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9. Escaping Visual Culture: The Character of Joelle van Dyne in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*

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Abstract

Joelle van Dyne is one of the most important female characters in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996). Joelle, who is remembered for her stunning beauty, disguises herself under the pseudonym of Madame Psychosis and hosts a late-night radio show in which she freely speaks to a niche audience. Through the use of sound studies theories, this paper investigates the positive effects that Joelle's radiophonic voice produces on herself and her listeners. Joelle and her listeners live in *Infinite Jest's* fictitious reality, which has many points in common with the American society of the 1990s. In that period, the spread of television and visual entertainment began to reveal its negative consequences on people's mental health and psychological well-being. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace discusses the dangers of a culture that prioritizes appearance and entertainment over meaningful values. This paper suggests that the character of Joelle reacts to these issues by counterposing the sound of her radiophonic voice to a culture that is becoming more and more visual. Sound proves to be the very element that permits this character to detach herself from her beautiful body-image and experience embodiment unrelated to her looks. At the same time, she powerfully and creatively affirms herself in the world through her radio show. Joelle's voice paves the way for the creation of a democratic sonic community which includes every listener regardless of their appearance while permitting connection through sound resonance. This sonic community valorizes human emotions and shared values, which appeared to have been abandoned in a society dominated by visuality.

Keywords

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, visual studies, sound studies, cinema, radio

Introduction

Visuality has played a leading part in the creation of Western culture up to the point that images have become central to our daily lives. We are surrounded by visual art, advertisements, photographs, television programs, and social media. In this cultural context, sight acquires a privileged position for deciphering reality at the expense of other senses such as hearing. Murray Schafer, one of the leading theorists of sound studies, observes that "in the West the ear gave way to the eye as the most important gatherer of information about the time of the Renaissance, with the development of the printing press and perspective painting" (101). In 1996, David Foster Wallace published his renowned novel *Infinite Jest* in which he deals with several social

issues prevalent in 1990s' American society including the disproportionate consumption of visual entertainment. The novel contains various references to the psychological dangers that image-centered media such as cinema and television cause for people. In his 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," Wallace argues that unconscionable consumption of television could deeply affect people's psychological well-being (174). The main cause to this problem seems connected to postmodern irony that had entered people's lives through television (171) and that contributed to dismissing "single-entendre values" (192), i.e. valuable principles and human emotions. Wallace can be considered as one of those "literary 'rebels'" (192) aiming at showing that "we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections" (Wallace in McCaffery 27) through their fiction.³⁴

This chapter aims at demonstrating that sound in the novel *Infinite Jest* can prove a valuable means to soothe the psychological distress experienced by the characters, which derives from the oppressive pervasiveness of images. The analysis of the radiophonic voice of the female character Joelle van Dyne, who in the persona of Madame Psychosis hosts an independent radio show, highlights that her voice can be beneficial to different characters in a variety of ways. This paper opens with a contextualization of *Infinite Jest* within the framework of visual studies and subsequently proceeds to an analysis of the figure of Joelle van Dyne from a sound studies perspective. Joelle's radio voice is investigated in contrast to her cinematic voice with the aim of showing that the radio provides this character with power and creative potential that the cinema denies her. The study then focuses on Joelle's voice as an instrument to create interpersonal connections between speaker and listeners through the physical phenomenon of sound resonance. The resulting sonic community reveals that the radio impacts listeners in a way that differs from how television influences its viewers. Finally, this chapter proves that Joelle's radio show in *Infinite Jest* allows characters to restore those values and human emotions that seemed to have been neglected due to the diffusion of television.

Visuality, Television, and David Foster Wallace

Visuality entered the discourse of cultural studies in the late 1980s with the emergence of an interdisciplinary field concerning the "cultural construction of the visual in arts, media and everyday life" (Dikovitskaya 3). The birth of this field of studies, visual culture (3), affirmed the value of images and their cultural centrality in Western postindustrial societies. In the first edition of *The Visual Culture Reader* (1998), Nicholas Mirzoeff, one of the pioneers of visual culture studies, explains that "[v]isual culture is concerned with visual events in which information, meaning or

³⁴ David Foster Wallace is considered one of the pioneers of the "New Sincerity." More on Wallace and the New Sincerity can be found in Adam Kelly's essay "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction."

