



CRITICISM ► FILM/MUSIC/PERFORMANCE

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## Author as Imaginary Friend: The Dull Spectacle of “The End of the Tour”

by Noah Dillon



Still from “The End of the Tour,” 2015, dir: James Ponsoldt, 106 minutes. Courtesy of A24 Films.

David Foster Wallace was an amazing writer, of both fiction and nonfiction, and in his interviews and other records he further revealed his humility and humanity — basically two of the most important traits a person can possess. And he won a lot of acclaim for those qualities. He committed suicide in 2008, and I often wish he were still alive, since I'd like to hear him think through contemporary entertainment, the proliferation of screens and images, politics, being a person, the changes in hip-hop, etc.<sup>[1]</sup> I never knew him, but I know he was a person.

*The End of the Tour*, the recently released based-on-true-events film about his 1996 interview by David Lipsky during the finale of Wallace's book tour promoting his magnum opus, *Infinite Jest* (1996), tries to share what made him a compelling thinker and writer. The movie stars Jason Segel as Wallace and Jesse Eisenberg as Lipsky, with a really awesome cameo appearance by Joan Cusack. Eisenberg, who can sometimes be great, is here essentially only Jesse Eisenberg onscreen. Segel has pretty much all of the right gestures and the voice and the mannerisms of the author: the hair, the gigantic stature and build, the glasses, enduring five-o'clock-shadow, and Wallace's iconic bandana. But throughout the film you see that these are people performing. You can sense the interactions of Wallace and Lipsky in shadows, behind the glaze of two actors who remain present throughout as impersonators on a film set. No matter how faithful to the original material, the movie announces itself over and over: “I am a sham.”

There's no doubt about the earnestness of the film's makers — neither the actors, nor director James Ponsoldt, not Lipsky or screenwriter Donald Margulies, nor Danny Elfman, who did the music, which is sparing and nonetheless totally cloying. You get the same impression from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, a 2009 adaptation of Wallace's short story collection of the same name, written, produced, directed, and co-starring John Krasinski: the people who made this love Wallace's work and also they can't help but to muck it up. And although there are things in these movies that Hollywood films<sup>[2]</sup> don't often acknowledge — about misogyny and visibility and detachment in *Brief Interviews*, and about public persona versus interiority versus the interdependence of personhood as something simultaneously continuous and something peculiarly fleeting and situational in *The End of the Tour* — they both end up being bad. And *The End of the Tour* is bad in a way that is actually a fundamental violation of some of the ideas that Wallace was most invested in thinking through, and for which his work is loved.

In the same way that Wallace followed in the stylistic footsteps of writers like Don DeLillo and Veronica Geng and Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme and cetera, he likewise took up their interest in the image as a thing that people interact with. And he kind of insisted on dealing with the difficult negotiation of wanting to engage with representations and people sincerely, without the defenses of suspicion and critical judgment or cynicism, while also recognizing that everyone (himself included) performs and conceals and advertises and dissimulates, and that the relationship of these images to what they represent or hide is complex and requires critical analysis to understand.<sup>[3]</sup>

The confusion of metaphor, delusion, reality and representation pervade his work. From his treatise on television and writing (“E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” 1993)<sup>[4]</sup> to his essay for *Rolling Stone* on the 2000 Republican presidential primaries (“Up Simba!” 2008) to his profile of David Lynch (“David Lynch Keeps His Head,” 1996) to his remembrance of the September 11 attacks (“The View from Mrs. Thompson's,” 2001) to *Infinite Jest* itself — I mean, it really goes on — those entanglements are nearly constant preoccupations. He looked at images and used them and doubted them and grappled with them, in a way that is absolutely no different from a competent artist or art critic.

So the haphazard and trite way that the image of Wallace is used, substituting a type for a person, is distressing. One of the aphoristic lines from *Infinite Jest* sort of gets to the heart of the problem here: “The vapider [the cliché], the sharper the canines of the real truth it covers.” Clichés, for Wallace, could contain and encode a lot of real and complex

truth in their abstract simplicity. But in *The End of the Tour*, cliché is used to paper over reality. Filmic treacle of plot, cinematography, music, and exposition pervade the movie.

