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Führer and Father in Flux: Fascism and Desire in the Works of George Saunders, Don DeLillo,
and David Foster Wallace

A thesis

Presented to

The faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

by

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May 2023

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Keywords: fascism, authoritarianism, desire, capitalism, David Foster Wallace, Don DeLillo,

George Saunders

ABSTRACT

Führer and Father in Flux: Fascism and Desire in the Works of George Saunders, Don DeLillo,
and David Foster Wallace

by

K. Tyler Wick

Since the end of World War II, the possibility of fascism and totalitarianism as a global threat continues to proliferate in American art and literature to the point that many individuals paradoxically desire the very things that seek to control them. Postmodern literature often portrays fascism and totalitarianism as it exists under contemporary capitalist systems as a multiplicity of discreet machines operating within objects of desire. These objects are complicated by the 24-hour news cycle and the popularity of solitary, on-demand entertainment that in turn mediates the desires and fears of a population through strict control of information. This thesis examines works by George Saunders, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace through a post-structural lens and seeks to explore the moments in these novels where desire and fascism intersect to create an endless, self-replicating form of control that is often too discreet to notice.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

It can hardly be said that fascism is a singular entity, or that every instance of fascist regime or activity is identical in action or aesthetics. Fascism did not begin with the Nazis, and it certainly did not end with them. The term itself seems to almost carry with it images of the mobilized masses goosestepping in formation with arms raised in roman salute, and the horrors of the Holocaust are likewise inseparable from the term. Fascism in America, while different in presentation and action than the fascism of the National Socialists of the early 20th century, functions under similar ideas. For example, there is a focus on isolating a minority group in order to frame them as terroristic Others bent on destroying the American way of life. In “American Fascism: Fourteen Deadly Principles of Contemporary Politics,” Brad Evans and Henry Giroux classify fascism as “a *process*, which parasitic to everyday fears, anxieties and insecurities,” that is “adept at seducing the masses, so they desire their oppression as though it were their liberation,” a sentiment that echoes earlier investigations into fascist desire carried out by Wilhelm Reich and the collaborative works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Evans and Giroux183).

The process identified by Evans and Giroux isn’t difficult to isolate; in the years since 9/11, the increase in islamophobia, general xenophobia, and American exceptionalism have been noted by several scholars and journalists. Abigail B. Bakan points out that despite the Patriot Act including articles denouncing violence against innocent Muslims, Arabs, and Sikhs in America, “the provisos were not sufficient . . . to prevent a pattern of notable targeting of those who could be racially profiled, either by official forces or the general public, as dangerous predators, unpatriotic and threatening, on American soil” (64). What’s more, Bakan suggests that the Patriot Act symbolizes “the license of ‘true Americans’ to protect themselves accordingly,” and

this allows for targeted violence, state-sanctioned or otherwise, to be carried out in the name of national security (64). Despite the Patriot Act increasing domestic surveillance, it was quickly passed and continues to have the support of much of the American population.

George Saunders's 2005 novella *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* depicts nationalism, genocide, and totalitarianism in such a way that invokes both Nazi Germany and post-1920's America. At first glance, the novella, which clocks in at 130 pages of accessible prose interspersed with a handful of illustrations (one of which depicts a grassy field sprouting cow heads), appears as a straightforward, allegorical warning about the implications of demagoguery and the act of blindly following orders. But when an embittered Outer Hornerite named Phil suggests that his countrymen tax the citizens of Inner Horner, an impossibly small enclave nation, for the privilege of living on a small swath of Outer Horner, the situation quickly spirals into chaos as colonialism and genocide are openly supported and enacted (Saunders 6). Yet, despite the novella's explicit invocation of the authoritarianism of Nazi Germany, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* is just as much an indictment of the fascist tendencies of post-9/11 America as it is of the Third Reich. Despite Phil's ultimate demise and the failure of his "final solution," the novella ends with a suggestion that fascism is a self-replicating problem that cannot be destroyed by a mere restructuring of society around existing pieces.

Given Phil's meteoric rise to power, it may come as a surprise that he is largely unremarkable as an individual before he assumes power, but the apparent banality of Phil and his life prior to the narrative finds historical precedent in Hannah Arendt's 1963 *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Eichmann, who played a major role in organizing the Holocaust, is described by Arendt as "a law abiding citizen" who "Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified . . . as 'normal'" (24, 25). Arendt's portrait of Eichmann, as its subtitle suggests,

paints him as an overall average—perhaps less than average—man who only joined the SS because he was asked to. In what is perhaps the most well-known line from Arendt’s work, she claims that “Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that [Eichmann] was not a ‘monster,’ but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown,” a description that works just as well for Phil (54). The authoritarian ruler then becomes something of a novelty that is easy to laugh at after the dust and ash are wiped away.

Don DeLillo’s 1985 novel *White Noise* is direct in talking about German fascism, but its presentation of authoritarianism in practice is hidden under the guise of advertisements, simulation, and television. John N. Duvall establishes how DeLillo’s novel suggests that “the urge toward fascism is diffused throughout American mass media and its representations,” but the airborne toxic event and its connection to television begins to crack the illusory nature of reality as mediated through broadcast news and consumerism (147). Advertising, education, and media are integral to maintaining the idea that capitalism has no other alternative and is key in framing the idea that breaking the capitalist framework is impossible. Mark Fisher writes that “It is impossible to conceive of fascism or Stalinism without propaganda—but capitalism can proceed perfectly well, in some ways better, without anyone making a case for it” (13). In *White Noise*, capitalist propaganda is not needed because commodities and television, the latter filled with advertisements and interspersed with news footage supporting the idea that those living elsewhere have it worse, do the heavy lifting in the way of propaganda. While Fisher notes that reducing capitalist realism to the “quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions” is shortsighted, he maintains that “it is more like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action” (16). This atmosphere permeates DeLillo’s

novel, especially at the intersection of advertising, culture, and education, and it is at this intersection that the threat of fascism thrives.

Much of the scholarship around *White Noise* begins with or works towards a synthesis with the work of Jean Baudrillard, and while the focus here is primarily on the television's ability to manipulate reality, this study relies on Baudrillard's writing and reacts to the writing of established scholars comparing the work of the two. Scholars such as Leonard Wilcox point out that in *White Noise* objective reality becomes overwhelmed with signs that "become more real than reality and stand in for the world they erase" (356-347). An early example of this comes after Jack describes his affectation of wearing dark-lensed glasses to signify his connection to Hitler. These glasses begin to take on the aspects of Baudrillard's simulation by suggesting that Jack possesses all the necessary components of a true scholar of Hitler even though we are aware that he is unable to learn German. According to Baudrillard, "To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have" (3). To use Jack's own words, he becomes "the false character that follows the name around" (DeLillo 17). But this idea of simulation is not exclusive to actual portions of reality that suggest the opposite; entire representational systems, such as television and radio, become disconnected from what they portray and create a virtual world full of advertisements and events that are completely disconnected to their real-world counterparts.

In David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, published in 1996, capitalism and American exceptionalism combine to form a totalitarian structure that removes freedom and the conception of personal choice from the average American citizen, leaving them at the mercy of those above them. The years are subsidized, with yearly naming rights auctioned off to corporations like Burger King, Dove, and Perdue Farms; America has forced its neighbors into an EU-like pact called the Organization of North American Nations (or O.N.A.N., a reference to onanism); and

the toxic waste from America is dumped into a territory forced upon the Canadians. Complete control over American citizens has become a difficult task, but the America of *Infinite Jest* has become a Deleuzian control society that floods its citizens with an insurmountable number of distractions meant to isolate them from one another. The students of the Enfield Tennis Academy, one of the novel's primary settings, are trained specifically for a highly controlled iteration of professional tennis referred to as "the Show." In effect, the characters of *Infinite Jest* are unable to acknowledge their own identities and instead look forward to the simulacra of identity that is promised in the future. Identity and entertainment begin to merge and, fueled by both addiction and the desire for human interaction, create subjects loyal to a system that is designed to be indecipherable.

