raizman). Ostensibly, the “hard work of rebuilding subjectivity from the ground up is performed in the story of Don Gately, [...] who discovers to his amazement that Alcoholics Anonymous actually works” (Hayles 693). Gately has “seen the darkness. Though he doesn’t know the word, he has felt abjection. He has been on the brink of pain, horror and despair, come in on his hands and knees, asking for help. [...] He was given clichés. And following them blindly has worked” (Raizman).

The problem with reading Gately’s “rebuil[t] subjectivity” (Hayles 693) as a success story that reinforces Wallace’s project is that the deeper social-structural dimensions of addiction remain unchallenged. If the poverty of Gately’s upbringing in urban Boston led him into drug use and crime, that larger social issue is not challenged in any way by his rebuilt subjectivity within a sandboxed environment; indeed, virtually every character to go back “Out There” relapses: the AA veterans

can’t even begin to say how many new guys they’ve seen Come In and then get sucked back Out There, [...] Hang In and put together a little sober time and have things start to get better [... then] start gradually drifting away from rabid Activity In The Group, [...] and then [...] away from any AA meetings at all, and then [...] forget what it was like, [...] until like one day [...] they think what could just one cold foamer hurt [... a]nd after that one it’s like they’d never stopped [...] The Crocodiles talk about how they can’t count the number of guys that’ve

Come In for a while and drifted away and gone back Out There and died,
or not gotten to die (Wallace, *IJ* 354).

Wallace's AA veterans "are always talking in hushed, 'Nam-like tones about Out There" – with their long sober time, they have not dared fully re-enter the outside world, instead living within the confines of the AA community (354).

More problematically, AA is not only a privileged form within the novel, which presents Gately as a sympathetic character, but also forms the "master narrative of *Infinite Jest*" (Daverman). Part of this mapping involves the continuity of AA, which recalls Bakhtinian cyclicity and folkloric time: "AA members are called recovering – instead of recovered – alcoholics, which emphasizes the continual process of AA" (Daverman). Likewise, "[p]art of the narrative system of AA is that it has no ending," which is a "narrative strategy that keeps AA members from thinking about the future and the cumulative sum of all of the temptations and situations that the future holds" (Daverman). For Wallace, "AA style becomes a new set of criteria for fiction" (Daverman). *Infinite Jest* "inculcates its AA-influenced aesthetic by repetition of the AA narrative form, just like actual AA meetings do" (Daverman). In general, the AA narrative form involves the traditional ideas of acceptance, putting community before self, and identifying with others, but in Wallace's novel it also includes specific tropes of carnivalesque materiality.

Wallace presents two possible options for newcomers to AA with respect to the "Alcoholics Anonymous language-game" (Raizman). The first is "a rebellion against it and an attempt to undermine it by exposing it as a cliché-ridden set of useless platitudes that accomplishes nothing but blind and idiotic servitude." Wallace agitates against this

view, likening it to postmodern metafiction's "hip, knowing, safe ironic distance that allows us to watch and sneer at the same time" (Fitzpatrick 5). Indeed, in Wallace's view, it "portrays the resistor of AA as self-assertive, actualized, perceptive, and autonomous when really he or she is the slave to the substance" (Raizman).

This view of AA is also aligned with Pynchon's characterization of the Firm as embodying Enlightenment rationality: "once reason has been coopted, [addiction] uses the power of ratiocination in the service of the Disease, inventing rationalizations that continue to operate until the Substance, deadly, kills the Subject" (Hayles 693). In fact, the "Boston AA term for addictive-type thinking is *Analysis-Paralysis*" (Wallace, *IJ* 203). This form of cognition is "typical of addicts who indulge in making finer and finer distinctions about a situation while failing catastrophically to intervene or act" (Hayles 693). Making distinctions is part of Kristevan subject formation, which involves the creation of distinctions between self and not-self. Analysis-paralysis is therefore complicit with hegemonic abjection, the abjection of the filthy reminders of the Real in an attempt to reinforce the illusion of a clean subjectivity.