The basic story is this: discouraged writer Lipsky gets a job writing for *Rolling Stone* and pitches an interview with Wallace, a near-contemporary who's been receiving effusive praise for his recently published epic, the already-several-times-mentioned *Infinite Jest*. Lipsky gets OK'd for the profile<sup>[5]</sup> and follows Wallace for several days on a book tour jaunt from Bloomington, IL to Minneapolis and back, and along the way they talk and argue and learn about each other and themselves. But the big takeaway message is that in their encounter Lipsky gropes the face of an angel.<sup>[6]</sup> It's a bait and switch: a movie ostensibly about Wallace turns out to be a coming-of-age story about a guy who talked to him exactly once on a five-day trip.

Although Segel/Wallace repeatedly, and probably accurate to the interviews, insists that he's regular, insecure, difficult, and flawed, the movie sets him up as an oracle and, in order to cement his beatification, frames the entire story around his suicide.<sup>[7]</sup> And a penultimate image of Wallace, in slow motion, ecstatic and arms cast wide in goddamn shafts of light in a fucking church, leaves no doubt that he was an angel on Earth. It really finishes that way. I mean really.

It should come as no surprise that Wallace's estate didn't sign off on this thing.<sup>[8]</sup>

Look: in one of the movie's most pointed scenes, Lipsky and Wallace argue about whether Wallace's persona as a regular guy who enjoys spectatation and candy, whether that persona is an affectation or a real, regular person. Lipsky insists, referring to *Infinite Jest*, “People don't crack open a thousand-page novel because they heard the author is a regular guy.” Oh no? At base, all people are no more or less than human. The reason that Wallace receives such love from people like Lipsky, Krasinski, me, et al. is because he is especially adept at articulating the complexity of being a person, in particular a (late-20<sup>th</sup>-century, college-educated, middle class, white) regular guy.<sup>[9]</sup> He talks about stuff at length, and makes simple problems extremely complex. The aforementioned scene is also one of the longest sustained dialogues the writers get into with each other, even though it ultimately doesn't provide anything interesting to think about. Although Wallace was well known for verbosity in his prose, and though these two intelligent guys talked for almost a week, their conversation has been distilled into snippets boomeranging from banality to “deep” pronouncement, with nothing lasting more than a minute or two. Surely if these guys are as witty and thoughtful as the movie supposes them to be, the audience could be entertained by more than a clip reel of 90-second excerpts from their conversation.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the film doesn't really spend any time thinking about the author's actual work, except to highlight how much praise it received and how enormous (literally and figuratively) his novel is. One scene briefly shows his studio, a black-box room with a computer. That's it. About two seconds. They note that his work thinks about subjects like loneliness and entertainment and satisfaction, but they don't ever talk about Wallace's actual ideas on those topics.

You know, the movie kind of expressly thinks about Wallace as a teacher and suggests a bit of martyrdom/humility in his decision to teach at Illinois State University. What Wallace taught there was creative writing and how to read fiction. In one class he used genre fiction to understand writing, assigning students books by Stephen King, Larry McMurtry, Mary Higgins Clark, Thomas Harris, and other popular authors, rather than supposedly challenging “literary” fare. I assume it's really difficult to make a biopic without being effusive, reductive, and basically just hammy and at least kind of dishonest — maybe it's totally impossible. But this is bad. Perhaps something more entertaining and unserious would have worked better: Wallace on the campaign trail, on a cruise ship, at the 1998 Adult Video News porn awards, whatever, anything with some modicum of action and non-pretense.<sup>[10]</sup> I'm aware of the fact that this likely sounds like a deranged fanboy claiming to know the author better or whatever. In trying to make a considered movie about a guy who thought a lot, what we end up with is fluff, flattery, hokum — a vapid con job. It's a real downer.