While easy to isolate, collating a single, all-encompassing definition of fascism is no easy task. In the introduction to *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Reich defines fascism as "the basic emotional attitude of the suppressed man of our authoritarian machine civilization and its mechanistic-mystical conception of life" (xiii). This definition works well enough for a novella such as *Phil* where mystical notions of Manifest Destiny and the mechanical aspect of disassembling and reassembling society run throughout. A more concrete definition that aptly describes the structures of fascism found in *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* while also building on Reich's definition comes from Bill V. Mullen and Christopher Vials, who write that fascism "is a largely middle-class movement animated by a highly symbolic, populist, and mythic drive for national renewal, grounded in militarism or male violence, anti-Marxism, racism, and authoritarianism" that "actively mobilizes the population in a culture war against national minorities and/or the political left" (5). This symbolic and mythic drive can be found in *White Noise* as the supermarket's driving appeal and the television's manipulation of desire. In *Infinite*

Jest, militarism is injected into the educational system that is meant to prepare students to function under an America that has undergone a drastic restructuring.

As technological advancements have been made in the fields of media and communication technologies, fascism has adapted to a world where connection often takes the form of a single viewer and a screen. Certain aspects of this development, such as the internet, are primed to nurture fascist ideas and movements due to their anonymity and unmediated, uncensored nature, and many contemporary fascist movements found their genesis on websites like 4chan. The three works of fiction I examine here are tied together by their unique portrayal of fascist mobilization, and they help paint a picture of the development of fascism alongside technology and American politics.

CHAPTER 2. THE EMERGENCE OF AMERICAN FASCISM IN *THE BRIEF AND
FRIGHTENING REIGN OF PHIL*

A Brief and Familiar Overview of Inner and Outer Horner

It can seem at times that George Saunders's 2005 novella *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* demands to be read as a straightforward allegory of authoritarianism and mob mentality, such as when the Inner Hornerites are fenced-into the barbed wired "Peace-Encouraging Enclosure" to await their execution (Saunders 102). This reading is no doubt aided by Saunders's whimsical tone and the story's otherworldly dressings. But to relegate the novella to a mere criticism of totalitarian regimes overall is to ignore the more intricate structure at work in *Phil*. The novella concerns two nations—Inner and Outer Horner—and the conflict that arises after the Inner Hornerite Border physically shrinks. This event leads to the Outer Hornerites torturing and extorting the Inner Hornerites under the leadership of a man named Phil, and it culminates in an attempt at full-on genocide. In *Phil*, fascism is not something that can be crushed through an act of restructuring society. It exists from the very beginning of the text where the Inner Hornerites are despised for their nationality and are held in what is essentially a prison camp, and it remains in the Horners at the end. Instead, Saunders's novella frames fascism as a self-replicating organism that can be found in the most innocuous of spaces.

The disguising of a darker, more menacing nuance under an already dark concept is typical of Saunders's work. His 2012 short story "The Semplica Girl Diaries," first published in *The New Yorker*, is on the surface a window into a dystopian world where women from third-world countries have holes surgically drilled through their heads so they can make money from being strung up on the lawns of wealthy (presumably) Americans. The story's narrator pities

these women to a certain extent, but he is more than willing to exploit them for his daughters' enjoyment. Much like the physical characteristics of the Hornerites, the Semplica Girls' surgery and subsequent display defamiliarizes the human subject, but instead of depicting characters who are outwardly inhuman with inward human characteristics, it depicts characters that are outwardly human but suffer from inhuman circumstances and situations. After the narrator, who is relaying the story to the reader through his journal, wins the lottery, he is able to rent four of the Semplica Girls for his daughter's birthday, but his daughter Eva releases the girls out of a sense of guilt. As Saunders himself points out in an interview with *The New Yorker*, "If, in the world of the story, Eva's decision is a no-brainer, and she is a complete hero, then the energy goes down. The story becomes (merely) a Demonstrative Moral Tale, which rings hollow, because it's been rigged" ("This Week in Fiction"). Instead, the story asks the reader to sympathize with both Eva *and* her father by detailing, in a compressed and shortened syntax, the latter's desire to provide distractions and luxuries for his family even though they are financially "stretched a bit thin these days" ("The Semplica Girl Diaries" 125). The story, much like *Phil*, is at once a commentary on the treatment of immigrants *and*, unlike *Phil*, an exploration into the love a father has for his family in an absurd world that profits off the suffering of others.

While the setting of "The Semplica Girl Diaries" is almost certainly American, *Phil's* Inner and Outer Horner are outwardly alien. Most of the novella takes place at the border of Inner and Outer Horner, with the latter being described as "so small only one Inner Hornerite at a time could fit inside" (*Phil* 1). Outer Horner, on the other hand, is much larger and features a cafe along with a functional and efficient postal service. Countries can physically shrink overnight, and the countries themselves are populated by beings that resist the classification of human—one citizen of Inner Horner, Cal, is described as being an assemblage of "a gigantic belt

buckle with a blue dot affixed to it . . . stapled to a tuna fish can” (*Phil* 7). The various citizens of Inner and Outer Horner, while uncanny and often incomprehensible in their physical forms, largely act like one would expect a human to act. Various Hornerites reflect on previous love affairs, they are capable of empathy and even cry when one of their own is killed, and they adhere to the typical Western family structure of father/mother/child. While none of the Hornerites could be described as resembling humans, they are nonetheless human in structure, relationships, and psychology.

None of this, however, typifies *Phil*’s world as an inherently American one, but the tension between Inner and Outer Horner, as well as the extent to which the Outer Hornerites are willing to allow their sense of exceptionalism to grow, are outwardly and undeniably steeped in post-9/11 American politics. For example, Phil invokes one of America’s controversial expansions of political power with his “Certificate of Total Approval” (88). Samuel Cohen writes that “the Outer Hornerites, in a competitive display of unquestioning loyalty, sign [the certificate] with their eyes closed, facing away” in an analog of the swiftly implemented Patriot Act of 2001 (213). The Patriot Act, which was enacted less than 2 months after the events of 9/11, allowed the U.S. government to expand surveillance activity and to indefinitely detain those whose release “[would] threaten the national security of the United States or the safety of the community or any person” (H.R.3162). Scholars such as Abigail B. Bakan point out that while the Patriot Act’s inclusion of articles denouncing violence against minorities, these “provisos were not sufficient . . . to prevent a pattern of notable targeting of those who could be racially profiled, either by official forces or the general public, as dangerous predators, unpatriotic and threatening, on American soil” (64). The unintended consequence of this is the

fascist suggestion of reclaiming the country from those who simply look as if they are of Middle Eastern descent.

What's more, upon Phil's death following his failed genocide against the Inner Hornerites, Larry, a member of the Outer Horner Militia, downplays his and his fellow citizen's involvement in the mass death by simply proclaiming "Mistakes were made" (*Phil* 120). This phrase is perhaps most well-known from its utterance by President Nixon during the Watergate scandal, but, as journalist Mark Memmott points out in an article for NPR, the phrase itself has a long-standing connection to the American political lexicon. Memmott claims that the phrase has popped up in America's political sphere on both sides of Nixon's presidency, with its first recorded use coming from Ulysses S. Grant during his presidency and another occurrence, this time said by Ronald Reagan when he "conceded that 'mistakes were made' by his administration" regarding the Iran-Contra Affair (Memmott).