pleasure is sought by the consumer in an interface with visual technology” (“What is Visual Culture?” 3). The study of “visual events” unsurprisingly finds its roots in the twentieth century, when images start pervading people’s daily lives thanks to the proliferation of television and other visual media. Mirzoeff’s definition of visual culture suggests a connection between images and capitalistic societies characterized by the emergence of consumerism. In the context of visual culture, people become “consumer[s]” (3) when facing a visual technology such as television, that contributed to changing profoundly the lives of Americans in the late twentieth century. Following Mirzoeff, television would provide pleasure in the form of entertainment, but also information³⁵ and meaning. Dikovitskaya’s work on visual culture focuses primarily on meaning, since she argues that visual studies concern the “visual image as the focal point in the processes through which meaning is made in a cultural context” (3). While Mirzoeff provides a neutral definition of visual technology, some scholars seem to be worried about the gradual increase of mediated images in people’s everyday lives. David Foster Wallace and Jerry Mander, for instance, have shown concern about the effects of television and televised images on people. Aware of the exorbitant number of hours Americans spend in front of it,³⁶ they both report that this medium threatens viewers’ psychological well-being.

In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace argues that television is a driving force behind the rise of an anxious and self-conscious society whose members worry excessively about their appearance. He is convinced that through television “we receive unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant feature of *truly alive* persons is watchableness” (“Unibus” 155; emphasis added). As a result, only those who can bear other people’s gaze and judgment can be defined as “alive.” Small screen actors distinguish themselves as models of “watchableness,” creating the illusion of being “oblivious to the fact that they are watched” (155). Actors’ illusory “watchableness” is transmitted to viewers who wish to “emulate them,” behaving in real life as nonchalantly as actors do in television shows (154). Beauty constitutes another concern for spectators who tend to feel anxious before actors’ typical outstanding prettiness (173-74). Such toxicity seems to derive from the fact that people are induced to compare their real lives to the false existences of actors in TV programs. As Jerry Mander argues in his 1978 *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, this medium is highly deceitful, causing “confusion as to what is real experience and what is television experience” (246). This derives from the power of images since, as Mander argues in a later essay, “we tend to always believe the image, because images seem real. But they’re not” (“Privatization”). Televised images are thus dangerous because they convey unimportant and superficial values that people accept as meaningful. By depicting “watchableness”

³⁵ For example, documentaries and TV news.

³⁶ In “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” Wallace includes himself within the mass of Americans spending six hours per day in front of television (155).

as a significant value, television contributes to influencing the “whole psychology of one’s relation to himself, his mirror, his loved ones, and a world of real people and real gazes” (“Unibus” 174). People become increasingly anxious and more concerned about their looks as well as about the impression they give others. As Wallace contends, “we seem terribly afraid of other people’s reactions to us and very desperate to control how people interpret us” (“100-Word Statement”). If other people become judges of one’s own worth and dignity, any individual will risk experiencing constant feelings of inadequacy within their own society.

In *Infinite Jest*, published in a moment of transition from literary postmodernism to post-postmodernism, Wallace offers several examples of the self-conscious society television has contributed to creating. For instance, the problem of appearance is investigated through *videophony*, a brand-new option to install on TPs,³⁷ giving characters the opportunity to make video calls. The sonic elements that characterize usual phone calls are complemented by the visual dimension provided by screens allowing users to see each other. Instead of enhancing interpersonal mediated interactions, in *Infinite Jest*, videophony triggers anxiety and apprehension in most users. Callers start to worry about their appearance on screen: “the videophonic stress was even worse if you were at all vain. I.e. if you worried at all about how you looked. As in to other people. Which all kidding aside who doesn’t” (*Jest* 147). Concern for their own looks may also derive from the characters’ conviction that they are less attractive than the society-imposed standard. Given their lack of self-confidence, users tend to see the negative sides of their own screen images, having the feeling of appearing “*untrustworthy, unlikable, or hard to like*” (147; emphasis in original). The characters’ constant focus on their appearance in front of this new visual technology well translates Wallace’s thoughts on the dangers of the excessive consumption of images expressed in “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.”

