

# **VI Solitude from the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Century: Space, Identity, and Pathology**



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# “It’s What We Have in Common, This Aloneness”: Solitude, Communality, and the Self in the Writing of David Foster Wallace

**Abstract:** This paper positions Wallace’s persistent interest in connection and solitude at the heart of his project for contemporary literature. By looking at the solitude of Wallace’s characters, instead of their struggle for connection, it explores Wallace’s ideas about moral and mental wholeness and the ethics of disconnection.

## 1. “It’s What We Have in Common”

Talking about the alienation of the teenaged students at Enfield Tennis Academy, the hero of David Foster Wallace’s massive, era-defining *Infinite Jest* (1996), Hal notes “it’s what we have in common, this aloneness” (112). Taking that as a starting point to explore the many forms of solitude Wallace explored in his work, this essay examines his abiding interest in disconnection, alienation, and solitude, arguing that for him, solitude in the modern world is necessarily a common condition, and that the meaningful witnessing of one’s isolation offers a means to transcend it. In offering this exploration, the essay begins by outlining Wallace’s famous concern with solipsism and how it is made manifest at every stage of his career in a range of ways. Distinguishing solipsism from simple solitude, I highlight the significance of topographical symbols of solitude – deserts, hermit figures, liminal spaces, and so on – that punctuate Wallace’s writing and discuss the ways in which Wallace works to incorporate such symbols into landscapes that are largely urban or suburban, and always overcrowded. Finally, I argue that Wallace constructs a set of conditions under which isolation – either physical or emotional – is necessary for self-awareness, and that this solitude must, ironically, be witnessed. I examine the concept of unconscious communities, or arrangements of communality, as I suggest it may be useful to call them, as they operate in Wallace’s fiction, especially in *Infinite Jest*, looking at the embedded I/we dynamic of Alcoholics Anonymous, the drive towards isolation and solipsism in drug addicts, and the constant desire for communication and connection that drive all of Wallace’s characters, concluding that the connection that his characters seek is necessarily associated with and emergent from a sense of the crucial importance of solitude.

## 2. “No Conclusion Could Be More Horrible”: Wallace and Solipsism

Easily the most-canvassed of all the concerns of his career is Wallace's interest in the notion of solipsism, which he regarded as the worst of all possible worlds. Solipsism, the illusion of being the only mind in the universe, the unconscious generative impulse of everything you encounter or imagine, is depicted time and again as the loneliest of conditions. The antithesis of meaningful communication for Wallace is not miscommunication or even silence, but the short circuit of solipsistic communication, the condition of being permanently and irrevocably alone in “tiny skull-sized kingdoms” (*This Is Water* 117). Solipsism, closely associated with but distinct from narcissism, is the ultimate horror for Wallace and his characters, bringing with it the impossibility of meaningful connection or communication in a period of what he once referred to as “Total Noise” (“Deciderization 2007” 301).

One of the main ways in which Wallace investigated solipsism and narcissism was through the recurrent imagery of infancy, which he used to literalize the complex development of subjectivity. Babies and images of infancy are everywhere in Wallace's work, from the feral infant of *Infinite Jest* to the wailing child of “Incarnations of Burned Children” (2004). Stonecipheco, the huge company at the center of *The Broom of the System* (1987), makes its money – and creates havoc – through baby food. *Infinite Jest*'s Hal refers to himself on one occasion as “an infantophile” (16). At a broader cultural level, infantilizing images such as the Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment and the Inner Infant Recovery Meeting (795–808) permeate the novelistic consciousness of *Infinite Jest*. Infancy in Wallace's work is perverse and unhomey, not the blissful, comfort-filled haven that narcissistic theory would suggest it to be. Specifically, it highlights the fear and horror of being unable to communicate one's needs coherently, and have those needs met. Mary Holland points to Wallace's early essay “A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again” (1996) as one of the founding texts of “the peculiarly postmodern angst of late twentieth century American culture” (63), arguing that the very purpose and stated aim of the cruise, namely “its obsessive desire to relieve the passenger of all decisions and duties,” promises to reduce us to “the bliss of the infant's narcissistic existence” (63–64).<sup>1</sup> This promise, made on the cruise ship as a promise of pleasure and seduction, is rendered horrifying in Wallace's deconstruction of it, and the infantilizing nature of the contemporary need for comfort recurs again and again through his writing. While the “infantilizing removal of responsibility for the self” (Holland 64) is evocative of *Infinite Jest*'s “Entertainment” (90), and the fear of society choosing death by pleasure, the same motif of infantilism ties in to the suspension of both ability and desire to communicate. In this sense, the infant