More than mere phraseology connections, *Phil's* Outer Hornerites' inflated view of themselves, as well as certain political actions enacted by Phil with the Outer Hornerites approval, make it clear that Outer Horner bears more than a coincidental passing resemblance to America. After Phil convinces the other Outer Hornerites to enforce a tax on the Inner Hornerites, he delivers a speech that effectively rallies his countrymen behind him— but only after his brain physically falls from his body:

I've been thinking about our beautiful country! Who gave it to us? I've been thinking about how God the Almighty gave us this beautiful sprawling land as a reward for how wonderful we are. We're big, we're energetic, we're generous, which is reflected in all our myths, which are so very populated with large high-energy folks who give away all they have! If we have a National Virtue, it is that we are generous, if we have a National

Deficit, it is that we are *too* generous! Is it our fault that these little jerks have such a small crappy land? I think not! God Almighty gave them that small crappy land for reasons of His own. It is not my place to start cross-examining God Almighty, asking why He gave them such a small crappy land, my place is to simply enjoy and protect the big bountiful land God Almighty gave us! (*Phil 9-10*)

Ignoring the fact that much of his speech consists of propaganda, by claiming that Outer Horner was given to its citizens by “God Almighty,” Phil invokes America’s expansion westward as justified by Manifest Destiny. This type of mysticism is important to note when discussing fascism, as Wilhelm Reich writes that “Every form of mysticism is reactionary, and the reactionary man is mystical” (24). Phil’s mystical displacement of culpability effectively disguises the oppressive nature of his regime and sets the stage for a “just following orders” excuse; by saying that “God Almighty” is the one to blame for the current sociopolitical situation in the Horners, Phil elevates his oppressive rhetoric to the status of a religiously tinged dogma.

Before his rise to power, Phil is not what one would expect an authoritarian leader to be. Phil grew up in a small home and was abandoned by his father, and he once “[ran] out of juice” (likely a form of death) and had to be revived with a “Farley ReMotivator” (*Phil 41*). Concerning the latter event, Phil seems to be more concerned with the mockery he faced from his fellow Outer Hornerites than with his experience with death. Overall, Phil is framed as mundane and weak, words that might be applied to Eichmann in Arendt’s account of his trial. Like both Eichmann and Hitler, who “under the then existing Nazi legal system . . . had not done anything wrong,” Phil is shown to be (largely) a law-abiding citizen (Arendt 21). Part of what makes the execution of Inner Hornerites under Phil’s leadership is that he *technically* has the power, if not the authority, to order it. When compared to Jack Gladney’s descriptions of Hitler in Don

DeLillo's *White Noise*, who lectures not just on the "continued appeal of fascist tyranny" but also on Hitler's love for his mother and his lifelong loneliness, the mundanity of Phil's existence *does* in fact make Phil an apt authoritarian (DeLillo 25, 71-72). The Hornerites do not resemble humans physically, but they still act and think in ways that are undeniably human, and their political actions and phrases unquestionably invoke America's reaction to terrorism following 9/11. Of course, this does not necessarily indicate a connecting thread between Outer Horner's Americanness and authoritarianism, but the Outer Hornerites are always already filled with the necessary drives that lead one to desire their own subjugation.

Mommy-NoDaddy-Phil: Displacement of Desire and Mass Psychology

It is not that Phil simply encouraged or pushed his fellow Outer Hornerites into fascist action through literal brainless and charismatic speeches but rather that his call to action resonates with a population who were always already in possession of an ideological predisposition to fascist and authoritarian suggestions. From the beginning, the Outer Hornerites consider the Inner Hornerites to be "pathetic and whiny and grasping, unlike them" (Saunders 1). In addition, the Outer Horner Border Guard and Militia are already established *before* Phil takes control, suggesting that the prejudice of the Outer Hornerites was long established and thriving before Phil takes over. And while the Inner Hornerites are not confined in a physical cage from the start, which only occurs when their total annihilation is imminent, they are required to stay either in their country or in a roped-off area of Outer Horner referred to as the Short Term Residency Zone. In post-9/11 America, it is difficult to imagine the confinement of foreign

nationals without images of Guantanamo Bay or the migrant detention camps along the US-Mexico border coming to mind.

The fact that the Outer Hornerites are the first to mobilize under a nationalistic and violent authoritarianism suggests a more discreet, internal conflict within Outer Horner that creates a more nuanced antagonism that Phil can take advantage of. As much as Phil expresses disgust with the Inner Hornerites, he is just as opposed to the citizens of Outer Horner. He lashes out at Larry for attempting to remount his brain, and the narrator recounts various examples of Phil being generally unliked by his countrymen (Saunders 41). In “The Origins of American Fascism,” Michael J. Roberto writes that “the emergence of fascism anywhere in the world was determined by the level of capitalist development in each nation” and that “Competing nations in the semi-periphery had some degree of advanced capital formation . . . making them . . . uniquely conducive to fascist movements” (27). While the economic development of Outer Horner is not clearly defined in *Phil*, Phil himself is the only character shown participating in monetary exchange. His bodyguards, who had previously worked unpaid for a woman named Edna, are solely reliant on Phil for income. As Phil also takes all the money possessed by the Inner Hornerites, he effectively embodies “monopoly-finance capital” and his dependents (bodyguards) become Roberto’s fascist conduits who enact the will of the nation on Inner and Outer Hornerites alike.

It isn’t just that the Outer Hornerites are predisposed to adopting fascist ideology but rather that they actually desire the oppressive forces of authoritarianism. This is not a new idea. The question of why the masses sometimes desire their own oppression can be traced back to Spinoza but is most often recognized in contemporary study through the works of Reich as well as the collaborative projects of Deleuze, and Guattari. For now, Reich’s conception of this desire,

which he details in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* by examining the role of sexual repression in fascist movements, will help illuminate Phil's action by examining his familial and romantic relationships.

Initially, it seems that Phil's main motivation for oppressing the Inner Hornerites stems from his own sexual failures. We learn that, in addition to being "considered a slightly bitter nobody," Phil was once in love with an Inner Hornerite named Carol who, completely unaware of Phil, married another Inner Hornerite named Cal (*Phil* 6). This event proved to have a tremendous and lasting effect on the emotional development of Phil, and it is made clear that the marriage increased his overall bitterness toward the Inner Hornerites. Later, when Phil again returns to the border to collect taxes from the Inner Hornerites who, due to prior collections, have no resources or money to satisfy Phil, he suggests that they give Carol to him instead (60). The offer is rejected and Phil's tendency towards violence only increases.

Yet, the situation surrounding Phil's father, which we do not learn about until near the novella's end, complicates what seems to be an emotional hang-up. Phil's childhood home resembles the spatiality of Inner Horner's impossible smallness: "[Phil] remembered his pathetic childhood home, the family crammed into the little kitchen, his father sitting in the sink so his mother could open the refrigerator, his mother climbing on top of the refrigerator so his father could let down the ironing board" (*Phil* 105). His father, who is said to have espoused anti-Inner Hornerite beliefs including support of extermination, leaves after being told that by a border guard that he legally cannot throw rocks at the Inner Hornerites (106). Using the logic of psychoanalysis, it can be said that the main thrust of Phil's hatred towards the Inner Hornerites comes from a desire to become his father and thus fill the space in the Oedipal triangle left vacant by his father's disappearance. As Phil's father left when he was young, and thus during an

important period in Phil's psychic development, he in effect subconsciously grows to adopt his father's desire for the destruction of Inner Horner.

We can look to Reich's conception of the authoritarian family for an insight into Phil's totalitarian development. Reich modifies Freud's Oedipal triangle, turning the father's role as adversary into that of Führer and "the authoritarian state representative in every family," ultimately "reproduc[ing] the [authoritarian system] in the structure of its members" (Reich 53). This is meant to produce the subservience and identification that is required for a successful fascist state. However, Phil is shown to hold little respect for authority outside of his father; he assumes total control over Outer Horner by simply taking over the residence and signifiers of the acting president. This does not necessarily discredit Reich's idea. Instead, it suggests that, as the president is shown to have a positive view of the Inner Hornerites, Phil's authoritarian family is one not mandated by the state but rather completely independent from the state. And since the family structure is, for Phil, disrupted by the absence of his father, he eventually both desires the position of authority (represented by the Führer-Father) and resents those who currently hold those positions.

