The Use of Multimodal Narrative Techniques in Creating Dystopian Undertones Permeating David Foster Wallace's Short Fiction

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Introduction

Set in the Organization of North American Nations, in a near future when the passing years are no longer denoted with numbers, but are given corporate-sponsored names instead, *Infinite Jest,* David Foster Wallace's most widely known novel is an unquestionable generic and thematic dystopia. When it comes to his short fiction, except for *Datum Centurio,* the pieces do not involve storyworlds considerably divergent from the popular image of the Western world at the turn of the century. Still, if we follow Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of "utopianism as social dreaming—the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives" and keep in mind his remark that even though such dreams "usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live […] not all are radical", the vast majority of David Foster Wallace's short stories turns out to be more or less markedly dystopian (Sargent 1994: 3). Just like some of the characters populating the author's fictional universe, his readers receive "*an intuition of the askew*", a sense of deep wrongness underlying the supposedly commonplace plots, settings, and characters which are depicted there (Wallace: 2011). The following chap-

ter will demonstrate how such an effect is achieved, focusing on the role of multimodal narrative techniques in the process. Beginning with a brief overview of multimodal narratology, based on Grzegorz Maziarczyk's *Toward Multimodal Narratology* and *The Novel as Book: Textual Materiality in Contemporary Fiction in English,* it moves on to examining the applicability of this relatively new perspective to literature studies on the example of Wallace's short stories. Further, focusing on *Little Expressionless Animals*, *Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR*, and *Datum Centurio*, the article discusses the ways in which multiple semiotic resources participate in creating a dystopian tinge on the ideological plane of the narratives.

Multimodal Narratology

Multimodal narratology derives its basic theoretical assumptions and analytical tools from social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis. The term "multimodality" is borrowed from social semiotics, where it stands for "the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2011: 20). Still, the very concept of mode has been applied to denote various phenomena and often confused with the notion of medium, which is why it needs to be clarified that whenever the term is to be employed here, it will be meant in the limited sense of "a sign system employed in a given narrative" (Maziarczyk 2013: 23). As to the basic premise of multimodal narratology, Maziarczyk describes it as "not simply to identify various modes operating on the level of narrative discourse, but to analyse how they contribute to the representation of the storyworld" with special emphasis put on the "the question of the representational potential of different modes" (Maziarczyk 2011: 117). Here, he concurs with Wolfgang Hallet, who notes that "a narratological approach [towards multimodality] is most interested in the narrative functions of non-narrative and non-verbal elements in and through the multimodal novel" (Hallet 2009: 141).

Even though numerous earlier studies—notably those conducted by Wolfgang Hallet, Alison Gibbons, and Marie-Laure Ryan—have already thoroughly addressed the subject of multimodal narratives, Grzegorz Maziarczyk's 2013 *The Novel as Book: Textual Materiality in Contemporary Fiction in English* is one of the first work to offer a synthesis of earlier studies in the field. Although the authors of the previous publications on multimodality agree as to the existence of a group of narratives where multiple modes participate in meaning creation, their studies are limited in the scope

of their analyses and focus on singular examples rather than try to establish a universally applicable poetics of such texts. The terminology they employ turns out to be another problematic area in the pioneering studies in the field, for some of such works tend to discuss similar phenomena under different labels while other mix various concepts, for instance, the mode and medium[1]. Most of the aforementioned theorists provide lists of properties exhibited by multimodal novels without trying to draw any generalising conclusions. *The Novel as Book* is an exception to the rule, apart from providing a comprehensive review of current research in the field, it also resolves some terminological problems and offers a broad theoretical framework applicable to all multimodal narratives.