Wallace depicts Erdedy's entrapment within analysis-paralysis before he enters AA: "[h]is language is one of panicky inaction, paralysis of the body accompanied by a mind running in abstract but unconstructive circles of unfulfilled possibility [...] Erdedy is watching himself think, making abstract commentary on his own abstractions" (Raizman). Geoffrey Day and Joelle van Dyne also fall into the trap of analysis-paralysis: "if one is fighting the tenets of AA on the grand and formalized linguistic turf of the whole English language, as Geoffrey Day and Joelle van Dyne do, then one has not internalized them – the language-game remains unlearned" (Raizman). Indeed, the AA

narrative “is questioned by Joelle van Dyne” when she “raises [...] a grammatical concern about an AA cliché” (Raizman). Her “trouble is that ‘But For the Grace of God’ is a subjunctive, a counterfactual” (Wallace, *IJ* 366). Wallace may be correct in suggesting that analysis-paralysis is not conducive to action in any way, political or psychological, but neither is Wallace’s privileged form of “acceptance” (Raizman).

This second approach involves accepting AA’s clichés, and believing in them as mystified and sacred. It follows AA’s connection to the prayer for serenity, famously critiqued for its privileging of political inaction by Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut depicts the prayer (“God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference”) and then follows it with the statement that “[a]mong the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present, and the future” (77). The suggested AA approach is therefore to believe without overanalyzing, as Gately does, to change only what is coded as *changeable*, which in Wallace’s world does not include politics. Instead, the change takes the form of “a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)[,] an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance” (Kristeva, *Powers* 15). Here, we see the non-hegemonic side of abjection, but, again, Gately is only transformed *privately* and *psychologically*.

Perhaps the book’s “ending with Gately’s [reminiscence of] failing to intervene in Fackelman’s torture and death [...] display[s] the end results of believing in autonomy while being sutured into a complex system through multiple recursive loops” (Hayles 695), but it has no political value. Gately “hit[...]s bottom” (695), which allows him to begin again, but not to make any impact on the world “Out There” (Wallace, *IJ* 354). He

is force-fed a “particularly lethal brand of heroin” and then “comes to ‘flat on his back on the beach,’” an image of “rebirth – the ocean as another womb” (Boswell 178). He is “reborn from the womb of his addiction, and the woman who has killed him has also given him birth, has saved his life[;] [t]he ending is therefore both a death and a birth, an exhaustion and a replenishment” (179). Regardless, as Gately constantly “wonders [...] what he’ll end up doing when his year’s Staff term is up and he’s sober but without any money and still clueless and has to leave [AA] and do something back Out There” (Wallace, *IJ* 594), his potential for political action against the structures promoting the Disease is not explored. Therefore, Gately’s is a private and psychological replenishment; his “rebuil[t] subjectivity” (Hayles 693) fails to challenge the political issue of the social-structural dimensions of addiction.

Seemingly in a defence against charges of an individualist focus, however, Wallace presents AA’s philosophy as explicitly concerned with the loss of ego, with a Kristevan privileging of an “I” that is not Cartesian but is instead “*heterogeneous*” (Kristeva, *Powers* 10). AA’s “philosophy is one of abandoning faith in yourself because it has only gotten you in trouble before” (Raizman). Members learn “in place of faith in yourself, [...] faith in the system of recovery” (Raizman). Furthermore, the “12th and final” narrative step of AA’s 12 step program is “‘Giving It Away’ or speaking about your addiction and how it ‘kicked your personal ass.’” Indeed, “Giving It Away is not just spreading the philosophy – it is the relinquishment of the self to the pursuit.”

The AA narrative thus differs from the the therapy narrative, which is aligned with individualism. Although both are “based on the sharing of a life narrative,” therapy “is an exploration of the self to figure out problems and then fix them” (Daverman).