It is the intersection of Phil's complicated relationship with the authoritarian family structure and his unfulfilled sexual desire for Carol that feeds Phil's totalitarian goals. After Phil assumes full control, he moves his sector of the authoritarian family into the public sphere by targeting a functional and happy family: that of Carol, her husband Cal, and their son Andy. Just as Freud's Oedipal complex suggests a rivalry and then association between father and son, Phil's corrupted view of the family unit is displaced into Carol's family. Here, by viewing Cal, the adversarial father figure of his respective family unit, as picking up the role of Phil's father as a paternal rival, Phil can act upon the desire to kill his father *and* achieve his father's goal.

“This Time, Be Kind to One Another”: Fascism as a Self-Replicating Organism

The Outer Hornerites are already more than willing to oppress the Inner Hornerites because of the former’s preexisting xenophobic ideas and tendencies. What this does not explain, however, is where that predisposition comes from. It does not appear in all the Inner Hornerites; Freeda’s insubordination via alerting the President of Cal’s execution is a prime example. Others are quick to denounce their affiliation with Phil once his plan falls apart. By examining the ending’s implication of eternal return, more light is shed on the consequence of fascism and the difficulty that arises after one decides to put an end to the system.

One approach to quelling fascist uprisings is an overall restructuring of the society that produced the uprising. This happens in a literal way after Phil’s death when the disembodied hands of the Creator ascend upon the Hornerites to quell a counterattack against Phil’s followers. The Inner Hornerites, seeing that the driving figure in their subjugation has died, viciously attack the Outer Hornerites in a final attempt at revenge, but their efforts are cut short by the presence of the Creator. In contrast with the violent nature of Phil’s mass execution—referred to as “disassembling” as the act consists of literally disassembling citizens into their individual parts—the Creator’s hands “gently disassembled the Outer Hornerites” as well as the Inner Hornerites before using their parts to create brand new beings with no memories of the past deemed New Hornerites (*Phil* 126). The Creator takes on the characteristic of the Deist watchmaker by leaving his creations to act as they choose without further interference—albeit after leaving the New Hornerites with the message of “THIS TIME, BE KIND TO ONE ANOTHER,” a message that is not heeded if it is heard at all (127).

One would imagine that this physical and cultural reset would wipe out any authoritarian urges from the minds of the New Hornerites, but the issue proves to run much deeper and might exist within the Creator itself. Instead of using parts from Phil to reconstruct the new race of Hornerites, it instead paints his body black and erects it as a statue that reads “PHIL MONSTER” (*Phil* 126). The strategy is at first successful, and the statue so disturbs the new citizens that they allow the field to become so overgrown that “all that could be seen of The Phil was the top of Phil’s rack, which stuck out of the weeds like a bad flagpole” (129). So, in a sense, the Creator’s strategy works; for most of the New Hornerites, the statue accomplishes what Michel Foucault names as the purpose of public execution and torture, as well as the subsequent displaying of the body: “publish[ing] the truth of the crime in the very body of the man to be executed” (44). Thus, the body of a dead tyrant can act as proof that he was a tyrant and as a warning much like the now-famous photograph of Mussolini and his mistress hanging in Piazzale Loreto. However, the problem is that the New Hornerites do not remember what truth is meant to be displayed, and they likely do not absorb the lesson handed to them by the Creator. The message of kindness left by the creator is given before the New Hornerites regain consciousness, so it is unlikely that any of them actually heard what was said. Further complicating this issue, the fact that the New Hornerites, if they had heard the message, are unlikely to understand it as the creator speaks “in a fundamentally untranslatable Creator-language” (*Phil* 127). Furthermore, turning Phil into a statue brings Arendt’s comment that “an eagerness to establish museums commemorating their enemies was very characteristic of the Nazis” to mind and suggests that replacing “Inner” and “Outer” with “New” does little in the way of eliminating a recurrence of authoritarianism down the line (37).

It is this exact lack of understanding that suggests, in the end, another authoritarian regime like Phil's will recur. One of the New Hornerites, a "compressed and ball-shaped" citizen, expresses distaste with some of her fellow Hornerites, specifically, those whose form differs from that of her own (*Phil* 129). She immediately takes a liking to The Phil statue and spends much of her time looking at it while "dreaming, for reasons she can't quite explain, of a better world run by humble, compressed, ball-shaped people, like her and Sally, who speak, when they speak at all, in short sentences, of their simple heroic dreams" (129-130). Despite explicitly lacking the understanding of what Phil represents as a symbol of the old Hornerites and their descent into nationalistic authoritarianism, the predisposition of the Outer Hornerites survives in at least one of the New Hornerites. The restructuring, physically and mentally, of the Hornerites by the Creator did nothing to address the fascism that lives within the individual pieces of that structure. The overall suggestion of this fact is that fascism is often self-replicating; but this does not imply that there is no escape but that merely restructuring society out of the extant pieces of civilization is not enough to overcome the desire for oppression when that desire exists already within the individual. Instead, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* suggests that a fundamentally new practice that explicitly targets fascist acts and ideas must arise. So long as the desire for oppression exists, that desire will find a way to come to fruition.

CHAPTER 3. *WHITE NOISE* AND MASS-PRODUCED FASCISM

Dictator On Aisle 5: Consumerism, Identity, and Control

The fascism of Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise* is an altogether different beast than the fascism of *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, but it is nonetheless ingrained so deeply in DeLillo's characters that it often falls to the background. The novel takes place in 1980s America, one filled with supermarkets where academics discuss the artistic value of cereal boxes—a far cry from Saunders's surreal take on prison camps, unrestrained prejudice, and public execution. Instead, the fascism of *White Noise* is presented as residing in everyday activities like shopping and watching television, wherein products and lives alike are framed as disposable, death can be circumvented by a visit to the supermarket, and the effects of ecological catastrophe are held at bay by personal status and accomplishments. These activities mediate the life of Jack Gladney, the novel's narrator, and those he interacts with, and they help to maintain an artificial harmony fueled by capitalistic desire. This harmony is nearly destroyed by an ecological disaster that reveals to Jack a glimpse of what exists outside the world of signs and representation, but his refusal to follow that glimpse forces him to relinquish himself to the world of control mediated by capital. In the end, the knowledge that his life is mediated by his consumption of products and media, both of which reinforce an overall suggestion of disposability, forces Jack to surrender control to the overall oppressive, authoritarian structure of consumer capitalism.

The supermarket is so frequently visited by Jack and his family that it begins to represent regularity and safety in a world that is otherwise shown to be obsessed with death and the overabundance of facts and events. It is the first place that Jack and his family are shown to visit after

the chronicle of the airborne toxic event, and it is here that Jack rests his own mortality. After Jack begins to fear that death is inching closer than before, he claims “Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get better as long as the supermarket did not slip” (DeLillo 170). Thus, the supermarket begins to offer a distraction from the threat of death, and there is perhaps no one in *White Noise* more dedicated to the space than Jack’s colleague, Murray Siskind, whose devotion to the supermarket approaches religious devotion. During an earlier encounter with Murray, he comments on the aesthetics of the supermarket while mystifying their symbolic meanings: “Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material” (37). This acts as a response to a series of questions posed by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*:

But what becomes of the divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme power that is simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or does it volatilize itself in the simulacra that, alone, deploy their power and pomp for fascination—the visible machinery of icons substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God? (Baudrillard 4)

Murray’s answer to all these questions comes across as a resounding “yes.” Consumerist spaces, then, offer an experience of awe and metaphysical meaning that one might expect in a house of worship, at least for Murray. It is likely that Murray’s spiritually tinged, academic ramblings about the supermarket influence Jack and his relationship to shopping as the effect that shopping is later shown to have on Jack is a powerful one that approaches spiritual fulfilment. This also highlights the level of control and influence that consumerism has on the individual.