Maziarczyk's framework includes a basic division of narrative modes into verbal and visual. "The former would include verbal narrative discourse, formal language and documents which are incorporated into the verbal narrative discourse by way of quotation. The latter would comprise graphics, pseudo-facsimiles of documents, typography, and photographs, including photographs of works of art and physical objects" (Maziarczyk 2011: 117). The division draws, among others, on Hallet's list of possible multimodal elements, a narrative may incorporate, included in *The Multimodal Novel: The Integration of Modes and Media in Novelistic Narration*. Adopting a perspective advocated by John A. Bateman, consisting in construing a page "as a visual entity" rather than "a text-centred structure", he further focuses on multiple possible modes operating on three levels of textual materiality: typeface, layout, and the book as physical object (Maziarczyk 2011: 115). Within this distinction the level of typography would deal with the "manipulation of typeface", layout with the "spatial arrangement of graphemes" and the level of book as a physical object with "the physical organisation of the text in the book" (Maziarczyk 2013: 12). Following Hallet and Gibbons, Maziarczyk notes that the broad category of images constitutes a separate mode in its own right, for they "do not belong to the realm of textual materiality as they are not elements of material representation of verbal text" (Maziarczyk 2013: 47). However, some illustrations can be considered multimodal narrative devices if they are "presented in some way by a character, and commented on or referenced within the verbal text" (Gibbons: 2012, 426). Just as all pages are multimodal, all of them include

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[1] An extensive discussion of the terminological conundrum, involving the use of the terms medium and mode, is to be found in Marie Laure-Ryan's article entitled *Story/Worlds/Media. Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology*, published in *Storyworlds Across Media*.

the previously mentioned levels of textual materiality, which "endow a given text with multimodal characteristics only when they are foregrounded by a deviation from some well-established convention" (Maziarczyk 2013: 47). Similarly, all multimodal narrative techniques gain their semiotic potential in the interplay between various narrative planes, and thus they need to be examined in a broader discussion of a given text.

Adopting a multimodal approach in narratological research entails profound implications for our understanding of narratives. For one thing, the narrator becomes "a narrator-presenter, who not only delivers a verbal story but also »presents« to the reader images, facsimiles of documents, etc." (Maziarczyk 2013: 45). The reader, in turn, becomes "engaged in constructing a mental model of the textual world in which he/she incorporates data from different semiotic sources and modes", which offers an interesting perspective for cognitive research (Hallet 2009: 150). Here, I would like to note that although nearly all of the researchers dealing with the subject of multiple semiotic modes operating in a given narrative write about multimodal novels, their remarks are by extension applicable to other narrative forms, as exemplified in the following discussion of short stories written by David Foster Wallace. The ensuing analysis employs the theoretical framework "combining the concepts derived from narratology, multimodal discourse analysis, semiotics and literary-theoretical accounts of the signifying potential of the printed codex" along with the differentiation of the "three basic levels of textual materiality—typeface, layout and book as physical object" proposed in *The Novel as Book* (Maziarczyk 2013: 12).

Little Expressionless Animals

A short story *Little Expressionless Animals* opens the first collection published by David Foster Wallace in 1989, *Girl with Curious Hair*. For most part, the story is set in the world of *Jeopardy!*, a televised game show being the nexus between all the characters and branching plot strands of the story. Here, a transworld identity of Alex Trebek hosts over 700 episodes of the show won by a young, purely fictional contestant named Julie, who is finally dethroned after a few characters working behind *Jeopardy!* scenes execute a plan of supplanting her with her autistic brother—Lunt—as the new champion. The story is composed of a mosaic of scenes and digressions, requiring high participation in reconfiguring the seemingly unconnected parts into a coherent

storyline and engaging various semiotic modes. Some of the scenes are accompanied by headlines, article excerpts, and images resembling drawings made with a straight-edge and pencil. The units vary in length and are separated with blank verses, yet this particular modification of layout seems to be too subtle to assume semiotic potential, contrary to the inclusion of headlines and excerpts. All of them pertain to the last event in the plot—the episode of *Jeopardy!* when Julie loses to her own brother, as in the following examples.

> "»JEOPARDY!« QUEEN DETHRONED AFTER THREE-YEAR REIGN
> - Headline, *Variety*, 13 March 1988" (Wallace 2010: 9).

> "Dethroning Ms. Smith after 700-plus victories last night was one 'Mr. Lunt' of Arizona, a young man whose habit of hiding his head under his arm at crucial moments detracted not at all from the virtuosity with which he worked a buzzer and board that had, for years, been the champion's own.
> - Article, *Variety*, 13 March 1988" (Wallace 2010: 29).

> "WHAT NEXT FOR SMITH?
> - Headline, *Variety*, 14 March 1988" (Wallace 2010: 29)[2].