Therapy's "focus on the self" is therefore "at the same level of intensity as television. They may be different in kind – television tries to fulfill the self while therapy tries to understand it – but they both serve to inflate the importance of the self." AA, however, "does not inflate the self like television and therapy do." Regardless, although AA's manner of sharing does not "inflate the self" it still privileges a psychological transformation, not a social one.

AA narrative form is also based on affect: successful stories are ones that promote identification, but, again, this identification leads only to private, psychological growth. Wallace notes that "[e]mpathy, in Boston AA, is called Identification" (*IJ* 345). Indeed, "Identifying is to realize the basic human similarity between the listener's story and a speaker's story. The opposite of Identifying is Comparing. Comparing is the way listening to stories works outside of the AA narrative system" (Daverman). Comparing is distinguishing, abjecting 'hegemonically,' separating the Real from one's own experience. For instance, immediately after Coming In Gately would just sit at meetings and "Compare": "'I never rolled a car,' 'I never lost a wife,' 'I never bled from the rectum'" (Wallace, *IJ* 365). Accordingly, the "best stories in AA are the ones that make people lose their own identity and mix with the speaker into a single group identity" (Daverman). Furthermore, "[i]f *Infinite Jest* has succeeded in recreating AA aesthetics, then the reader will also Identify with the speaker's story." AA's concept of connection, like its "continual process" (Daverman) has shades of Bakhtinian cyclicity: "sobriety in Boston is regarded as less a gift than a sort of cosmic loan. You can't pay the loan back, but you can pay it *forward*, by spreading the message that despite all appearances AA works" (Wallace, *IJ* 344). AA can therefore be seen as a type of positive feedback loop,

of growth out of control, just like annular fusion; the growth that it promotes is apolitical and psychological. Perhaps it can raise a large community, but it is a community of people who are afraid of the “Nam”-like world “Out There” (345) and therefore cannot and will not work toward any macropolitical change. Wallace’s version of AA narrative form, however, is not only characterized by acceptance, putting community before self, and identifying with others, but also uses specific tropes of carnivalesque materiality and abject affect within the stories themselves, a closer examination of which reveals their dubious political value.

Every successful AA narrative – the most disturbing, the most affecting, the ones that linger – in the novel is extremely carnivalesque. John L.’s and the Irish truck driver’s stories, which are interrupted with the narrator’s own pronouncements, set out the parameters of AA narrative. The final speaker of that evening, a nameless ex-freebase-addicted woman, illustrates the entirety of Wallace’s project: abject, carnivalesque materiality that evokes an unironic, emotional affect in the reader and the other characters in the book, as well as a loss of ego – but limits its potential for resistant consciousness to apolitical small groups.

Grotesque language of any kind is welcomed in AA: “you can say *anything* in [t]here” (352). Gately describes how

These folks have literally heard it all. Enuresis. Impotence. Priapism. Onanism. Projectile-incontinence. Autocastration. Elaborate paranoid delusions, the grandiosest megalomania, Communism, fringe-Birchism, National-Socialist-Bundism, psychotic breaks, sodomy, bestiality,

daughter-diddling, exposures at every conceivable level of indecency.

Coprophilia and -phagia. (352)

The mixture of all of the series of materiality is evident here: enuresis is accidental urination, which falls under the series of excrement, as does projectile-incontinence. Priapism describes an erection of unreasonably long duration, falling into the series of sex, along with onanism. Autocastration mixes the series of violence and sex. Sodomy in its most common definition, anal sex, mixes the series of excrement and sex, but sodomy in the bible covers a vast range of acts thought transgressive. Coprophilia and -phagia recall the most stomach-churning element of *Gravity's Rainbow*: Brigadier Pudding and his literal shit-eating grin.