It is by way of this fulfilment through commodity consumption that Jack attempts to maintain and affirm his crumbling identity, but it also acts to maintain his unconscious

willingness to commit to systems of control. This is revealed early in the novel when Jack describes the germination of his academic identity as being the result of a suggestion from the school's chancellor: "[He] advised me, back in 1968, to do something about my name and appearance if I wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator. Jack Gladney would not do . . . We finally agreed that I should invent an extra initial and call myself J. A. K. Gladney, a tag I wore like a borrowed suit" (DeLillo 16). Here, it is the signifying of his profession that concerns him, a signification that he achieves through his altered name and the dark glasses he adopts. Yet, an insecurity develops from his inability to learn German with any level of fluency. This insecurity can explain the amount of influence that Murray holds over Jack, as it is in Murray that Jack confides his insecurities again and again. The influence of Murray and his religious devotion to the supermarket work to manipulate Jack in ways that he is all too willing to allow. The effect of this can be seen later in Jack's unfettered desire to shop that materializes after a coworker sees him not as J. A. K. but merely Jack:

I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. I sent clerks into their fabric books and pattern books to search for elusive designs. I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me. (84)

This is nothing short of rebirth in the Christian sense; Jack gives himself away to the flood of consumerism offered by the shopping mall and supermarket and emerges "a person [he'd] forgotten existed." Jack not only feels compelled to buy things that he does not want or need, but he believes those things bring out the true subject within himself. He acts as if he is running on

autopilot, compelled forward by his unconscious desire to become whole in the only way he knows how: shopping.

White Noise frames consumerism, here represented by shopping outlets and supermarkets, as an all-consuming force that strips away an individual's identity and replaces it with an identity more in line with the status quo. This can be seen as a consequence of capitalism regardless of nationality, but the sentiment can be found earlier in the American literary canon with the works of Allen Ginsberg, specifically "A Supermarket in California." Here, Ginsberg's pained and hungry speaker goes shopping not for items, but "for images" (2). By stating his purpose as "shopping for images," or the signifiers of capitalism and consumerism, Ginsberg's speaker is more aware of the imagistic allure of consumerism than Jack is; Where Jack is more submissive in the face of consumerism, Ginsberg's speaker is simply fascinated by it and ultimately avoids participating in that system by eating food from the shelf and "never passing the cashier" (7). But the speaker of Ginsberg's poem demonstrates in a more direct fashion the way that identity is consumed by these images. The other patrons of Ginsberg's supermarket are conflated with the commodities that drew them to the store in the first place: "Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!" (3). This frames the speaker as an observer and possible revolutionary in this setting. In contrast, Jack's submission to consumerism puts him in the midst of the action as a participant, and his ambivalence towards the supermarket by the end of the novel demonstrates his full submission to the control systems of authoritarian capitalism.

*“Don’t We Deserve Some Attention for Our Suffering?”: Television, Consumerism, and
Authoritarianism*

White Noise is the story of an America steeped in mass communication and media technology. The home, while isolated and enclosed, takes on some notion of the global as news and contradictory facts stream into the sitting room through the television screen and through the air via radio broadcast. There is often more information than one is able to process, and the effect of this overabundance is often detrimental to one’s perception of reality. The Gladney’s television is almost always on, calling out slogans and headlines from the background of a dinner scene or from the bedroom of one of the many children of Jack and Babette. Media becomes such an important aspect of the Gladneys’ lives that television and radio can, and do, alter their perceptions of reality, causing them to feel things that they should not feel and clouding their understanding of death. When an event of existential proportions occurs—the release of a deadly chemical called Nyodene D. as the result of a locomotive accident—the Gladneys’ reality as mediated through television and consumerism clashes with the reality of the airborne toxic event and introduces the possibility of an escape from the simulative and authoritarian nature of capitalism.

While most early conversations about death in *White Noise* involve just one or two people and are held at arm's length as a simulated or hypothesized event, death as a television spectacle is portrayed as a rallying cry to the masses able to assemble diverse groups of people. Both Jack and Babette ruminate on the idea of each other's death, with each wanting to “die first” in order to avoid living in the absence of the other (DeLillo 100). Jack claims these discussions are serious, but they tend to take the form of a contest, that if one “death is capable of leaving a large hole in” the life of the other, then the other’s death would create “an abyss . . . a great

yawning gulf” (101). The pair’s discussions of death go nowhere and lose the weight of mortality in favor of displacing focus onto the life of the hypothetical surviving spouse. In effect, the signifier of death is removed from all signifieds, and, with the growing technological landscape of the 80s, it finds a covert home in television and advertising. During one instance of the Gladney’s Friday night television ritual, the family watches documentary footage of natural disasters. The footage of death and disaster excites the family in a way that previous instances of television programming have not:

There were floods, earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We’d never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Heinrich was not sullen, I was not bored. Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death. . . We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping.” (64)

The Gladney’s fascination with televised disaster footage can be seen as a mirror image of their anxiety towards death. While Jack and Babette’s private conversations around death peter out once the other’s absence is mentioned, not knowing the victims on screen allows them to revel in their fear without the terror materializing in their home. While the actions in the footage are certainly not comparable to the fascism of Nazi Germany nor to the homicidal and totalitarian rule of Phil, the Gladneys’ reaction to it hints at how television can be used to mediate the value attached to human lives. Evans and Giroux highlight fascism’s “willful disregard for human life” that the pair dub “the normalization of human disposability” (191). This normalization allows the Gladneys and others, especially the well-off members of the upper middle class, to engage with

the idea of death while simultaneously offering an abstract connection to it. Through the lens of television, death becomes a spectacle, a piece of entertainment to watch with your family over a Friday night Chinese dinner.

The most vocal supporter of this totalitarian alternate reality, and thus of the surrendering of oneself to the control of television and advertising, is Murray, who acts as a foil for the more negative and worrisome Jack by calling for a surrender to the simulacra of death. When Murray begins musing on death to Babette, he suggests that “Tibet is not Tibet anymore,” implying that Tibet, like the most photographed barn in America, has become a simulacrum, a signifier without a true signified (38). His suggestion is to ignore the artifice of our conceptions of life and death and to “proceed calmly” into the unknowable realm associated with death (38). By suggesting that we “proceed calmly” Murray is presupposing Jack’s conflict with the SIMUVAC agents during the airborne toxic event and acts to maintain Jack’s reality as simulative.

Murray can be seen as a sort of disciple of television ushering the nonbelievers into the embrace of its simulation and, as a result, facilitates their surrender of freedom and autonomy. He rebukes his students for rejecting television in favor of film concluding that his students do not know “how to look” at television in order to truly gleam what it offers (DeLillo 51). What it offers, Murray suggests, is a reality alternative to ours; he claims that television “welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern” and ultimately gives the television a religious tone by referring to advertising slogans as “chants” and “mantras” (DeLillo 51). However, scholars have noted that Murray is more than a mere disciple of television, he is a disciple of what Wilcox calls “the new semiotic regime” (350). In effect, Murray prevents Jack from viewing objective reality in favor of the perceived reality promoted and created by television. He claims that death “has a life independent of us,” seeming calling

attention to the disparity between objective truth and perception (DeLillo 150). Yet, he goes on at length about how impossible reconciling the two is, claiming “every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death . . . death adapts” (150). Death, like reality, gets bigger and bigger the more we learn about it, and the same can be said for perceived reality as well.

The Liberating Disaster

At the center of *White Noise*, both figuratively and literally, is the ecological disaster referred to as the airborne toxic event, an event that exposes the underlying totalitarian nature of Jack’s world by breaking with the “facts” of reality portrayed on television. The development of psychosomatic symptoms in those exposed to Nyodene D. reinforces Baudrillard’s claim that the medical field is one of the two “favored terrains of simulation,” but it also helps to illustrate the extent to which those affected by the airborne toxic event have become reliant on mass-media to provide an understanding of their reality (4). Symptoms of Nyodene D. exposure are quickly replaced with new symptoms as more information is dispersed, with the residents of Blacksmith being given, via the mediascape of television and radio, a shifting list of vague symptoms ranging from sweaty palms to *déjà vu*. Upon hearing that both Denise and Steffie are exhibiting outdated symptoms, Heinrich tells his mother that “There’s been a correction” and suggests that she “Tell them they ought to be throwing up” (DeLillo 112). By the time the pair begin exhibiting the new symptoms, newer symptoms have taken place of the old, and no one is sure as to whether the girls’ symptoms are genuine or not. Moreover, their feigning of symptoms falls in

line with Baudrillard's theories of simulation and are mediated by news reports and emergency radio broadcasts.