The headlines and magazine excerpts are distinguished with a different typeface and separated from the bulk of the text with spaces. Subtle as it may seem, this modification transforms them into a device operating within the visual semiotic mode. The fact that their appearance is never even alluded to in the text, together with the typographical distinction and the fact that they are not "incorporated into the verbal narrative discourse by way of quotation" make it possible to treat them as "pseudo-facsimiles of documents" (Maziarczyk 2011: 117). Thus, in the case of headlines and excerpts inserted into *Little Expressionless Animals* the reader is confronted not only with an alien discourse (headlinese) but also an "alien", non-verbal mode of signification. The typeface and layout manipulation visible in this example participates in different semiotic processes taking place in the story. Together with the images included in the text, they add another level to the fragmentary character of the narrative's discourse by making it resemble a patchwork of semiotic modes. Arguably, the intention behind construing the story in this manner is to make the reader's engagement with the text resemble that required from a TV-audience. This, to meet the agenda put forward for a kind of prose which David Foster Wallace proposes to call

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[2]   I use original formatting in all the quotes from multimodal fiction.

image-fiction and discusses in detail in his seminal 1993 essay *E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction*. On the thematic level, the headlines and magazine excerpts may be treated as an additive device, for by standing in sharp contrast with utterances made by the same characters in informal or work-related situations, they emphasise the discrepancy between their actual treatment of Julie and her brother and their description thereof in the mediated territory of a magazine. Let us now consider one of the headlines juxtaposed with a fragment of a discussion taking place among *Jeopardy's* producers:

> "We loved her like a daughter," said »JEOPARDY!« public relations coordinator Muffy deMott. "We'll be sorry to see her go. Nobody's ever influenced a game show like Ms. Smith influenced »JEOPARDY!«" —Article, *Variety*, 13 March 1988 (Wallace 2010: 12).

> "Can't let her go. Too good. Too hot. She's become the whole show. Look at these figures." [...] "Rules, though," says the director. "Five slots, retire undefeated, comeback for Champion's Tourney in April. Annual event. Tradition. Art Flemming. Fairness to whole contestant pool. An ethics type of thing". Griffin whispers into his shiny man's ear. Again the man rises. "Balls," the shiny man says to the director. "The girl's magic. Figures do not lie. The Triscuit people have offered to double the price on thirty-second spots, long as she stays" [...]. "See that window?" he says. "That's where the rules go. Out the window" (Wallace 2010: 24-25).

Even though at first sight the headlines and article fragments do not seem dystopian at all, combined with meaning transmitted by the verbal mode they participate in the creation of a dystopian tinting on the ideological plane of the narrative. The tension arising between their content and the characters' behaviour exemplifies the relativity and fragility of rules supposedly governing the world of a televised game show. It also reminds the readers that television is inherently money-oriented. In order to make a profit, television has to appeal to the greatest numbers of viewers possible and that is why it shows them what they want to watch. In this particular case, the audience seems to want to watch Julie, so the producers decide to get rid of the winnings limit in order to give the audience what they want. All this to boost the ratings and increase the show's profitability. However, what if the audience eventually get tired of the brilliant contestant? At another point in the story readers learn that Julie "lost to her own brother, after Janet and Merv's exec snuck the damaged little bastard in with a rigged five audition and a board just crawling with animal

questions" (Wallace 2010: 19)[3]. What makes the plan of supplanting the former winner with her autistic brother particularly repulsive are the few mentions of his behaviour before the recording of the show, made by Muffy deMott, the show's PR coordinator, the same character whose declarations of love towards Julie are contained in the previously presented excerpts. She describes him as "a boy who's half catatonic with terror and general neurosis" and continues to explain that when she last saw him "he was fetal on the floor outside Makeup" (Wallace 2010: 5). Thus, the headlines and magazine excerpts incorporated in the narrative, considered in connection with its story level echo a remark made by Pierre Bourdieu and further explained by Jean Baudrillard, "»[t]he essence of every relation of force is to dissimulate itself as such and to acquire all its force only because it dissimulates itself as such,« understood as follows: capital, immoral and without scruples, can only function behind a moral superstructure, and whoever revives this public morality (through indignation, denunciation, etc.) works spontaneously for the order of capital" (Baudrillard 1995: 11-12). This way, the inclusion of headlines and excerpts allows the reader to get a glimpse of the moral superstructure masking the ruthless exploitation of the autistic boy and his sister. At the same time, juxtaposing these multimodal elements with the verbal mode of the narrative creates a fissure in the aforementioned superstructure, allowing to see the dystopian horizon behind it, embodied by the immoral and ruthless capital manifesting itself, i.e. in the previously discussed treatment of *Jeopardy!* contestants.