In fact, it is hard to ignore that this list could almost serve as summary of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a book that concerns Communism, fringe-Birchism, National-Socialist-Bundism, and psychotic breaks as well as all of the material, grotesque images: daughter-diddling is committed by Pökler; sodomy by Weissman; paranoid delusions, near-bestiality, projectile-incontinence and enuresis by Slothrop; megalomania by Pointsman. The fact that none of these abstract ideas is prevalent elsewhere in *Infinite Jest* suggests that the connection to Pynchon is not accidental; Wallace aligns the grotesque, affective elements of Pynchon's novel with successful AA narratives, thus acknowledging him as a basis for his own affective grotesquerie – although Wallace fails to see that Pynchon has been *satirizing* these carnivalesque forms.

Medical terminology, aligned with Bakhtin's privileging of Rabelaisian anatomical depictions of violence, appears throughout AA narratives: in the prototypical narrative Wallace cites a series of events that include "pancreatitis, overwhelming guilt,

bloody vomiting, cirrhotic neuralgia, incontinence, neuropathy, nephritis, black depressions, searing pain” (346). The only material action that comes from this depiction is that the characters Come In to AA – a limited community far smaller in scope even than that of Bakhtin’s agricultural folkloric time.

The series of excrement is also a major element of AA narrative. Prefacing the story of an Irish trucker and ex-phenetamine-hydrochloride addict, the narrator states that “[o]nly in Boston AA can you hear a fifty-year-old immigrant wax lyrical about his first solid bowel movement in adult life” (Wallace, *IJ* 351). The man then describes how he had ““been a confarmed bowl-splatterer for yars[. . .] barred from t’facilities twixt hair’n Nork for yars”” then rhapsodizes about how after he had been sober for three months, he ““prodooced as er uzhal” and saw “a *tard* in t’loo. A *rail tard*,”” his “red-leather face radiant throughout” (351-2). In response, “Gately and the other White Flaggers fall about, laugh from the gut” (352). One affect of this story is carnivalesque laughter from the bodily lower stratum. This laughter, stemming from the gut in two different ways, is also apocalyptic laughter, “a way of placing or displacing abjection” (Kristeva, *Powers* 8). In line with the anti-subjective bent of both abjection and pure Bakhtinian carnivalesque, “certain palsied back-row newcomers” experience “Identification and possibly hope [. . . a] certain message has been carried” (Wallace, *IJ* 352). Wallace therefore presents the affective use of the series of excrement in his AA narrative as leading to a form of community; a community based in apocalyptic laughter, however, is a community of total instability and disorganization, which contraindicates a broader class critique of the members’ chemical addictions as symptoms of larger social issues.

The Bakhtinian and Kristevan concept of mixing the series of death and those associated with life are illustrated in John L's summary of his situation: "When I was drunk I wanted to get sober, and when I was sober I wanted to get drunk," John L. says; "I lived that way for years, and I submit to you that's not living, that's a fuckin death-in-life" (Wallace, *IJ* 346). The audience reacts empathetically to this admixture: "Audience heads nod [...] in rows like a wind-swept meadow; *boy* can they ever Identify" (347). Identifying is ultimately a *passive* process; to identify is to feel the same as one's neighbour but not to *change* anything about the way that both feel.

Clearly the parameters of AA narratives that Wallace establishes align with those of his own manifesto; they incorporate a focus on the human and material (as defined by Bakhtinian materiality), emotional affect and the loss of ego, but the focus on private growth and passivity is politically quiescent. Whereas the narratives of John L. and the Irish trucker illustrates those parameters, the narrative of the freebase cocaine-addicted mother is an instance of the generation of affect through carnivalesque mixing of the series of materiality – it incorporates the open body, death infecting life, medical terminology and generates empathy – but also, given further analysis, illustrates the loss of political potential in Wallace's psychoanalytic carnival.

The woman, "pregnant at twenty" who continue[s] to smoke "[e]ightballs of freebase cocaine like a fiend all through her pregnancy," even though "she kn[o]w[s] it [i]s bad for the baby and want[s] desperately to quit," gives birth to a deformed, stillborn child (Wallace, *IJ* 376). The baby "emerge[s] dry and hard like a constipated turdlet," mixing the series of sex/birth and excrement; it is described as "arachnodactylic" with "some sort of translucent reptilian-like webbing between its mucronate digits," which

suggests Rabelaisian maximalist medical attention to anatomic detail (376). Birth is associated with the grotesque open body, and with a violent wound.

