MA Dissertation Proposal

David Foster Wallace and technology

My research will focus on the extent to which David Foster Wallace's engagement with technology defines his conception of selfhood after postmodernism. Examining both his fiction and non-fiction, I will argue that Wallace's conception of selfhood moves from an initial reaction to postmodern tropes of irony and self-reflexivity having been made culturally dominant by the proliferation of entertainment technology, to one centred on a critique of posthumanism and the implications of machines assuming human roles. I aim to show how Wallace complicated his view of technology as *defining* contemporary selfhood in the wake of postmodernism - in, for instance, his essay 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' (1993) and in *Infinite Jest* (1996) - through his increased interaction with posthumanist ideas, resulting in a view of technology as potentially *erasing* selfhood (apparent in his unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011)). To do this I will follow Wallace's early focus on pervasive entertainment technologies in particular - epitomised, in his most famous work, by the fatally captivating *Infinite Jest* film cartridge - to information technologies in general, most significantly the less visible but equally portentous data processors threatening IRS agents in *The Pale King*.

Since his death in 2008, the work of David Foster Wallace has, increasingly, been a site of critical interest for scholars working on contemporary narrative, with two major works attempting to provide a framework for future critical study of Wallace being published last year (Hayes-Brady, 2016 & Hering, 2016). These books are accompanied by other recent works that show a marked attempt to broaden the scope of Wallace Studies from an early insular focus on irony, solipsism, and communication, to one more involved with established branches of critical theory; just in the past twelve months studies have been published which read Wallace in the context of world literature (Lucas Thompson, *Global Wallace* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016)) gender (Mary K. Holland, '"By Hirsute Author": Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace', *Critique*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (2017)), and neoliberalism (Jeffrey Severs, *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017)).

Despite new areas of research in Wallace Studies, his engagement with technology remains under-examined and is frequently elided in a way that positions the author as a purely literary entity. 'Wallace and his World', the opening section of Hayes-Brady's *Unspeakable Failures*, for example, develops Wallace's influences outside postmodernists

such as Thomas Pynchon and John Barth, bringing into consideration his reading of British Romanticism among others, but Wallace's world as described by Hayes-Brady remains firmly embedded in the written word; her brief mention of technology suggests it simply 'offers a perspective from which Wallace's writing approached the shifting landscape of contemporary American life'. I will argue in my thesis that Wallace did not view technology as passively as Hayes-Brady proposes, but instead used it in his work as the most active force of disruption in the 'shifting landscape' of life at the turn of the century - Wallace himself warned in 'E Unibus Pluram' against 'the temptation not to take television seriously as [...] a definer of the cultural atmosphere'

While the topic of Wallace and technology remains under-researched, there is existing criticism in this field upon which my thesis can expand. I will draw on the relatively early study by Paul Giles ('Sentimental Posthumanism', 2007) published before *The Pale King*; though unfinished, this novel necessitates a re-evaluation of Giles's argument that Wallace 'seeks to open up spaces within [...] abstract grids of information technology where human emotion and identity can be explored'. I intend to show how spaces for identity are rarely opened up in *The Pale King*, instead being enclosed by the advent of mechanised data processors to the extent of erasing the self: from Wallace's notes on the novel we know that the character/narrator David Wallace was intended to disappear from the narrative and simply become a 'creature of the system'. I will also re-evaluate the conclusion of Conley Wouters's study on information patterns in *The Pale King* ('"What Am I, A Machine?"', 2012) in which he reasserts Giles's argument in light of the new novel, claiming it offers the reader a series of case studies on 'how people might become machines' in a 'cohabitational harmony between consciousness and information'.

While engaging with these texts specific to Wallace, I will also examine how Wallace handled the ideas of posthumanism as set out in some of its key texts: Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1991) and N. Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). Unlike previous studies, I intend to examine how the way in which Wallace used technology to define contemporary conceptions of selfhood was altered between the publications of *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, arguing that the importance of technology's relationship to postmodernism in this definition was overridden by posthumanism and the idea of 'material objects [...] interpenetrated by information patterns' (Hayles), or as Giles writes: 'computation [...] as the ground of being'.

The faculty's expertise at Charles University in the teaching and research of postmodern literature would provide me with an invaluable foundation for understanding the

context against which Wallace tried to define himself. It is only through a firm grasp of postmodern conceptions of selfhood that I will be able to study how technology facilitated Wallace's engagement with his literary predecessors and ultimately supplanted their conceptions in his work.

Critical Bibliography

Wallace, David Foster, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll   Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998)

> In this article, first published in 1993, Wallace sets out his critique of postmodern irony and its influence on contemporary fiction in relation to television. He argues that television has appropriated postmodern techniques in a way that has made them the primary modes of self-expression in American culture, which Wallace views as cause for alarm given his argument that irony is capable only of destroying hypocrisy without constructing anything of value in its place. The study of this article will benefit my thesis as it provides a clear exposition of how Wallace viewed entertainment technology as the dominant method for defining selfhood at the turn of the century, and gives insight into how Wallace planned to tackle the challenges posed by this in his role as a contemporary author.