Apart from the magazine headlines and extracts, *Little Expressionless Animals* features another multimodal narrative technique rendering the ideological plane of the narrative dystopian—images of lines drawn with a straightedge and pencil. As in the case of headlines and excerpts, the drawings' dystopian semiotic potential is dependent on the story level, even though the pictures do not seem to be directly connected to the textual units they precede or follow. Interestingly, the drawings' function seems to change as the reader progresses through the text. The first picture, depicting a sharply rising and then falling line, precedes all verbal presentation in the narrative, and thus it seems to be devoid of semiotic potential in the first reading. Still, it may achieve a defamiliarizing effect through disrupting the readers' expectations

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[3]   Julie was unable to respond to any kind of questions involving animals.

of the layout of a typical short story and serve as an indication that the text is not going to progress in a typical, linear manner.

The semiotisation of images included in *Little Expressionless Animals* takes place in connection with a scene where two of the characters—Faye Goddard, *Jeopardy!* question researcher and Julie Smith, her lover and the show's unequalled champion, sit on a beach outside Los Angeles, watching the sunrise. There, Julie relates the story of her troubled childhood:

> Men would just appear, one after the other. I felt so sorry for my mother. These blank, silent men, and she'd hook up with one after the other, and they'd move in. And not one single one could love my brother […] Sometimes things would be ugly. I remember her leading a really ugly life. But she'd lock us in rooms when things got bad, to get us out of the way of it […] At first sometimes I remember she'd give me a straightedge and a pencil. To amuse myself. I could amuse myself with a straightedge for hours […] It makes worlds. I could make worlds out of lines. A sort of jagged magic. I'd spend all day. My brother watched (Wallace 2010: 10).

The above excerpt and the fact that the images appear between other, distinct scenes, without any apparent connection to their content allow the lines to be viewed as scenes in their own right. In the light of Julie's account of her childhood, every instance of inserting drawings which look as if they were made with a straightedge and pencil may be interpreted as a flashback sending the reader to numerous situations "when things got bad" and Julie's mother locked her and her brother up (Wallace 2010: 10). Interestingly, such a strategy appears to render these non-verbally represented scenes more poignant than they would be if explicitly written about. Here, the reader has to do the work of imagining what disturbing things must have happened each time when Julie created one of the drawings. If we follow such a reading, even the frequency of the drawings' appearance shows considerable semiotic potential, suggesting how very bad the characters' childhood had to be for Julie to have created so many different pictures. The device employed here bears strong resemblance to a verbal narrative technique, the "Klein bottle", which is a figure where "the inside and outside are indistinguishable" (McHale 1999: 14). As McHale explains, such a structure involves the text's "secondary or embedded representations […] becoming the outside world, its world in turn collapsing back into a secondary representation (a world within a world), which is thus embedded in itself" (McHale 1999: 14). Here we seem to be dealing with a multimodal counterpart of the Klein bottle, where the level of narrative discourse, where the drawings are exhibited, collapses back into the storyworld, and the other way round—the story level becomes "the

outside world", that is the level of narrative discourse. Such a modelling renders the storyworld (*sensu* Ryan and Thon) a claustrophobic, inescapable trap. Together with portraying all human relations as disturbed and devoid of nourishing powers they create a powerful dystopian tinting on the ideological plane of the narrative.

Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR

Another instance of introducing non-verbal modes of signification to be discussed here is included in the second piece from Wallace's 1989 collection *Girl with Curious Hair—Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR*. The story's plot is very simple and progresses in a lineal order: two executives finish work late in the evening and descend to the Executives' Garage. There, one of them suffers a heart attack and the other one tries to revive him by administering CPR. Contrary to the previous examples, the device employed here appears only once throughout the few-pages-long story and depends on a rather subtle typographic modification—italicizing an excerpt of the exposition. Here, "the italicized graphic form of the [four] word[s] iconically enact[s] [their] meaning" (Maziarczyk 2013: 210), foreshadows the future development of action and participates in creating a dystopian image of the storyworld. Let us consider the following excerpt from the beginning of the story:

> Each received, to the varying degrees their respective pains allowed, an *intuition of the askew* as, in the neatly stacked slices of lit space between the executive and the distant lament of a custodian's vacuum, the Building's very silence took on expression: they sensed, almost spinally, the slow release of great breath, a spatial sigh, a slight sly movement of huge lids cracked in wakened affinity with the emptiness that was, after all, the reasonable executive realizes, half the Building's total day. Realizes that the Building not only took up but organized space; contained the executive and not vice versa. That the Building was not, after all, comprised of or by executives. Or staff (Wallace 2010: 45).

The typographic modification of the "*intuition of the askew*", similarly to the previously discussed drawings, complicates the structure of narrative levels in the text. On the story level, the characters are those who receive such an impalpable intuition, but on the level of narrative discourse the actual reader receives a signal of there being something different, "askew", with the text at the same point in the story as the characters inside. As all multimodal narrative techniques, this instance of italicization is able to participate in creating dystopic undertones in the narrative only together with the other narrative planes. In this case, the leading role in the process is played by the plane of spatio-temporal characteristics and its phraseological rendering.

The "large Building", where the action is set, stretches itself in both directions (Wallace 2010: 45). The Executives' offices are located somewhere on its top floors, reflecting the high position they occupy both in the company and the social structure. Thus, the office high-rise becomes a reflection of dreams about social advancement. Still, "the utopia of the glass structure", functioning as the setting of this story, in this case turns out to embody a transparent, but inescapable cage making the characters unable to form any kind of meaningful connection neither with each other nor the outside world, forcing them to become simulacra of some previously determined and manufactured social roles instead of human beings (Bloch 1996: 737). It is signalled from the very beginning, when both of the characters finish work well past ten p.m. and begin to move towards the Executives' Garage located "below the Staff Garage below the Building's basement maintenance level" (Wallace 2010: 46).

> There were between these last two executives to leave the Building the sorts of similarities enjoyed by parallel lines. Each man, leaving, balanced his weight against that of a heavily slender briefcase. Monograms and company logos flanked handles of leathered metal, which each man held. Each man, on his separate empty floor, moved down white-lit halls over whispering and mealy and monochromatic carpet toward elevators that each sat open-mouthed and mute in its shaft along one of the large Building's two accessible sides. Each man, passing through his department's hall, felt the special subsonic disquiet the overtime executive in topcoat and unfresh suit and loosened tie feels as he moves in nighttime through areas meant to be experienced in, and as, daytime (Wallace 2010: 45).

A closer look on the phraseological plane of the narrative reveals that the disquieting atmosphere filling the Building is first signalled by writing its name with a capital letter. This impression is further strengthened by describing the seemingly inanimate Building with organic terms. The "whispering and mealy and monochromatic carpet", the "elevators that each sat open-mouthed and mute", the "neatly stacked slices of lit spaces", "the distant lament of a custodian's vacuum" culminating in "the slow release of great breath, a spatial sigh, a slight movement of huge lids" endow the glass office high-rise with a mysterious sort of presence (Wallace 2010: 45). The portrayal of the Building becomes even more interesting when juxtaposed with the rendering of characters, who are shown to be very similar on the outside, both harbouring an undisclosed pain inside, working in the same manner, and even walking in the same manner, "parallel lines" (Wallace 2010: 45). Such a modelling reflects Mario Perniola's remark that "[h]umans are becoming more similar to things, and equally, the inorganic world, thanks to electronic technology, seems to be taking over the human role in the perception of events" (Perniola 1995: viii). Note that the

characters are not given any proper names, they are not portrayed as individuals, they are the Account Representative and the Vice President in Charge of Overseas Production, which illustrates Bloch's remarks on the progressing universalisation of "glass utopias", where he notices that "the real people in these houses and towns become standardized termites or, within a »housing machine«, foreign bodies, still all too organic ones" (Bloch 1996: 736). This manner of rendering the phraseological plane of the narrative is continued in its subsequent parts and might be considered one of the trademarks of Wallace's writing, for it is also present in a number of other texts written by the author.