The mother goes into such “Denial” that she leaves the baby’s umbilical cord connected to her “empty insides” and carries “the dead infant everywhere, even when turning sordid tricks” for months afterwards (Wallace, *IJ* 376). She keeps “the cord’s connection intact until her end of the cord finally f[a]ll[s] out of her and dangle[s], and smell[s]” (377). Here is a literal instance of “death infecting life” (Kristeva, *Powers* 4), in both an abject Kristevan and a Bakhtinian sense. Beyond the cognitive evaluation of John L., here is the “true theater [. . .] at the border of [one’s] condition as a living being” (3). If the “abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills [the subject], interferes with what, in [their] living universe, is supposed to save [them] from death: childhood” (4), a dead child reaches a similar affective level of abjection. It is “the most sickening of wastes,” what the woman has abjected and at the same time *holds onto*: “something rejected from which one does not part” (4). The dead child is clearly an instance of “troubling” abjection.

Furthermore, the dead child represents Bakhtinian materiality and cyclicity as well; it connects the series of sex/birth and the series of death. Everything that lives eventually dies and begets new life; the mother linked to her dead child is an image of folkloric cyclicity. Only after the death of her infant is she able to positively change her life by coming in to AA: “[t]his final speaker is truly new, ready: all defenses have been burned away. Smooth-skinned and steadily pinker, at the podium, her eyes squeezed tight, she looks like she’s the one that’s the infant” (Wallace, *IJ* 378-379). Again, she

may experience personal growth, but on a macropolitical scale she merely subtracts her voice from the terrifying world Out There, in which political action is possible.

Finally, the terror of the wordless Real penetrating the symbolic order is shared among the AA members at the meeting:

evidence that the infant had a serious bio-viability problem started presenting it so forcefully that even the Denial-ridden addict in the mother could not ignore or dismiss it – evidence which the speaker’s reticence about describing (save to say that it involved an insect-attraction problem) makes things all the worse for the empathetic White Flaggers (Wallace, *IJ* 379).

Indeed, the AA members “have to consciously try to remember even to blink as they watch her, listening. I.D.ing without effort” (Wallace, *IJ* 379). They could all empathize because “it was basically the same all over, after all, Out There”; as a result, “it was so good to hear her, so good that even Tiny Ewell and Kate Gompert and the rest of the worst of them all sat still and listened without blinking, looking not just at the speaker’s face but into it” (379). The AA members sit “in nose-pore range,” looking directly into her grotesque, open body, her “ruined teeth,” her missing eyelashes, experiencing interconnection – an interconnection that, however, seems to be its own (apolitical) reward (352).

The problem with Wallace’s project is therefore not, as Theuwis and Holland claim, that his own fiction cannot escape the mode of postmodern irony. Instead, what is problematic is Wallace’s discarding of motions toward systemic political change in favour of humanism, post-individual growth, and secluded, in-group community – more

heterogeneous than bourgeois subjectivity, but still a form of solipsism. Maybe the AA members could all empathize because “it was basically the same all over, after all, Out There” (Wallace, *IJ* 379), but this secluded interconnection signals a retreat from the greater political questions of Out There in favour of private growth. In essence, Wallace dispenses with the negative, destructive aspect of the carnivalesque, equating it with hegemonic power, and maintains only the utopian, populist conception of folk culture, but on a far smaller, psychoanalytic, scale. Likewise, maybe the final speaker is an “infant” (Wallace, *IJ* 378-379), born again into the AA community, but as Boswell points out, infancy is not necessarily the most political of states (Boswell 132). Infancy is, in the Lacanian psychoanalysis upon which Kristeva builds her theory of abjection, the most solipsistic state imaginable – the infant believes that it is the only thing that exists until it reaches the mirror-stage and sees that it has extremities, and that there must be something existing outside its own consciousness.