represents precisely the kind of isolation Wallace fears; not solitary, but rather trapped, howling, and incoherent, among a crowd, an almost urban gothic form of conspicuous invisibility more readily associated with writers like Edgar Allan Poe.

### 3. “We Are Ourselves Other”: Alterity and the Narrative Self

While the enforced isolation of the infant consciousness presents one kind of horror – the horror of the solipsistic subject – it is important to realize that Wallace’s imagined relief from this state also relied heavily on the separateness of the subject. With regard to the loneliness of the narcissistic or solipsistic self, Thomas Docherty explores a paradox that arises from Paul Ricoeur’s theory of dual identity in his *Alterities: Criticism, History, Representation* (1996), wherein to identify in the other a means by which to establish a coherent self – as Ricoeur’s theory would suggest is necessary – means to posit the other as existing only to satisfy that need: “it is as if they exist only for the present moment in which the subject identifies itself” (7). In other words, identifying the other as necessary to the self leads, paradoxically, to a form of solipsism: the belief that the other is in fact a projection of the self. Docherty evades the necessary conclusion of solipsism by positing the idea of alterity to supplant that of otherness. Alterity, by contrast with simple otherness, implies the inaccessible self that inheres within another, thereby protecting some element of the other from exploitation in reference to the self. Ricoeur’s theory of dual identity enriches the Wittgensteinian identity games that Wallace enacts in *The Broom of the System*. The definition of self by other is repeatedly addressed at a number of stages in the text, explicitly and comically by the Spaniards in their family drama, and at a more complex level during the Amherst conversation with LaVache. Lenore, the novel’s protagonist, according to her brother LaVache, has “decided that [she is] not real” (248), or that she is “really real only insofar as [she is] told” (249), charges which are borne out by any number of other passages in the text, most obviously Lenore’s “rap sessions” (135) with Dr. Jay, and indeed by Wallace’s own admission in the interview with McCaffery (142). On the basis of the two drawings, LaVache proposes that Lenore view the whole mysterious situation as part of a sinister game being played by Lenore Sr. Its outcome, he posits, is that Lenore Jr., by trying to consider her own existence, renders herself irrevocably other, and so, if we take the original premise – that “all Lenore is is her act of thought” (247) – to be the case, Lenore is nonsense, and as such cannot possibly exist. In a sense, he is treating Lenore’s search, and indeed life, as one of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s antinomies; by applying logic to a set of circumstances he arrives at a patently impossible conclusion: that Lenore is both self and other, both Lenore and not-Lenore, which maps directly on to Wittgenstein’s qualification for nonsense

(a proposition being both *p* and not-*p*). As we have said, this being the case leads directly to her non-existence, which is made ridiculous by the manifest fact of her (fictional) existence, in an absurdist reironizing of existential instability. In view of the above, the antinomies in this scene function as signposts to the unraveling of logical meaning, rather than as clues to the disappearance of the senescent philosopher Lenore Senior.