The last scene of the story puts forward a few interesting processes occurring at the same time. Once "the elevator disgorged the Vice President in Charge of Overseas Production, who moved stiffly, flushed, into the open, low yellowed space of the Executive Garage", the two characters shared a limit-experience that seems to offer a possibility of wrenching the characters out of their termite-state. The Vice President suffered a heart attack and the other man tried to revive him. Consider the following excerpt:

> "Help" the working Account Representative called, feeling the stir of a tinily remembered humid wind and pausing, again, to look behind him [...] at the Ramp that spiraled up out of sight toward a street, empty and bright, before the Building, empty and bright, dispossessed, autonomous and autonomic. Bent to what two lives required, below everything, he called for help again and again (Wallace 2010: 51-52).

Whether this experience would transform them both, or at least one of them, remains a matter open to speculation. Regardless of the outcome, this limit-experience is not the most prominent element of the story's final scene. Here again the setting has the lead. The Building's predatory, claustrophobic character is foregrounded, allowing for this simple plot to be transformed into a commentary on the "constitutive features of the postmodern" which Fredric Jameson believes to be "a new depthlessness [...] a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum [...] and the deep constitutive relationships of all this to a whole new technology, which is itself a figure for a whole new economic system" (Jameson 1991: 5). The Building, representing the postindustrial socio-economic system, not only swallows, digests and disgorges people. It imprisons them, and makes it utterly impossible for the Account Representative's cries for help to be heard. The Ramp, spiralling out of site, suggests an infinite regress, a total separation from the outside world, which is not much different from the rapacious Building itself, anyway. The usage of the word

"dispossessed" in connection with the office high-rise is also notable here—it further strengthens the vision of the two characters being in possession of the Building embodying Jameson's postmodern Other—"that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labour stored up in our machinery—an alienated power […] which turns back on and against us in unrecognizable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis" (Jameson 1991: 34). Thus, the previously discussed typographic distinguishing of the *"intuition of the askew"* analysed in connection with the story's thematic level, reveals the seemingly unremarkable italicization as an extremely capacious semiotic resource serving as a beacon for a whole array of notions visible on the ideological plane of the narrative.

Datum Centurio

One of the most straightforwardly dystopian texts written by Wallace is *Datum Centurio*—a piece from *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men,* his second short story collection first published in 1999. It makes use of multiple semiotic modes in a presumably most easily discernible manner, for it is designed to resemble "pages" of:

> *Leckie & Webster's Connnotationally Gender-Specific Lexicon of Contemporary Usage,* a 600gb DVD$_3$ Product with 1.6 gb of Hyperavailable Hot Text Keyed to 11.2 gb of Contextual, Etymological, Historical, Usage and Gender-Specific Connotational Notes, Available Also with Lavish Illustrative Support in All 5 Major Sense Media*, ©2096 by R. Leckie DataFest Unltd (NYPHDC/US/4Grid).
>
> * *(compatible hardware required)* (Wallace 2011: 106).

Although the short story functions as an autonomous piece, it is thematically linked with a cycle of stories by the same title as the collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. As the title suggest, the cycle is designed to resemble clinical interviews, typically with men responsible for inflicting various kinds of violence on their intimate partners. Viewing them and *Datum Centurio* in terms of a cause and effect relationship gives rise to additional meanings. However, they only become visible after a previous reconstruction of the dystopian world from the snippets of information included in the dictionary entry. Once this is done, the similarities between *Datum Centurio* and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* turn out to include, for instance, the development of violence-related aspects of intergender relationships such as objectification of the partner, the woman's passive attitude and the tendency of "getting rid of the pain without addressing the deeper cause" (McCaffery: 2005). Actually, in

Wallace's 2096, relationship came to denote a liaison between two persons only in historical usage. Here, the word "date" stands for:

> Consequent to the successful application for a License to Parent (KEY at PROCREATIVITY; at BREED/(v.); ...) the process of voluntarily submitting one's nucleotide configurations and other Procreativity Designators to an agency empowered by law to identify an optimal female neurogenetic complement for the purposes of Procreative Genital Interface (Wallace 2011: 106).