Wallace does raise many political questions in *Infinite Jest* through his use of the cognitive carnivalesque, particularly in its form as “defamiliarization” of the political and economic relations of postmodern North American society (“An Interview”), but as he ultimately critiques those same forms and presents them as co-opted by power, he simply re-enacts Pynchon’s critique two decades later. He privileges the abject, affective carnivalesque as a solution, but, against his nonfiction manifesto, the AA narratives reveal that carnivalesque resistance is possible only in private and psychological terms.

Conclusion

Ultimately, both Pynchon and Wallace critique the cognitive carnivalesque for its complicity with postmodern hegemonic capitalism. Pynchon's Marxist representations portray it as politically bankrupt, nothing more than a "licensed blow-off" (Eagleton 148). Indeed, Roger Mexico's urination on the table of power is historically ineffectual; Slothrop's taking advantage of a Bakhtinian folk festival for free food and sex and then leaving when the police arrive to break it up is complicit with the technocratic System that, with its ethic of progress, tends toward exhaustion and entropy. Wallace's masquerade and cyclicity are presented as similarly complicit, with carnivalesque disguises hiding government agents that work for a régime so greedy that it sold the rights to name *years* to multinational corporations, and a father putting a Raquel Welch mask over the head of his 14-year-old "drooling invertebrate" daughter before "incestuously [...] diddl[ing]" her to "extremity" (Wallace, *IJ* 371).

Where Wallace and Pynchon differ in intent is in their treatment of carnivalesque affect. Pynchon satirically turns carnivalesque affect into unproductive pornography; the festive joy of taking part in a gigantic shipboard orgy involving "a banker" and "two adorable schoolgirls" is not only degrading to women (and children), and satisfying for capitalist power, but also has no historical effect (Pynchon, *GR* 467). Challenging the System on a semantic level accomplishes nothing if the challenge is isolated; the boat, cut off from the rest of the outside world, reveals carnivalesque resistance as private, politically quiescent, and, sometimes, complicit with patriarchy and hegemony.

The orgy on the Anubis, named for the Egyptian Kingdom of Death, might also be read as a powerful metaphor for the inefficacy of Wallace's positive project:

“troubled” by irruptions of the deathly Real in “shared” narratives, the AA members may experience personal growth and interconnection with each other, but they still fear the “Nam”-like world of political action Out There (Wallace, *IJ* 354). Wallace’s positive project is thus rendered apolitical. As Pynchon anticipates Wallace’s attack on the cognitive aspect of the carnivalesque as complicit with postmodernity by twenty years, and also anticipates (and counters) Wallace’s privileging of affect, Wallace’s attack on Pynchon as a “patriarch for patricide” (“An Interview”) is of dubious progressive value.

A further implication of both findings is that Jameson’s belief in a “waning of affect” in postmodernity requires re-evaluation (10). Both novels are intensely affective through their use of the carnivalesque abject, regardless of their aims – through stomach-churning representations that include coprophagia, incest, gang rape, genital mutilation and the particularly memorable image of a crack-addicted prostitute “turning sordid tricks” while still attached umbilically to a “turdlet”-like stillborn infant (Wallace, *IJ* 376). Terada’s claim that emotion must be theorized as “nonsubjective” (3) is thus a valid one. Affect appears regardless of a loss of subjectivity – in Wallace, Don Gately, who ascribes fully to the AA belief in minimizing the role of the ego experiences significant affect; in Pynchon, Byron the Bulb, not only an inanimate object, but an inanimate object who is “liberated to a multiple, fragmented identity” (McHugh), is the most sympathetic character in the book.