The self/other element of the paradox in LaVache's reasoning evolves the question to include a dynamic interdependence of isolation and connection that make up a central element of Wallace's philosophy of communication, tying it to the philosophy of Ricoeur. LaVache's argument that "we are ourselves Other" (248) is here pointing out the futility and ultimate self-destructiveness of relying too much on interpretation, as we have said, and if we apply Ricoeur's theory of identity to Lenore's quandary of confused selfhood, she emerges as lacking 'ipseity' in her character. In other words, her reliance on the stories of others is too strong, and she has not yet created a story for herself. Her confusion, in this reading, is perfectly natural: by means of the *idem*-identity we can use the stories and speech-acts of others to relate to our own experiences and further solidify our *ipse*-identity. However, the stories of others cannot be used to create an *ipse*-identity, and as such, over-reliance on external narratives renders a character one-sided and dysfunctional. Lenore, then, is in danger of over-identification, which Wallace repeatedly involved in his short fiction, and her progress through the narrative charts her movement beyond that essentially linguistic entrapment in solipsistic recursion.

In *Oneself as Another (Soi-même Comme un Autre, 1990)*, Ricoeur views the inevitable tension between *idem* and *ipse* as partially resolved by the use of narrative. The *idem* is the part of our identity that is given – cultural history, family, and so on – and so it appropriates and is mediated by other people's stories. The *ipse*, on the other hand, is unique to the individual, spontaneous, creative, and self-creating. It writes its own story and turns to the narratives of others for reference. We use narrative to create an ordered "human time" out of the inchoate, uncontrollable cosmic time, as well as to impose some commonality on "felt time" (i.e. the personal experience of the passage of time, which is by no means linear)<sup>2</sup> since "human lives become more intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them" (188). Ricoeur goes on to argue that "self-knowledge is an interpretation; self-interpretation, in its turn, finds in narrative ... a privileged mediation" (188). What necessitates narrative identity, in his philosophy, is the inevitable discord between the discontinuity of the changing person over time and the permanent selfhood that means the child and the man are the same person in some way. This was a theory introduced in Immanuel Kant's

*Critique of Pure Reason* (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781), but because it was not specific to identity, the inevitable tension of the permanent and the mutable self was not really addressed. For Ricoeur, this tension, and the tension of *idem* and *ipse*, necessitate the mediating influence of narrative, public and private.

Ricoeur is less forthcoming on the temporal experience of the *ipse*. In *The Course of Recognition* (*Parcours de la reconnaissance*, 2004), he refers to our ongoing struggle for mutual recognition, which is “a struggle against misrecognition of others at the same time that it is a struggle for the recognition of oneself by others” (258), in language that strikingly evokes some of the central ideas of Stanley Cavell’s philosophy. While this hints at an internal consciousness of the necessity of narrative to “the dialectic of order and disorder,” demonstrating an awareness of the way our identities engender “second-order stories, which are themselves intersections between stories” (Kearney 6), it remains focused on the public, interpersonal nature of these intersecting narratives. Importantly, however, another, altogether more private form of story-telling exists and is at least as important, that of the lonely person’s imaginative self-narrative. The ‘if . . . then’ paradigm associated with linear temporal experience is crucial to human behavior, which is, at survival level, based on a fairly rational analysis of necessity, cause, and consequence. Because anything above this survival level thought process involves reflection, memory, and an abstract awareness of the disjunction between inner and outer time, a discord arises. Narratives allow us to cobble together the inchoate episodes of our lives and fix them into a temporal span, lending them a basic, if illusory harmony. Wallace challenges this linear temporal inclination in the short story “Good Old Neon” from *Oblivion* (2004), in which the deceased narrator explains: “Words and chronological time create all these total misunderstandings of what’s really going on at the most basic level” (151). In a Ricoeurian paradigm, then, narratives are devised to impose a comprehensible order on otherwise troublingly scattershot lives. Story becomes the anchor of identity, and understanding of ourselves and those around us as characters stems from this basis. More importantly, by telling stories, we anchor ourselves in groups of others, and are witnessed by them. It is not sufficient to say that we tell each other stories in order to present ourselves. We tell ourselves stories in order to locate or delineate ourselves, without which process the *idem* gets into trouble because we cannot differentiate ourselves from others. In this way the two theories mentioned earlier, the conflicted self and the mediating function of narrative, work to strengthen and enrich one another by way of entry into an involuntary linguistic network.