As Jack notices the delay in his daughters' symptoms, his musing on the subject brings him closer to confront the fact that he himself has been under constant manipulation even before the airborne toxic event. After he is unable to discern the validity of Steffie's experience of *déjà vu*—at this point a symptom of Nyodene D. exposure already replaced by “coma, convulsions, and miscarriage” —Jack begins a postmodern deconstruction of the relationship between symptom and disease:

Did Steffie truly imagine she'd seen the wreck before or did she only imagine she'd imagined it? Is it possible to have a false perception of an illusion? . . . I wondered whether her palms had been truly sweaty or whether she'd simply imagined a sense of wetness.

[. . .]

Which was worse, the real condition or the self-created one, and did it matter? (125-126)

Jack's inner dialogue here begins to resemble the thought of Baudrillard more closely, who writes, “Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces “true” symptoms . . . For if any symptom can be ‘produced,’ and can no longer be taken as a fact of nature, then every illness can be considered simulatable and simulated, and medicine loses its meaning” (3). Jack is unable to handle this slippage of reality and chooses to instead turn the radio—the possible source of his daughters' symptoms—off, “not to help [him] think but to keep [him] from thinking” (DeLillo 126).

Jack's understanding of disaster is skewed due the effect of television normalizing human disposability, leading him to believe that something like the airborne toxic event cannot happen to people like the Gladneys. He tells his daughter Steffie:

These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornadoes. I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? (DeLillo 114)

Again, it is the signification of his status that Jack relies on to maintain his sense of self and safety. His claims here echo the footage he and his family watched earlier in the novel of houses falling into rivers, earthquakes, and floods. For Jack, television reinforces the idea of "the poor and the uneducated" as disposable, and it is therefore only those who fit this description who may fall victim to disaster. He isn't simply a consumer of fascist suggestions; the suggestions are so ingrained into Jack that he is willing to risk his life, as well as the lives of his own family, in order to maintain the simulation of normalcy he is accustomed to. Not only does he rely on the prestige of television to convince his child of their relative safety, but he also relies on the signifiers of higher education—of a college professor—to assist him in his convincing despite his own belief that he is a fake man chasing a fake title. He relies so much on distorted or simulated perceptions of reality that, when the inevitable happens and he must evacuate with his family, he refers to the evacuation as an "absurd fact" somehow inconsistent with his own understanding (DeLillo 120).

It is only when television fails the evacuees that Jack begins to understand the full extent of the medium's ability to control and mediate reality. After he and his family are quarantined in

Iron City, another evacuee laments the lack of television coverage of the event, saying “Do they think this is just television? . . . Don’t they know this is *real*?” (DeLillo 162; emphasis added). Mark Fisher discusses the nature of reality in relation to capitalism and environmental disasters in *Capitalist Realism*, wherein he writes that “For Lacan, the Real is what any ‘reality’ must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression.” To push against this oppressive aspect of capitalism, Fisher suggests, “could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us” (18). The raving of the man with the television, by invoking this idea of the Real, inadvertently reveals that the very thing he longs for is the unraveling of his reality. While the man with the television’s frustration ultimately stems from the fear that the airborne toxic event is not being taken seriously, it highlights that a major function of television as a medium is to portray society’s disposables are shown to be someone other than the viewer.

In the end, Jack can see his reality for the controlled simulation that it is, but his experiences with death leave him either unable or unwilling to act. In the novel’s final chapter, we return with Jack to the supermarket where the “shelves have been rearranged . . . without warning” (DeLillo 325). He does not accept calls from his doctor, and the supermarket has slipped, but Jack is alright and will continue to be alright despite his fears that any slippage in his reality will send him hurtling towards the grave. In short, Jack *knows* that he is being controlled by mass media and consumerism, and that those forces feed off his desire for a wholeness that only comes with an identity recognized by others through signification. This knowledge is ultimately useless, at least for Jack. In his own words, “in the end it doesn’t matter what they see or think they see” (326). Jack is just one credit card in a flood of credit cards passing through the checkout line; removing him from the equation is unlikely to produce any structural changes.

Here, Fisher's suggestion that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" rings true; Jack has experienced an end-of-the-world scenario through the airborne toxic event, and he will live with the uncertainty brought by his exposure to the released toxic chemicals for the rest of his life (Fisher 2). Even if he desires an escape, all that he has to escape into is the manipulative drive of consumerism and the lingering threat of death.

CHAPTER 4. A WHIFF OF PROTO-FASCIST POTENTIAL: DISCREET FASCISM,
ADDICTION, AND DESIRE IN *INFINITE JEST*

The America of David Foster Wallace's 1996 *Infinite Jest* sees capitalism and fascism reshape almost every aspect of American life. The novel is partially a coming-of-age story following Hal Incandenza as he struggles with the death of his father, his addiction to cannabis, and an increasingly isolated disposition; but *Infinite Jest* is also about addiction in its many forms and how that addiction causes those afflicted to desire the oppressive structures of authoritarianism. Under the rule of former Vegas performer President Johnny Gentle, the United States Government has forced both Canada and Mexico to enter the "Organization of North American Nations," typically referred to as O.N.A.N. This union, as N. Katherine Hayles writes, "slyly points toward onanism, the sin of Onan in ejaculating his seed upon the ground" and highlights the self-gratifying nature of O.N.A.N. and its Americentric ideology (Hayles 685). The restructuring of North America into O.N.A.N. was a costly venture; O.N.A.N., guided by Gentle, funds this restructuring by auctioning off the naming rights of each year to a different corporation. This "revenue-response," as Wallace's narrator calls it, results in years named "Year of the Whopper" and "Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment," with the former embodying American consumerism and the latter foreshadowing the surrender of autonomy that comes with viewing the novel's titular film (Wallace 438, 223). Under Subsidized Time, temporality itself becomes represented by commodities and consumption, which leads to a disorganized perception of time underscored by O.N.A.N.'s all-encompassing control. Meanwhile, a film created by protagonist Hal's father, "Infinite Jest," is being hunted for by American governmental agencies and Canadian terrorists alike. This film is an object of desire because it is described as "so

entertaining and diverting it is lethal to persons” (321). The film offers an alternative structure to Gentle’s fascist authoritarianism, but this alternative is nothing more than another structure of control meant to lull a populace blighted by addiction and crime into blind, catatonic subservience.

The fascism present in *Infinite Jest* is often discreet, allowing the state to become totalitarian without establishing a true dictatorship or police state. Embodying this discreet fascism is the president of O.N.A.N: Johnny Gentle, Famous Crooner and germaphobe. Gentle founded the “Clean U.S. Party,” (referred to hereafter as C.U.S.P.) a reactionary political party centered around the idea of cleanliness and governmental reform. However, Gentle’s application of “cleanliness” is murky; it is at once metaphorical and literal, with Gentle expressing his banal political aspiration to “clean up government” while also funneling large amounts of labor into actually cleaning up the US (Wallace 382). This ecological and germophobic slant of Gentle’s platform hides more nefarious goals, such as the suggestion of returning to an idealized past that is buried in his promise to “restore the majestic ambers and purple fruits of a culture” (383). Gentle’s election under a third political party represents a break from the Marxian suggestion of Carmen Haider, echoed by Michael Roberto, that “the rise of American fascism would not require a distinct party, as in Italy and Germany. Rather, fascism could penetrate the two-party system and lead to a fascist state . . . exercised in the interests of capitalists” (qtd. In Roberto 29).