Still from “The End of the Tour,” 2015, dir. James Ponsoldt, 106 minutes. Courtesy of A24 Films.

<sup>[1]</sup> In 1990, he co-wrote *Signifying Rappers* with Mark Costello, about the artform's history and cultural significance and complications.

<sup>[2]</sup> Yeah, the definition of “Hollywood film” is pretty loose here.

<sup>[3]</sup> One thing he wrote really well about was complication and complexity, the difficult ways in which seemingly simple phenomena involute themselves.

<sup>[4]</sup> Here's what I think is an interesting little... I don't know... *thing*: in one scene, Eisenberg/Lipsky and Segel/Wallace are touring Minneapolis with Joan Cusack, and they spot Gwendolyn Gillen's 2002 bronze statue of Mary Tyler Moore, located in the city's downtown, commemorating the image of the actress tossing her hat on the air at the end of her famous 1970s TV show's opening credits. So, with this movie set in 1996, the statue is an anachronism. So but then why's it there, in the story? Because it's a nod to Wallace and his work, since he, an avid TV watcher, spent a lot of time in “E Unibus Pluram” unpacking the semiotics of an episode of 1980s medical drama *St. Elsewhere*, produced by Moore's MTM Productions, starring and guest starring former *Mary Tyler Moore Show* actors, and featuring a plot about a deluded man who thinks he's Moore on the original show, even ending with the same gesture of the deluded man tossing his hat into the air just like Moore. And Wallace points out that although the moral lesson of the *St. Elsewhere* episode is that we shouldn't watch a lot of TV, the only way to get the whole payoff of interleaved allusions in the episode is by having watched a ton of television. Which also the only way to get the reference in this little throwaway scene in the movie is to know both the television and literary Wallace-canon references. Though if you've read that long essay you've probably read a lot of other stuff by him which might give you the suspicion that the interaction you're seeing on screen is by two fabricated people and not at all representative of the author you've spent so much time with.

<sup>[5]</sup> The thing was published only as a transcription after Wallace's death. I haven't read Lipsky's book, but in interviews he seems happy with the movie, and even with its inventions.

<sup>[6]</sup> Even as Eisenberg/Lipsky repeatedly embarrasses himself by acting like an ass (read: human), Wallace always gives him sage little moral instructions on how to “be a good guy.” Wallace becomes a *deus ex machina*, rather than a person. In so doing, the film makes Lipsky the focus and whitewashes the flaws in Wallace's own base humanity, and

further raises his sanctity, and thereby raises the stature of whoever the great man would spend so much time divulging himself to (i.e. Lipsky), and verifies the credibility of Lipsky’s role as caretaker of Wallace’s post-suicide legacy, which bookends the whole thing.

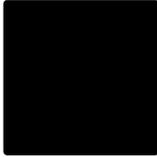
[7] It’s sometimes suggested that the work of a person who committed suicide can’t be read except through that lens. This seems absurd and demeaning. Can’t Ernest Hemingway be read apart from his suicide? Sylvia Plath? Marilyn Monroe? Hunter S. Thompson? Or Amy Winehouse, whose self-destruction is chronicled in a documentary that was playing in the same theater? In many cases I would aver that, if we must make such analyses, the interpretation might make more sense running in the reverse: that the death should instead be read from the work. But maybe this is all ancillary.

[8] This alone doesn’t say anything significant about the movie, of course.

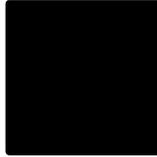
[9] To answer a friend’s question: although Wallace talks about America a lot, about what particular traits are especially American, I think his writing *about America* is often aimed seemingly too broad and too narrow. It’s about what it’s like to live in any developed capitalist nation, and what it is to be a young, middle class, college-educated, late-20<sup>th</sup>-century white guy in that world.

[10] Few of the conversations run for more than a few minutes, tops. Perhaps like *My Dinner with Andre* (1981), the audience could be trusted to remain interested in a tête-à-tête — excised from five days of chatter by two smart and interesting guys — that runs an hour-and-a-half.

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