The cold, scientific language, and the high level of institutional control over the citizens' private lives, although absolutely devoid of violent elements at first sight, connote a total objectification of the woman, who became reduced to the role of "an optimal [...] neurogenetic complement" used by men to achieve "the gratification associated with having one's Procreativity Designators affirmed by both culture and complement as neurogenetically desirable" (Wallace 2011: 106, 110). Still, this is only one of the meanings of the word date contained in this entry. The other one, related to the evolution of entertainment—one of the subjects of particular importance for David Foster Wallace—denotes "[t]he creation and/or use of a Virtual Female Sensory Array [...] for the purposes of Simulated Genital Interface" (Wallace 2011: 107). A further historical usage note sheds some light as to the reasons why in Wallace's 2096 dates no longer involve a meeting between two living human beings, but are simulated machine-aided intercourses instead. According to the historical usage note provided, "the result of an estimated 86.5% of 20C dates was a state of severe emotional dissonance between the date's participants, a dissonance attributed by most sources to basic psychosemantic miscodings" (Wallace 2011: 108). While 20C women understood the word date almost exclusively as "the mutual exploration of possibilities for long-term neurogenetic compatibility [...] leading to legally codified intergender union [...] and soft offspring", a "fraudulent interest" in this connotation of the word date was supposedly "often employed by 20C males for purposes related exclusively to connotation (B)" which denoted "the unilateral pursuit of an immediate, vigorous, and uncodified episode of genital interface without regard to neurogenetic compatibility or soft offspring or even a telephone call the next day" (Wallace 2011: 108). With a characteristic mixture of seriousness and humoristic tone, Wallace brings up the previously mentioned predatory, objectifying attitude of males towards females. Then, he seems to point to their inclination towards viewing themselves as victims, as in the following fragment: in order to "palliate the 86.5% semioemotional conflict

that attended genuine interpersonal dating" "wholly depersonalized simulacra of genital interface" were made available to "U.S. male consumers" (Wallace 2011: 109).

Wallace's vision of intergender relationships one hundred years from now, although devoid of violence, entails eliminating relationships altogether and supplanting them with their technosexual simulacrum. Thus, paradoxically, eliminating intimate partner violence gives rise to a dystopian future where governmental agencies and technology exert total control over the choice of partners, where one needs to obtain a "License to Parent" to have kids, and the purpose of meeting with a genuine human being of the opposite sex is reduced to procreation only (Wallace 2011: 106). Similarly to the previously discussed stories, multiple modes of signification actively participate in the creation of a dystopian storyworld in *Datum Centurio*. Beginning with typographical and layout modifications, the text is construed to resemble the view of a window of a computer dictionary. The interplay between the piece's thematic content and its codification in the form of a dictionary entry strengthens the dystopian undertones present on the story level. The fact that the previously mentioned characteristics of intergender relationships in Wallace's 2096 are recorded in a lexicon, means that they enjoy the status of a social norm. This, in turn, leaves the reader wondering what other norms must be accepted in this society, if it has given up the most intimate spheres of human life to be managed by governmental agencies with help of technology and surveillance.

Thus, it turns out, that even though the multimodal narrative techniques included in the discussed stories are subtle, they play an important, in some cases even crucial, part in the creation of the dystopian undertones in Wallace's fiction. Still, the functions they perform are dependent on meaning generated by the verbal mode of signification and, thus, they gain their semiotic potential in the interplay between the various modes. In some cases, as exemplified by *Datum Centurio,* the meaning-generating process may take place also on a higher level, not only in the interplay of various modes, but also in the interplay of various modes and thematic levels of multiple stories included in one collection. Apart from this, the analysed stories prove that even notions as vague as a sense of wrongness arising while reading a text, although never directly referred to in its verbal presentation, can be pinpointed to the workings of multimodal narrative techniques. The discusses texts also suggest that even the most subtle modifications operating within the non-verbal modes of signification should not be overlooked, as they exhibit considerable semiotic potential.

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