Gentle seeks to control U.S. citizens by taking advantage of their solipsistic nature and weaponizing it against them. Many of the characters of *Infinite Jest* are unable or unwilling to engage in meaningful interactions. One prime example of this solipsism can be found in Erdedy, a young man with a cyclical addiction to cannabis. Despite attempting to cull his addiction at every opportunity, Erdedy never goes more than two weeks without relapsing into an expensive,

multi-day cannabis binge during which he takes no calls, skips work, and attempts to “smoke so much so fast that it would be so unpleasant and the memory of it so repulsive that once he’d consumed it and gotten it out of his home and his life as quickly as possible he would never want to do it again” (Wallace 22). Erdedy’s addiction has led him to a place that demands that he forfeit his own autonomy to something else—here, drugs—allowing that something to assume full control over his choices even in situations where resisting that forfeiture is his only goal. Subjects like Erdedy, who are more than willing to give away their ability to choose, are the prime demographic targeted by Gentle, who claims in an inauguration speech that “he wasn’t going to stand [there] and ask us to make some tough choices because he was standing here promising he was going to make them for us” and suggests that everyone else should “simply sit back and enjoy the show” (383). Gentle explicitly states his intention to remove autonomy from the American public and to impose his own agenda on his constituents, essentially taking advantage of the turbulent social and political atmosphere to assume control over all North America.

The Suicidal State of Tennis

Other than being a novel about addiction, *Infinite Jest* tackles the idea suicide as a method of escaping the anhedonia that comes with addiction and reliance on entertainment media for fulfillment. The America of the novel is in the midst of societal turmoil in which “domestic-crime rates, as well as out-and-out suicides, topped out at figures that cast a serious pall over the penultimate year of the millennium” (Wallace 415). Throughout the novel, multiple characters attempt suicide, and some of them succeed. Many of those who attempt suicide in the

novel are addicted to one or many substances, but just as many are tennis players or otherwise sober and active individuals under some sort of societal pressure. James Incandenza, Hal's father and raging alcoholic, commits suicide by microwaving his head; elsewhere, an unnamed tennis player commits suicide by way of cyanide laced Nesquik because he could not "keep the lip stiff and fires stoked" under the pressure of the competitive tennis world (Wallace 436).

The suicidal nature of fascism is typically applied to the state itself, but various institutions in *Infinite Jest*, specifically tennis and the near-authoritarian institutions centered around the sport, have developed into state-like structures that are just as capable of expressing fascist tendencies. Deleuze and Guattari comment that "in fascism, the State is far less totalitarian than it is *suicidal*," and they point to a 1945 telegram from Hermann Göring, the head of the *Luftwaffe* at the time, that reads: "*If the war is lost, may the nation perish*" as an exemplary point of reference (230, 231). In *Infinite Jest*, the tennis players of the Enfield Tennis Academy are subjected to the suicidal State in the form of tennis under the instruction of Head Coach and Athletic Director Gerhardt Schtitt. Besides Schtitt's stereotypical Germanic name, some students refer to him specifically as a Nazi, and Wallace's narrator describes Schtitt as being "anchored from infancy to certain permanent values which . . . may, admittedly, have a whiff of proto-fascist potential about them" (Wallace 82). These values boil down to, according to the narrator, as "Old World patriarchal stuff like honor and discipline and fidelity to some larger unit," all typical features of National Socialism and fascism in general. What's more, Wallace's narrator suggests that Schtitt's rigorous and often strange training is less focused on tennis than it is on "training [the players] for citizenship." He is explicitly training the students of E.T.A. to "sacrifice . . . the self . . . to the larger imperatives of a team (OK, the State) and a set of delimiting rules (OK, the Law)" (82-83). Citizenship in O.N.A.N., then, follows the same

grueling and highly controlled structure of tennis wherein the player is subject to strict rules and physical stress.

There are two threads in the novel that connect suicide to tennis/the State that express a movement towards death and act as indictments of the appropriation of the State. The first of which is the tale of Eric Clipperton, an unaffiliated tennis player who achieved infamy in the tennis world after first going undefeated by way of pressuring his opponents into withdrawing from play:

For the Clipperton legend derived from the fact that this Clipperton kid owned a hideous and immaculately maintained Glock 17 semiautomatic sidearm that came in a classy little leather-handled blond-wood case with German High-Gothic script on it and a velvet gun-shaped concavity inside where the Glock 17 lay nestled in plush velvet, gleaming, with another little rectangular divot for the 17-shot clip; and that he brought the gun-case and Glock 17 out on the court with him along with his towels and water-jug and sticks and gear bag, and from his very first appearance on the East Coast jr. tour made clear his intention to blow his own brains out, publicly, right there on court, if he should lose, ever, even once. (Wallace 408)

The Göring Telegram is echoed here in Clipperton's intention to commit suicide on the occasion that he loses a match. His specific use of a Glock 17, the narrator's repetition of the firearm's model, and the "German High-Gothic script" of the weapon's case invokes not just the image of war and violence but also of Germany's seizure of Austria (the country that manufactures the Glock 17) in the year before the outbreak of World War II. Eventually, Clipperton does commit suicide—with the same Glock, no less—and his death is chalked up to him being unable to "keep the lip stiff and fires stoked" in the highly competitive world of tennis (Wallace 436). Thus,

Clipperton embodies the suicidal State of fascism, and his death inextricably connects him to the fascist tendencies of O.N.A.N.ite disciplinary structures.

The second thread connecting tennis to the State and suicide is Eschaton, a game played by E.T.A students using tennis to simulate worldwide nuclear war and mutually assured destruction. In the game, E.T.A students occupy a world map constructed of tennis equipment and launch tennis balls at various countries symbolizing nuclear warheads. Eschaton has been interpreted differently by various scholars, such as Timothy Jacobs who suggests the game is a metafictional “analogy for the contemporary sundering of the reader-writer relationship,” but it carries with it deeper implications of how fascism can become so ingrained in a culture that it expresses itself through parallel acts. The suicidal State is present not only in the discipline of the player’s tennis skills, here channeled into a simulated game of mutually assured destruction, but also in the willingness of the players to commit to an act of virtual suicide. After one student, Evan Ingersoll, attempts to take out a group of players who congregate to discuss the game, the entire body of players descends into chaos and virtual mutually assured destruction begins. The players, like Göring, are more than willing to risk absolute annihilation in the face of loss.

Addiction in Fascist Structures

Perhaps most central to the plot of *Infinite Jest* are the oppressive powers of addiction that seem to afflict every major character. Like Erdedy, protagonist Hal Incandenza is a cannabis addict who prefers to get “covertly high in the Enfield Tennis Academy’s underground pump room” (Wallace 49). Hal obsesses over this solitary aspect of his excursions, and, while he is often seen interacting with others, he has become increasingly inward since his father’s suicide.

His compulsion to get high in secret is no less oppressive than Erdedy's recurring binges, and the rampant solipsism of O.N.A.N. and C.U.S.P. acts only to exacerbate his problems.

The Novel's other protagonist, the former oral narcotics addict Don Gately, is able to navigate the fascist structures of addiction, but only through establishing a connection to others and by staying true to his sobriety. He lives at Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House (*sic*) and attends Boston AA meetings that are described as "almost classically authoritarian, maybe even proto-Fascist" (Wallace 374). The particular type of authoritarianism Gately is exposed to through AA is a mostly voluntary one; he must give his "Diseased will over to the direction and love of 'God as you understand Him' and commit to praying every day to facilitate his sobriety (443).

While drug use is not on its own an indication of fascism, it can be a feature if properly utilized. Illicit drugs are in one way enticing because they take away the user's choice through addiction and surrendering bodily control. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "There is a fascist use of drugs, or the suicidal use of drugs," and while the pair do not define what either use looks like, they do ask if it "would even be possible to use drugs without using drugs" (165, 166). This question may not be answerable here, but an attempt to answer can be found in *Infinite Jest's* MacGuffin: the immobilizing, catatonia inducing film from which the novel takes its title.