The problem of “watchableness” in *Infinite Jest* is also echoed by the huge variety of characters displaying unusual body shapes, physical peculiarities, “deformities,” and disabilities. Members of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed cannot be seen by other characters as they shelter from other people’s gazes under a veil that inevitably prevents them from being watched. Described with disturbing but ironic adverbs such as “hideously and improbably” and by the noun “deformed,” they can see the world through their veil while the world cannot see the deformity they hide. Den Dulk interprets the use of the veil as an “ironic distancing mechanism” (330) that prevents U.H.I.D. members from being determined by the gaze and judgment of others: “literally [...] as a barrier, [...] but also by openly displaying their shame [...] and at the same time hiding that shame, placing it [...] beyond determination by others” (330). However, den Dulk highlights the “negative freedom”

³⁷ The TP in the novel *Infinite Jest* is a digital device permitting characters to watch movies through cartridges as well as making phone calls and video calls.

derived from this escape: “it is a freedom from the look of others, but no positive content has been given to one’s own identity” (330). The members of the U.H.I.D. subtract themselves from other people’s gaze while not affirming their identity. Den Dulk states that “The veils of the U.H.I.D. work as an interesting means of distancing from a culture that is itself ‘deformed,’ but they do not offer a satisfactory alternative to that culture” (331). Other instruments are needed to undermine the toxic culture of “watchableness” that subjugates characters in *Infinite Jest* and prevents them from asserting their presence in their fictional world.

Besides developing the topic of “watchableness,” *Infinite Jest* contains further criticism of the televised image. The novel’s plot develops from the accidental illegal dissemination of a TP cartridge titled “Entertainment.” The content, which remains mysterious nearly to the end of the novel, entails that characters who accidentally watch it can never recover from a vegetative, death-like state.³⁸ The word Entertainment reminds of Postman’s beliefs expressed in his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*: “all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment. Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business [...]. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death” (15). The Entertainment delivers a type of pleasure literally pushing characters to amuse themselves to death, as it is nearly lethal to them. Moreover, the cartridge and its effects on characters could constitute a metaphor for Postman’s ideas on the American society that turns its components as well as its fundamental values into entertainment. Wallace negotiates this issue in the novel by exaggerating the effects that the televised image produces on people, which are explored by Mander. The scholar argues that when we watch television “[w]e become affixed to the changing images, [...] we merely give ourselves over to them. It is total involvement [...] and total unconscious detachment [...] – no cognition, no discernment, no notations upon the experience one is having” (*Four Arguments* 204). People watching the Entertainment are absorbed by images but deprived of the possibility of consciously considering what they are looking at. In addition, they are unable to openly agree, disagree, or ponder the content of the cartridge. As Mander argues in his essay “Privatization of Consciousness,” “Television is *not* democratic. Viewers at home do not make television; they *receive* it.” This resonates with Postman’s idea that several aspects of society have become part of the entertainment industry “largely without protest or even much popular notice” (Postman 15). Spectators’ absence of cognition precludes them from having any decisional power or participation right in the Entertainment. The reception of TP images happens in a

³⁸ In his essay “The Killing Vision: David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*,” Stefano Ercolino interprets the Entertainment as a rewriting of the *topos* of the killing vision and argues that “Wallace’s rewriting of the *topos* dealt a fierce criticism to the televisual addiction of Americans [...] magnifying at the same time the televisual image by providing it with infinite entertaining power unbearable to the viewer” (34).

state of total passivity, since TP, like television, “create[s] a passive mental attitude” (Mander, *Four Arguments* 200).

Taking into consideration the categories of *pleasure* and *meaning* introduced by Mirzoeff (3), it is arguable that since the sense of satisfaction is so strong and pervasive in spectators, any other meaning inferable from the cartridge is effaced at the expense of pleasure. The conditions of passivity and total involvement prevent watchers from judging the visual content critically, with the result that they cannot find a deeper significance behind the image. This creates a loop of “infinite” watching with the only aim of selfishly perpetuating pleasure for oneself. As Marathe, a character in *Infinite Jest*, states, “people choose nothing over themselves to love, each one. A U.S.A. that would die [...] for the so-called perfect Entertainment, this film” (*Jest* 318). This individualistic way of seeking gratification is at the expense of human connections and shared principles. The radio program by Joelle van Dyne and the sonic community she creates through her voice are two of the possible means allowing characters to embrace human feelings while being connected with their peers.