Indeed, Gately’s and Byron’s positions at the ends of their respective novels reveal the surplus political potential that remains in Pynchon’s work, and how Wallace’s human, likeable hero ultimately reflects the novel’s powerlessness. Byron understands the political issues; his historical consciousness is encyclopedic and recalls *Gravity’s*

Rainbow itself. His lack of political action does not stem from a lack of will; it stems from the material impossibility of his initiating anything in the “wide open” Grid (Pynchon, *GR* 668). He is merely waiting, feeling the pain of entrapment in a repressive political regime, until he can take real, historical action. Furthermore, his affect is not carnivalesque; it comes from a Marxist sense of historical injustice.

Gately, however, no matter how similar his position is to Byron’s – Holland calls him “a character [...] earnest enough to suffer [...] irony and brave enough to struggle heroically to escape it, but still doomed [...] by an author who cannot overcome his own ironic ambivalence” (220) – is focused only on overcoming his own chemical addiction. His conception of irony is not systemic and political but personal and psychological; the affects he experiences from the abject, carnivalesque AA narratives have no effect on the greater social implications of his addiction.

A second implication of this paper concerns the future of the carnivalesque mode: in Pynchon’s and Wallace’s articulations, it clearly cannot provide an effective critique of postmodernity. If the carnivalesque can be employed, however, not as utopian end in itself, but as a means to reveal the contradictions of material reality, it can still be politically charged. Kristeva’s abject falls into a similar position: clearly it can generate significant affect; the question is how fiction can combine postmodern affect with a focus on macropolitics rather than confining it to narratives of individual psychoanalytic liberation.

A decade after the publication of *Infinite Jest*, Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño’s (2004) novel *2666* may provide a viable solution: it incorporates both a historical knowledge of the relations of production and an affect of “frustration without limit”

(Pynchon, *GR* 668). Scholars of *2666* agree that, like *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Infinite Jest*, the book is an “encyclopaedic fiction” (Moore). Its vast constellation of narratives and characters revolves around a series of murders in Santa Teresa, a Mexican border town where most residents are employed at very low wages in foreign-owned factories, or *maquiladoras*. The similarities between Byron the Bulb and Bolaño’s novel are most evident in *2666*’s fourth section, “The Part About the Crimes,” which explicitly details the police discoveries of 108 female murder victims in Santa Teresa between 1993 and 1998. Santa Teresa is based on a real town; between 1993 and the Spanish publication of *2666* in 2004 “approximately 470 girls and women died violently in Juárez, Mexico” (Valdes). In both Bolaño’s novel and material reality most of these murdered women were *maquiladora* workers, and many of the bodies were discovered in or near the factories’ dumps. Bolaño’s depicts the corpses using “the language of forensic investigation” (Valdes): “The Part About the Crimes” is primarily driven by the relentless, bureaucratic repetition of hundreds of pages of similar crime scene reports, interspersed with the narratives of several exasperated detectives searching for the culprit and never coming to a satisfactory conclusion. While *2666* incorporates few instances of the joyful aspects of the carnivalesque, the description of bodily orifices with anatomical precision recalls Bakhtin’s grotesque realism: “Esperanza Gómez Saldaña had been strangled to death. There was bruising on her chin and around her left eye. Severe bruising on her legs and rib cage. She had been vaginally and anally raped, probably more than once, since both orifices exhibited tears and abrasions, from which she had bled profusely” (Bolaño 354). The exhaustive repetition of imagery of the open body in the novel is clear from Amazon’s top “statistically improbable phrases” for *2666*, which

include “raped several times” and “next dead woman” (Amazon.com). After only a few pages, Bolaño’s repetition of violent imagery begins to function not as a defamiliarizing disruption of the symbolic order but as an illustration of how the brutality in Juárez/Santa Teresa is linked to the hegemonic subjugation of every ideology to the continued movement of capital. Bolaño’s novel leaves both the detectives and the reader in the same position as Byron: they understand the inequalities inherent in capitalist production and how they contribute to the normalization of brutality, but rather than evoking private terror or ambiguous apocalyptic laughter, *2666* evokes a “frustration without limit” (Pynchon, *GR* 668).

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