I Am in Here: The Body and Fascism

All of this—fascism, drug use, and suicide—circle back to the idea of entertainment and find their synthesis in the novel's titular fictional film "Infinite Jest" (referred to hereafter as "the Entertainment"). The film, created by James Incandenza and starring a pre-facial disfiguration

Joelle van Dyne, was created to act as a catalyst for Hal, from whom James “requires only daily evidence that [Hal] *speak[s]*” (Wallace 31). However, the film produces the opposite effect in those who view it, with the viewer unable to “choose to resist it . . . and cannot choose instead to live” (321). Upon viewing the film, the viewer is completely unable to *stop* viewing the film and enters a catatonic state, refusing to eat or move. Instead of prompting the viewer to actively participate with their surroundings, the film forces the viewer into a state of anti-production, which in *Infinite Jest* amounts to a channeling of the flows of desire towards a single, predetermined amalgamation of fascism, addiction, and death.

While there is evidence that suggests Hal is unable to speak by the novel’s end—the novel’s opening chapter depicting Hal speaking in “Subanimalistic noises and sounds” is chronologically the last event in the novel—James’s insistence on Hal’s muteness is more a reflection of O.N.A.N.’s masturbatory ideology (Wallace 14). When James laments on his son’s alleged silence, Hal is actively engaging in conversation with him. During this scene, Hal responds normally, save for his hyper-intellectual word choice and musings, but James simply talks over him and removes any chance that Hal might respond in a way that James deems appropriate. This could be a result of James’s intense alcoholism, but it is more likely the result of projection on the part of James. Hayles points out that James’s familial nickname, Himself, “signif[ies] the inward bent of his nature,” and this inward bent leaves James unable to see anything outside of himself (690).

In effect, The Entertainment removes the ability of the viewer to partake in any sort of meaningful production by channeling desire into the consumption of the film. The Entertainment takes on the spirit of desire itself and eliminates all other potential connections of desire. We can turn to the writings of Deleuze and Guattari once more, specifically their concept of the body

without organs (or BwO, as it is often abbreviated) as detailed in their second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: A Thousand Plateaus*. They write that “we treat the BwO as the full egg before the extension of the organism and the organization of the organs,” or, in other words, the BwO is the metaphysical surface upon which desires are recorded and which acts as a state of pure potential where desire can intensify (153). This can be utilized as a means of liberation or self-fulfillment—one example of this potential is given by Deleuze and Guattari in the form of the sadomasochist who instead of feeling pain from the impact of a riding crop or the prick of a needle feels pleasure (155-156). However, the BwO created by the Entertainment is a cancerous one, one that “proliferates and loses its configuration, takes over everything” in the form of uncontrolled recursive viewing (163). Instead of offering a multitude of potential, the Entertainment locks the viewer into an unending chain of consumption. For Hayles, the Entertainment “reinscribes with toxic force the illusion of autonomy,” and it is here, with the removal of individual agency, that the fascist aspects of the film reveal themselves in all their totalitarian prowess (692).

The Entertainment becomes a false alternative to the America of Johnny Gentle by removing the aspect of personal choice from the conversation, thus leading the subject to surrender any and all personal autonomy to the film. Where Gentle explicitly removes the question of choice from his constituents by making their decisions for them, the Entertainment presents itself as any other piece of video media. Both options leave the subject reliant on the orders and decisions made by someone (or something) else, and both exist in such a way that their decisions are unquestionable. The viewer does not need to know what effects of the film are to fall victim to it, nor do they need to consent in the form of voting or otherwise. In fact, they do not even need to know what the film is for it to remove power from the viewer. For example, the

first victim of the Entertainment portrayed in *Infinite Jest*, a medical attaché, only watches the film because of the “slim entertainment-pickings” in his home and his own demand for immediate video entertainment at the end of every day (Wallace 36). His mistake inadvertently dooms his wife and another physician, both of whom end up viewing the film after checking on the attaché. The Entertainment is able to spread organically simply by being an object of desire, and it is through this desire that it infiltrates the minds of Americans.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016 has led to the terms “fascism” and “fascist” to reappear in American political discourse—if they can be said to have disappeared in the first place. *The Guardian* journalist Dorian Lynskey details the resurgence of a 1980s protest slogan modified for the election’s outcome: “No Trump! No KKK! No fascist USA!” The phrase’s popularity, Lynskey writes, “took off at the American Music awards” when pop-punk band Green Day “barked the chant six times” in the middle of their set. Of course, this was broadcast on television, and the event itself was a ticketed event attended by celebrities and other wealthy individuals, which lessens its power to affect real change. To be sure, fascism and capitalism are two separate entities, but as pointed out by Roberto, “In the U.S. capitalist epicenter, the driving force of fascism came from the capitalist class itself, intent on extending and protecting the wealth and power it had gained during the boom years of the 1920s” (28). In this light, Mark Fisher’s thesis in *Capitalist Realism*, that capitalism has absorbed all methods of revolution as a way to participate in the system itself, is validated and its scope extended to encompass this American intersection of fascism and capitalism.

Fascism did not end with World War II; it has merely adapted to the postmodern conditions ushered in by the technological boom that took place in the Allied resistance against Nazi Germany. There are still prison camps, minorities are still killed or abused simply for being minorities, and nationalism still fuels expansion and colonialization in a more discreet and palatable fashion. But advents like television, the internet, and, more recently, deepfake technology complicates the matter. Issues of fascism as a discreet force with no central organization are becoming more and more relevant as online fringe groups become more pronounced. Cathrine Thorleifsson classifies this growing threat as “cyberfascism” and claims

that it “cannot be understood as propagated by a single actor in a particular nation-state, but by multiple co-producers connected across continents in digital networks” (288). These forms of fascism utilize the internet as a plane of organization—if these movements can be said to have an organization at all.

The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil offers a more traditional vision of fascism that closely resembles that of the National Socialists. Phil assumes the roles of both Hitler and Eichmann in that he is the demagogue that fuels the fear and anger that drives his countrymen to desire a fascist state while also acting as the architect for the eradication of the Inner Hornerites. What makes Phil’s power so terrifying isn’t just that he is willing to kill his own citizens in order to fulfil his goals but that his power is unshaken in the face of his ineptitude as a leader and a thinker. Despite his shortcomings, the Outer Hornerites set aside whatever positive feelings they may have towards the Inner Hornerites to embrace Phil’s genocidal plan. In *Phil*, fascism seems to win as the population of both Inner and Outer Horner are mystically reborn with their desire for oppression intact.

The fascism present in DeLillo’s *White Noise* creeps in through mass media, consumerism, and entertainment. Hitler has birthed an entire academic department, and the invocation of his name brings scholarly interest instead of condemnation. Capitalism has found a friend in consumerism, as large-scale shopping centers and conflicting news broadcasts are nearly enough to discreetly submit to the rule of whoever controls production. The amount of media and data consumed by the average citizen, and the extent to which that information is processed by the individual acts to validate reactionary and classist thought processes that might have otherwise been kept silent or out of the public eye. Effectively, fascism’s growth under this advancing technology is easily disguised as a feature of the system, not a flaw.

The fascism of *Infinite Jest*'s America is perhaps the most all-encompassing of the three works examined here. While still technically a democracy, Wallace's America sees the complete removal of personal choice and freedom from a population that wants only to find connections. The development of adolescent relationships is stunted by the near-authoritarian structure of the Enfield Tennis Academy, and many of those adolescence turn to drug use and constant media consumption to counteract the disconnected nature of their relationships. Jack Gladney's suggestion that "All plots tend to move deathward" becomes law for those who choose either direction (DeLillo 26). Drug use becomes suicidal and all consuming, and the governing body of O.N.A.N. is more than happy to step in and take control of the situation.

Perhaps Murray Siskind's claim that "Hitler is larger than death" holds some amount of truth (DeLillo 287). It has been nearly a century since the end of World War II, and the ideology of the National Socialists is still relevant in an America where children are put in cages at the U.S.-Mexico border and prisoners are held indefinitely without charge in Guantanamo Bay. The works of Saunders, DeLillo, and Wallace latch onto these ideas and explore what might happen if they are not identified and cured. Not only that, these works demonstrate the existence of fascist ideology in America, but they also highlight the development and expansion of the ideology as aided by the advancement of technology.

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