Cinema Actress and Radio Speaker: Joelle van Dyne's Voice

Joelle van Dyne is one of the characters in *Infinite Jest* who seeks to escape visual domination through the veil of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed. The reader learns that she decides to hide under the veil of the U.H.I.D. even though she has a completely different kind of deformity from all the other characters belonging to the Union. In fact, her “deformity” is her stunning beauty, since she is described both as a member of the Union of the Hideously and Improbably Deformed and as the “Prettiest Girl of All Time” (*Jest* 239). Joelle's beauty is so fascinating and mesmerizing that it literally drives people crazy. Reactions toward her attractive figure escalate when she becomes a cinema actress, and her image is at the mercy of several viewers. *Infinite Jest* seems to convey the idea that even beautiful bodies are victims of the culture of “watchableness,” and that beauty may be a type of “deformity.” In the novel, Joelle is also presented as a radio speaker under the pseudonym of Madame Psychosis. Her late-night radio show, “60 Minutes +/- with Madame Psychosis,” allows Joelle the use of sound, specifically her own voice, to escape visuality and create an alternative to the toxic culture of appearance. In addition, through her radiophonic voice, listeners assume Joelle's corporeality and automatically convey her embodied existence.

Body and embodiment are crucial to our analysis of Joelle van Dyne. These concepts can be considered in relation to cinema and radio, the media featuring Joelle in the novel. A definition of embodiment may be deduced from the works by scholars Mary Ann Doane and Michael Chion, who both investigate voices in cinema. Doane defines the voice-over in films as a “*disembodied* voice [...] not localizable, because it cannot be yoked to a body [...] lacking any specification in space or time” (42;

emphasis in original). Similarly, Chion discusses the cinematic switch from acousmètre to de-acousmatized voice in terms of embodiment and disembodiment. He defines the acousmètre as “a voice [that] has not yet been visualized – that is, when we cannot yet connect it to a face [...] a kind of talking [...] shadow” (21). On the contrary, de-acousmatization is the “symbolic act” of “embodying the voice. [...] [It] roots the acousmètre to a place and says ‘here is your body’” (27-28). The two scholars consider embodiment as the presence of a body localizable in time and space, while implying the visualization of this body on screen. As Chion argues, “de-acousmatization [...] results from finally showing the person speaking” (23) who “in-scribe[s] his or her body inside the frame, in the visual field” (27). These considerations on (dis)embodiment as well as the definition of acousmètre are useful for our analysis of Joelle’s embodiment in the contexts of cinema and radio.

Cinema and filmmaking play a significant role in *Infinite Jest*. This topic is mainly related to the figure of James Incandenza, who is an amateur filmmaker and father of the three brothers and main characters Hal, Mario, and Orin. The addictive Entertainment cartridge is produced by James Incandenza himself and stages Joelle van Dyne as the main character personifying “some kind of maternal instantiation of the archetypal figure Death, sitting naked, corporeally gorgeous, ravishing, hugely pregnant” (*Jest* 788). It is important to notice that in cinema, Joelle van Dyne is represented in her physicality and her female physical attributes are showcased. As the example shows, the Entertainment revolves around the beauty of her naked body while her femininity is highlighted by pregnancy. Joelle’s corporeality is visually identifiable and localizable through her screen image implying her embodiment. Furthermore, the content of the image is reiterated by Joelle’s speech, adding a sonic dimension to the visual elements, since the woman is “explaining in very simple childlike language to whomever the film’s camera represents that Death is always female, and that the female is always maternal” (788). As a result, Joelle’s speech functions as a restatement of her body image, encouraging the spectator to associate Joelle’s body with the concepts of motherhood and death. This seems to imply stereotypical woman-mother and woman-death combinations and assert a male-centric view of the woman.

In her essay “Murder, She Spoke: The Female Voice’s Ethics of Evocation and Spatialisation in the True Crime Podcast,” Amanda Greer proposes a way to explain the difference between female voices in cinema and in radio podcasts. She states that “the female voice in cinema is confined to the frame (devoid of lateral movement), exists in a monophonic dimension of sound and is anchored to a diegetic body” (159). This means that female speech in cinema is always de-acousmatized, bound to the image of the body, with no possibility to detach from it, and this is what happens in the scene of the Entertainment staging the naked actress. As noted previously, in the cartridge, Joelle van Dyne’s speech complements the image of her body.

