

OPPONENT'S REPORT

MA THESIS

Wallace Among the Machines: David Foster Wallace, Technology, and the Self **Alex Russell**

Drawing on David Foster Wallace's novels, short stories and interviews, Alex Russell argues that in Wallace's writing technology increasingly constitutes an obstacle to self-becoming: "Wallace's early interest in entertainment technology as defining the contemporary relationship to selfhood grows, in the later works, to a concern that machines assuming the roles of humans may erase the possibility of attaining that selfhood entirely" (5). This argument is then developed in three major chapters that focus on Wallace's understanding of the self, *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*. On the whole, the thesis successfully engages with contemporary issues related to Wallace's views of technology. It is well written and supported with substantial research.

What may be noted at the outset is that Russell does not open his thesis with an overview of Wallace's writing but introduces him as an icon in the American cultural machinery, including the #MeToo movement, film, youtube, conferences and printed media from academic book-length studies to articles in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Guardian* and *The Atlantic*. The thesis thus contributes to the paradox mentioned in the Conclusion, namely that in spite of Wallace's resistance to television, contemporary social media and the Internet, what will remain of his self after his death is likely to be mediated by this technology. In other words, even if "Wallace viewed this new technology as a distraction from, rather than a platform of, human expression and connectivity" (90), "his enduring popularity and cultural importance for casual readers and dedicated scholars alike is fuelled by the very technology whose promise he regarded as, at best, a bromide and, at worst, a contributor to the ills of society" (92). My first set of questions relates to this paradox. Given that for Wallace technological "images could not replace genuine connection" (92), one may ask what in his view would constitute "genuine connection" when "dialogue and engagement with the other" (22) are somewhat unrealistic. Related is the question of how is technology understood, in the thesis and by Wallace. It seems to be exemplified here by sleep-inducing "killer entertainment" (particularly the television in the chapter on *Infinite Jest*) and the IRS machine (chapter on *The Pale King*) but what is and is not technology? In what ways is the "new technology" different from earlier forms when it comes to human agency and the construction of the self in particular? And where are the differences among the various forms of the "new technology"—obviously using something like Twitter is not the same as "actualizing oneself" through the IRS. The thesis touches upon these questions but could they be succinctly elaborated?

Two further questions that could be addressed during the defense:

- 1) Concerning the discussion of constructing the self through the positive freedom to (ethical life) instead of the negative freedom from (aesthetic life, detachment, irony): why are these mutually exclusive movements rather than aspects of the same process?
- 2) The idea that disconnecting from "the technological environment determining the individual's experience of life at the end of the 20th century [...] cannot help but be fantasy now" (57) seems far fetched when considered globally as many people continue to live without at least some of the "new technologies." Isn't this rather an issue of class, generation, region, etc.?

Proposed grade: výborně (1)

Pavla Veselá, PhD.
28th August 2019