Building on this theoretical construct, at which Wallace arrived very early in his career, he developed a working concept of connection that revolved around love

and separateness. In the early short story “Lyndon” from the early collection *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989), distance is described as a measure of love: love entails distance because love is always only of the other. In this vein, Mrs. Johnson says that she and her husband “do not *love* each other anymore. Because we ceased long ago to be enough *apart* for a ‘love’ to span any distance” (115). Paradoxically, then, we cannot love without the isolation that it is fiction’s job to rupture, because love – or connection – can only be between and never within. This concept was comically literalized in *The Broom of the System* by Norman Bombardini, and Wallace referred to it in relation to his admiration of Wittgenstein: what made Wittgenstein “a real artist [was] that he realized that no conclusion could be more horrible than solipsism” (McCaffery 143). That is to say, in the absence of the possibility of connection, isolation offers the ultimate horror. The absence of an other – solipsism – entails the loss of the self. In other words, the coherence of the self as a teleological imperative is in fact completely self-defeating, and can only be disrupted by love of or engagement with an other. The separateness of the author and the reader, and of the characters seeking connection, is necessary and absolute. It is in witnessing the distinct selfhood of another – in acknowledging, as Docherty offers, the alterity of the other, the unreachably foreign locus of the not-I self – that we might break the cycle of isolation and alienation amid crowds that characterize Wallace’s vision of the contemporary human condition.

#### 4. Hermits, Hauntings, and the Blasted Heath

Dealing as it does with the alienation of the contemporary self in a largely urban, always populous context, it is interesting to note the numerous classic symbols of isolation that permeate Wallace’s writing. The first novel, *The Broom of the System*, includes a kind of corporate non-space in which contemplation of the self is encouraged, a man-made black-sand desert called the Great Ohio Desert, or G.O.D. The novel also features a hermit figure in Lenore’s brother John (an obvious reference to John the Baptist), who wanders the desert, claims to eat locusts, and maintains an ascetic/frightening thinness throughout the text. Lenore’s great-grandmother, also named Lenore, disappears into a network of tunnels under the city, wholly isolated from the novel and all its characters. Later, in *Infinite Jest*, the United States and Canada have amalgamated to form the Organization of North American Nations, a name most significant for the acronym O.N.A.N., with its implications of excessive self-pleasuring, wasted potential, and isolation; the society is characterized not by overt destruction, but rather by excess. However, it is in this very excess that Wallace demonstrates the greatest destructiveness, most clearly figured in the substance abuse that permeates the novel. The wasted fecundity



implicit in the name O.N.A.N. is also mirrored in the large portions of the north-eastern United States and southern Canada that form an immense and dangerously fertile landfill, and the isolation that comes with the solitary nature of masturbation is reflected throughout the novel, but most particularly by reference to the preference of one of the novel's many addicts, Erdedy, for masturbation (solitude) over sex (companionship) when he is taking drugs (21). The novel's action is centered around a number of interconnected themes, including film (which we typically watch collectively, but experience in "primordial" darkness and seeming solitude, as Laura Mulvey has argued, 833), drug use, and tennis. Specifically, the Enfield Tennis Academy is a training ground for young athletes who live and work together, but whose goal is the decisively solitary pursuit of competitive tennis. Lyle, the sweat guru of the Enfield Tennis Academy, functions as a hermit or wise man figure, but lives in suburban Boston, in a boarding school – surely the least isolated place imaginable. In this sense, Wallace invokes the kind of fashionable hermit-in-the-garden figures of earlier American and European imaginations; Lyle is a hermit, yes, but he and his wisdom are also accessible, and so not truly solitary. Once again, in *Infinite Jest*, we encounter a desert space outside of Phoenix, explicitly invoking Wittgenstein's antinomies, and the space in which the majority of the novel's serious philosophy is expounded. The flatlands of Illinois are critical to the early story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way" (1989) and throughout *The Pale King* (2011), particularly in its evocative, still opening passage, and the motif of movement unites these and numerous other works in Wallace's oeuvre.