Moreover, Joelle's voice is attached to the image, which means, following Chion (27-28) that her voice is embodied. Greer reports Doane's "politics of the female voice in cinema," namely that "the female voice is denied the authority of creativity, restrained by her inescapable embodiment" (Greer 153). Considering Doane's argument, the close relationship between image and speech in the Entertainment results in a negative outcome for Joelle since she is deprived of the authority to speak without being immediately recognized as a female, naked, good-looking, and attractive body. Joelle speaks with a "de-acousmatized voice [...] inherently feminine, sexualised and, in the vein of the striptease, highly visual and spectacular" (153). Moreover, the image-voice pair is in the hands of a male director who opts for a certain model – in this case he probably chooses Joelle because of her stunning looks – and decides her lines. The female image-voice pair is totally determined by a male mind, once again highlighting the male-centric impositions on the female body.

Joelle van Dyne's voice has an antithetical role when she personifies the radio speaker Madame Psychosis. Greer argues that resistance to the cinematic representation of the female voice is provided by podcasts (153). Similarly, the radio in *Infinite Jest* can provide this type of resistance to Joelle by allowing a separation of voice and body. Greer writes against the cinematic representation of the woman and argues in favor of podcasts: "Though, in cinema, the female *acousmetre* is often de-acousmatized, re-attached to her body as a signification of her lack of power, alternative, aural-spatial media like the podcast have offered new, alternative routes of resistance for this female *acousmetre*, allowing her to maintain her powerful disembodied status" (153; emphases in original). This consideration on the effective disembodied status of the *acousmètre* can be applied to the character of Madame Psychosis, since her acousmatized voice allows her to maintain her disembodied condition through which she gains authority and power. In this case, the radio program permits Joelle to affirm her "authority of creativity" (Greer 153). As a matter of fact, she herself decides on the music and the content of her program, consisting mainly of monologues which "seem both free-associative and intricately structured, not unlike nightmares. There's no telling what'll be up on a given night. If there's one even remotely consistent theme it's maybe film and film-cartridges" (*Jest* 185). As the reader will later discover, Joelle is a cinema student but her passion for cinema and her creativity can only be freely expressed through another medium – radio –, which intrinsically excludes images. The radio becomes thus a safe sonic space for Joelle. Despite the eclectic and unpredictable content of the show, Joelle's monologuing and acousmatized voice is the recurrent feature of all episodes.

Joelle's acousmatized voice plays an important part in the program because it constitutes another way to infer Joelle's embodiment. So far, embodiment has been defined by the coincidence of the voice and the image of the body on a screen. In her work *Sounding the Novel* (2018), Nathalie Aghoro proposes a way to affirm bodily

presence that involves the auditory instead of the visual and precisely includes the voice. Aghoro discusses the body-voice pair, arguing that the voice “becomes an autonomous phenomenon reflecting the body while distancing itself from it [...] the sounding voice manifests as the body’s ephemeral sonic double in the world” (40). Following Aghoro’s argument, the voice can be conceived as an independent manifestation of corporeality. Aghoro’s statement that the voice distances itself from the body is crucial to understanding that, despite the body not being visually recognizable, the voice allows listeners to imply it. Even in the case of a synthetic voice, listeners are still able to attribute “virtual” or “perceived corporeality” to it (42). In *Infinite Jest*, the audience of Joelle’s show is totally clueless about Madame Psychosis’ identity, and they can only imagine her look. Nevertheless, they assess her voice as embodied since they perceive the corporeality behind it, even without any visual proof of its connection to a real body. In this case, listeners’ perception is central for attributing corporeality to Joelle. While Doane and Chion define embodiment in strictly visual terms, the sound of the voice and the way listeners decide to interpret it are pivotal to define a different type of embodiment, a sonic one. In *Infinite Jest*, listeners never seem to question Joelle’s embodiment, meaning that they do not doubt the presence of a real person beyond that voice. Joelle’s sonic embodiment implies thus a meaningful relationship between listeners and speakers, which will be explored in the next sections.