Wallace, David Foster, *Infinite Jest* (London: Little, Brown, 1996)

> Wallace's most famous and significant work of fiction centres on the fatally enjoyable *Infinite Jest* film, which captivates its audience to the extent that they desire nothing but to view it *ad infinitum*. Wallace offers a vision of America in the near future at a time when hyper-corporatised entertainment technologies have become increasingly invasive, available to all and disseminating their message that the apotheosis of human life is continual self-pleasure. This novel will form the starting point of my thesis, and I will examine how Wallace's characters attempt to define themselves in this culture governed by pervasive technology.

Wallace, David Foster, *The Pale King* (London: Penguin, 2012)

> Wallace's unfinished novel on which he worked immediately following the publication of *Infinite Jest* until his death in 2008. The novel follows the lives of IRS agents in 1985, at a time when the Service is planning to introduce the computerized examination of tax returns. From what exists of the novel, and from the notes Wallace

made as he was writing, one can see a departure from the author's earlier concerns of selfhood as defined by entertainment technology. My thesis will focus on how the characters of the novel are faced with the potential erasure of identity by the new data processing machines and how this relates to his earlier treatment of technology in *Infinite Jest*.

Giles, Paul, 'Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol.   53, No. 3, (Autumn, 2007), pp. 327-344

In this article Giles argues that Wallace firmly rejects liberal humanism's belief in human sovereignty and presents posthumanism as a *fait accompli*, placing his characters in an environment which has moved beyond geographical and physical difference into one negotiated by digital networks. Giles posits that Wallace attempts to move posthumanism away from informatics by opening up spaces for human sentiment - hence his 'sentimental posthumanism'. This article offers a useful base for researching Wallace's engagement with technology and the relationship between posthumanism and postmodernism in his fiction, but the publication of *The Pale King* requires Giles's conclusions be re-evaluated.

Haraway, Donna, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late   Twentieth Century' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991)

Haraway's 'Manifesto' argues that humanity in the twentieth century is increasingly hybrid, with the boundaries between human and machine being less distinct as technology continues to advance. As the 'Manifesto' forms the basis for critical study of the cyborg, my thesis will examine how Wallace engages with Haraway's conception of cyborg identity and complicates her conclusion that 'we are they' when it comes to human/machine hybridity.

Hayes-Brady, Clare, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and   Resistance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016)

Hayes-Brady's book tracks the repeated 'failures' throughout Wallace's work - namely the failures of communication and closure. This book will be useful to my thesis as it provides a clear framework for viewing Wallace's body of writing as a whole, drawing thematic connections between his fiction and non-fiction - where previous study on Wallace has been atomistic in its approach, focusing on one piece of writing or theme at the exclusion of others.

Hayles, N. Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999)

> Hayles's book establishes the figure of the 'posthuman' - a shift in subjectivity that she argues is as much a historical construct as that of the 'human'. The posthuman identity as defined by Hayles is one still firmly rooted in materiality, but one in which there are no boundaries between the organic and synthetic; human subjectivity is altered by its seamless interaction with mechanical processes that surpass liberal humanist definitions of being. This text forms the foundation for much of the subsequent discourse in posthuman theory and my thesis will incorporate Hayles's book to ground my study of how Wallace's conception of selfhood in *The Pale King* is defined by the ideas of posthumanism.

Hering, David, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016)

> In this book Hering attempts to map out the structural evolution of Wallace's novels, both through his career and through manuscript to publication; Hering is the first to make extensive use of Wallace's manuscripts, letters, and personal library to inform his study, arguing that this vast archive should be viewed as another Wallace 'text' in itself. This book is particularly useful to my thesis for its chapter detailing the composition process of *The Pale King* and the unfinished novel's relationship to the author's past work during this period, which will be invaluable as I will seek to examine how Wallace's engagement with technology changed during his ten years attempting to write *The Pale King*.

Wouters, Conley, '"What Am I, A Machine?": Humans, Information, and Matters of Record in David Foster Wallace's "The Pale King"', *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Winter, 2012), pp. 447-463

> Wouters's article presents several case studies of how characters in *The Pale King* seek to define their identity against an excess of information in everyday life. The article concludes that, although Wallace sets up the possibility of his characters symbolically becoming machines as a way to process information, *The Pale King* ultimately offers a harmonious view of the relationship between human and machine. This source is useful in detailing the myriad information patterns against which Wallace's characters are faced, but I intend to argue that the author is not as definitively optimistic at the prospect of human/machine cohabitation as Wouters suggests.