Beyond Visual Escape: A Positive Sound Space

In addition to constituting a safe sonic space for Joelle van Dyne in the persona of Madame Psychosis, the radio show arguably offers this opportunity to her listeners, too. As a matter of fact, the radio program permits listeners to remain invisible to the gazes of others and provides them with the same ease as of being under the veil of the U.H.I.D. When Joelle disappears from her radio program to recover from her drug addiction, audience members surprisingly show up to the student engineer in charge of the radio station to gather information about her absence. In doing so, they become visible to the narrator’s eye who cannot refrain from describing them: “Almost all the personal wee-hour inquiries are from listeners somehow bent, misshapen, speech-defective, vacantly grinning, damaged in some way. The type whose spectacles have been repaired with electrician’s tape. Shyly inquiring” (*Jest* 625). This audience characterized by physical “deformities” had been previously addressed by Madame Psychosis, who, in her radio show, invited them to take part in the U.H.I.D.: “The phrenologically malformed. The suppuratively lesioned. The endocrinologically malodorous of whatever ilk. Run don’t walk on down. The acervulus-nosed” (190). Madame Psychosis, as a sort of political activist, summons all these categories of people, who, she says, still hole up at home, to join the U.H.I.D. with the warranty of invisibility: “All meeting rooms windowless. That’s in ital: all

meeting rooms windowless" (190). However, what she probably fails to understand is that these people already have a "windowless" meeting space where they meet every night: her radio show.

"60 Minutes +/- with Madame Psychosis" is a sonic meeting space. It is deprived of visuality but maintains its status as a room in which people share their company and create community. This is possible thanks to the physical link between bodies which is guaranteed by Joelle's voice. Sound propagation is a primarily physical phenomenon deriving from mechanical waves interacting with the surroundings. As Aghoro reminds, "[s]ound waves pervade the sounding as well as the listening body. The senses of hearing and touch register their vibrations and the emitting and receiving bodies connect in a process of oscillation" (132). It is precisely through sound waves that two or more bodies are physically – not only emotionally or psychologically – connected. This concept is expanded by Amanda Greer, who includes the idea that bodies can connect through sound even when a medium interposes between them. She refers specifically to podcasts, arguing that "the podcast engages not only the mind, but the resonant and resonating body, establishing a physical connection between listener and sonic object (podcast)" (160). While Greer addresses the podcast, her argument can certainly be applied to Madame Psychosis' radio show. Even if Madame Psychosis' voice is broadcasted by radio, the oscillations produced by this sound permit her body – the sounding one – and the listeners' bodies to physically connect, despite the distance and the absence of direct contact. Moreover, the sound of her voice ends up linking listeners into a community. As Aghoro argues, "the sounding of voice is a social act, a demand or, at least, an invitation to participate in the acoustic community that it establishes – starting with a person and her or his sonic double and extending to the most complex intersubjective networks facilitated by contemporary media" (45). Not only does the radio show allow for a one-to-one connection, namely from Joelle's single body to a listener's body: it gives birth to a sonic community of multiple bodies tied together through sound. Without their awareness, all listeners of Madame Psychosis' radio show are connected through sound resonance, even if the emitting body is just one. The requirement to take part in this sonic community is merely having a body, regardless of its shape and look. Through her voice, Madame Psychosis invites her listeners to return to a simple, primordial, and resonating matter. As Strack argues in her paper on elemental compositions, "sound's material infrastructure is composed of vibrations that emerge from and are inflected by material surroundings" (24). There is no need to visualize bodies, since sound already makes them interfere and physically connect.

Madame Psychosis' radiophonic community can be defined as democratic. As a matter of fact, the total irrelevance of one's looks implies that bodies cannot be classified in terms of beauty, which is instead a tendency that television fosters. Television viewers are inclined to compare their appearance to that of television actors with the

result of feeling constantly inadequate (“Unibus” 173-74). The absence of visuality inhibits listeners from making comparisons and excludes any desire to look different. Moreover, no hierarchy is established between Madame Psychosis and her listeners. As far as television is concerned, Mander affirms that it cannot be defined as a democratic medium and that “[v]iewers at home do not make television; they *receive* it” (“Privatization”). Despite listeners not “making” Madame Psychosis’ radio program, they are often invited to participate: “Sometimes Madame Psychosis takes one random call to start ‘60 +/-.’ Tonight the one caller she ends by taking has a cultured stutter and invites M.P. and the YYY community to consider the fact that the moon, which of course as any sot knows revolves around the earth, does not itself revolve. Is this true?” (*Jest* 192). The possibility to take part in the program anonymously permits listeners to feel totally free to reflect on the most diverse topics. The eclectic content of the program highlights its inclusivity, since listeners bring their contributions with the assurance of total neutrality and acceptance of their thoughts. The narrator hence reports that Joelle’s voice is “not bored or laconic or ironic or tongue-in-cheek. [...] It’s reflective but not judgmental” (189). Considering their active participation in her program and their prompt demand for information when she disappears, Joelle’s radio listeners may be considered rather dynamic. This differentiates them from TP watchers, who are rendered totally inactive by the images of the Entertainment cartridge. By allowing listeners to freely express their thoughts, the radio program provides a solution to the non-democratic entertainment delivered by television and TP and fosters critical thinking and the circulation of diverse opinions.

When Madame Psychosis disappears from the radio program, all that remains is silence: “A terrible silence now, weeknights. A different silence altogether from the radio-silence-type silence that used to take up over half her nightly show. Silence of presence v. silence of absence, maybe. The silences on the tapes are the worst” (*Jest* 625). Silence is perceived by Madame Psychosis’ listeners as a loss. The absence of sound is identified as absence of physical connection and implies the dissolution of the sonic community. As Strack argues, “[l]oss is thereby sensed more than known or seen, as shifting vibrations affectively work on mind-bodies and transport messages without approaching the level of consciousness” (35). Since the emitting body stops producing sound waves, the audience’s bodies are no longer connected through oscillation, ending up physically separated from one another. Listeners of Madame Psychosis’ show feel this loss at the mind-body level before consciously or emotionally mourning their radio star. Through the concept of silence as absence of sound waves and vibrations, it is possible to argue again for sound as a generative and linking force. This reinforces the thesis that the sound of Joelle’s voice in “60 Minutes +/- with Madame Psychosis” permits the creation of a socially active and democratic community of listeners.

Sound, Meaning, and Affection: Sad Speakers and Loving Listeners

The radio show hosted by Joelle van Dyne in the persona of Madame Psychosis links listeners physically while allowing for emotional connection with the speaker. The sonic space Joelle creates during her radio show is a shared space which is also affectively full. In *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (2020), Marshall Boswell suggests that Madame Psychosis “provides listeners with something close to maternal security, the primary allure of the show residing in the quality of her voice” (77). In other words, he implies that listeners find in Madame Psychosis’ voice the security of a mother, which seems to resonate with the fact that, in the Entertainment, Joelle represents motherhood and death. Boswell, however, does not distinguish between Joelle’s cinematic voice in the Entertainment and her radiophonic voice. Instead of overlapping reflections on Joelle as an actress and as a radio speaker, it is more useful for our analysis to keep cinema separate from radio. While *Infinite Jest* contains references to some characters’ need to be reassured by a maternal figure as if they were children or infants, this work suggests that within the sphere of the radio show, Joelle and her listeners establish a relationship of equals. Joelle’s voice conveys emotions and affection that result in empathetic understanding and care among peers. Not only does Joelle care for her listeners, but they are invited to care for her.

Mario Incandenza, one of the main characters of the story, and the student engineer, who can only grasp Joelle’s silhouette from behind a “triptych screen of cream chiffon” (*Jest* 183), seem capable of grasping the emotional distress that stems from Madame Psychosis’ voice. Mario is described as one of the main fans of “60 Minutes +/-” and cannot miss one single episode of the radio show:

He treats the lavish Tatsuoka fringe-FM-band tuner in the living room of the Headmaster’s House like kids of three generations past, listening the way other kids watch TP, opting for mono and sitting right up close to one of the speakers with his head cocked dog-like, listening, staring into that special pocket of near-middle distance reserved for the serious listener. (189)

Mario, who is also one of the characters displaying the most severe disability, is outlined as a “serious listener” given his devotion to the radio show. However, he is also metaphorically described as the “ultimate listener” (Frantzen 274) since he is probably the most empathetic, caring, and selfless character of *Infinite Jest*. Mario and the student engineer can perceive melancholy and sadness transpiring from Joelle’s radiophonic voice: “Mario [...] felt like he was listening to someone sad” (*Jest* 592); “Sometimes she seems very sad” (185). These two characters’ approaches to the radio show are other-directed rather than self-directed. They can transcend potential feelings of pleasure conveyed by the radio voice and focus, instead, on the voice’s mood. This would not be in the interest of TP watchers, for instance, since their need to be constantly entertained by the cartridge explains their selfishness: “a people choos[ing] nothing over themselves to love” (318). Besides Mario and the engineer, most of the audience is able to perceive Madame Psychosis’ agony, since several

members are later worried about her disappearance. The ability to feel the others' emotions through the voice is suggested by Aghoro, who argues: "voice simultaneously conveys several layers of acoustic signification beside the mediation of language, such as the particular affective state or bodily condition of the voicing subject" (49). The sound of Joelle's voice permits listeners to grasp her emotional pain and, therefore, worry for her. As Honold argues, voice is fundamental for language since it conveys the emotional and the affective aspects of language that add to its cognitive and intellectual qualities (191). Through the sound of Joelle's voice, listeners can go beyond the meaning of her speech and, while sympathizing with her emotional condition, they try to find a solution to her distress.

Mario, for instance, believes that Madame Psychosis would "feel a lot better if she listened to her own show" (*Jest* 190). He recognizes Madame Psychosis' compelling talent but also her necessity to experience the same sensations her audience feels when listening to her. As the narrator reports,

One of the reasons Mario's obsessed with her show is that he's somehow sure Madame Psychosis cannot herself sense the compelling beauty and light she projects over the air, somehow. He has visions of interfacing with her and telling her she'd feel a lot better if she listened to her own show, he bets. Madame Psychosis is one of only two people Mario would love to talk to but would be scared to try. (190)

Mario perceives that, despite Madame Psychosis producing positive emotions in others, she is unable to feel them herself. Mario thus feels trapped in a position in which he would "love" to help Madame Psychosis, but he is "scared" to do so. In this passage, Mario acts as a lover who is unable to face the loved one. Some adjectives such as "obsessed" or "scared" show the anxiety Mario feels toward Madame Psychosis. At the same time, he perceives her "beauty and light," as if an aura emanated from her voice. The idea of falling in love is explicitly reiterated some pages later: "Mario'd fallen in love with the first Madame Psychosis programs" (592). The characters involved in Madame Psychosis' radio show display both fear and love. Mario, for instance, fears a potential interaction with Madame Psychosis but is still the first one who wishes to display his unconditional love. At the same time, while Madame Psychosis fears the reaction people may have toward her looks and conceals herself under a veil, she probably loves her radio show and uses it as a tool to convey the affection she has for her listeners. Similarly, listeners care for the speaking voice, despite their inability to transcend the invisibility that the radio warrants. *Infinite Jest* does not provide the ultimate solution to fear and anxiety, derived from the toxic culture of "watchableness" infused by televised media. Yet, it allows for an inclination toward love, care, and affection within a democratic community that may still count on meaningful values and emotions. The latter would be impossible to feel by Entertainment watchers, trapped in their individualistic loop of pleasure. Madame Psychosis and her radio show are not the ultimate solution to the culture of "watchableness" but provide at least a niche countermovement to selfishness and a tendency

toward infusing life with those important “single-entendre values” that David Foster Wallace tried to instantiate through his fiction (“Unibus” 192).

Conclusion

Criticism of visuality and its effects on people is widely present in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Some elements of the novel such as the Entertainment can be discussed considering some of the twentieth-century theories on visual culture, television and entertainment by scholars such as Mirzoeff, Postman, Mander, and Wallace himself. *Infinite Jest* negotiates the negative consequences of the extensive consumption of images accentuating their effect on characters. Yet, this work proves that the novel contains possible solutions to the pervasiveness of visuality in this fictional world. By focusing on the radiophonic voice of the character of Joelle van Dyne, it is possible to argue that sound, as opposed to image, and listening in contrast to watching, can prove a valuable countermovement to ever-present images and their harmful outcomes. Contrary to her de-acousmatized voice, which is bound to the image of the body in cinema, Joelle's acousmatized radiophonic voice empowers this character providing her with the freedom, power, and creativity she is prevented to benefit from in the role of cinema actress. Still, listeners may infer her corporeality through the sound of her voice, resulting in Joelle's sonic embodiment. In addition, Joelle van Dyne's radio show allows for bodily connections between speaker and listeners through sound resonance. Joelle's voice functions as the very medium that fosters sociality and creates a sonic democratic community in which bodies can physically connect regardless of their appearance. Moreover, the radio program nurtures affection and care between the radio speaker and her loving listeners. Through the sound of her voice, Joelle's emotions of sadness and melancholia are conveyed while listeners are induced to empathize with her. Following Wallace's reflection on the necessity to turn away from cynicism and irony and embrace human values and emotions (“Unibus” 171; 192), our analysis of *Infinite Jest* proves that human connections are possible within a sonic mediated space, the radio program of Joelle van Dyne. Joelle's voice represents a tendency against the culture of “watchableness” and toward a culture of human connections.

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