Liminal spaces, then, are fundamental to Wallace's creation of the tension between the alienated individual and the crowded, noisy reality of contemporary living. As well as these landscapes, images of infancy, and the comic specter of a man of infinite size, Wallace used drugs specifically and addiction in general as a way of dramatizing cataclysmic alienation and the drive to connect. *Infinite Jest*, in particular, has at its center the alienated self. Much of the novel's action evolves around the use of and recovery from drugs. The incapacity to communicate is exacerbated and highlighted by a shared drive towards isolation in the novel's drug users. Erdedy is waiting for "the woman who said she'd come" (17), but later it becomes clear that one of the common features of his drug binges is solitude (his habitual selection of masturbation over sexual intercourse during these episodes, 21). Hal is "as attached to the secrecy as he is to getting high" (49), and later reveals his "strong distaste about smoking dope with/in front of all these others" (329). Pemulis's connection with drugs is, as a dealer, altogether more sociable, yet the formality of his language – requiring his customers to ask him to "please commit a crime" (156) – imposes an immediate and conscious distance between

Pemulis and his interlocutors. The dialogue of drug users and addicts throughout the novel uses much of the same terminology, resulting in abject failures of communication because the speakers are so self-involved that they do not recognize alterity or other subjectivity. The Alcoholics Anonymous system in *Infinite Jest* is conceptually reflective of Wallace's conceptions of alienation and connection. It is also narratively and structurally center to the novel,<sup>3</sup> functioning narratively as a synecdoche of the addictive propensities of the novel's wider milieu, and structurally as another symbol of the poisonously recursive language of the postmodern apocalypse. The AA structure is grounded in collectivity and the inescapability of shared experience. Reaching "the fork in the road that Boston AA calls your *Bottom*" (347) is the novel's primary impetus towards the desire, or rather the need, to give, to connect in some way, even if that way has seemed and continues to seem insipid or inane. Again, it is the need to connect and not the success in connection that is represented as the first step towards redemption. This isolation-progression of an individual at the heart of a group is consistent with Wallace's vision of contemporary society, "taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic," but recognizing "that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections" (McCaffery 132). It is also, importantly, consistent with Wallace's approach to late postmodern literature as a complexly cyclical enterprise that resists progress as illusory, and with his vision for the future. Read in these terms, the end of the novel – particularly Don Gately's efforts to resist medication – is a distinctly ambiguous analogy for the plight of late postmodernism as Wallace represented it. In this, *Infinite Jest* again exploits the condition of the "contemporary extreme," in the way it "enact[s] an aesthetic that does not strive for harmony or unity, but, instead, forces the confrontation between irreconcilable differences, most notably the difference between reality and art" (Durand and Mandel 1), a description strikingly resonant with Wallace's larger resistance to closure. Taking the idea of the contemporary extreme as a guiding pattern, a clear connective path is discernible between the structure of the novel, the process and pattern of addiction and recovery, and the Entertainment at its core, still, always, resisting the sense of an ending and cleaving to ideas of beginning and process.

## 5. See and Be Seen: The Importance of Witnessing

The annularity of the AA system – a circle with no center, anti-hierarchical, and focused on process over achievement – echoes the annularity of much of the architecture of *Infinite Jest*, from the idea of annular fusion to the circular geography of much of the action. This connection of the literary topography with the structures of the central locus of action is mirrored in *The Pale King*, with the use of § to

designate chapters. In *Infinite Jest*, the AA structure could also be read as evoking the annularity of late postmodernist fiction, in its constant self-referentiality and complex internal order: as Ilkka Arminen points out, AA has succeeded without “professionalization of leadership or the emergence of a bureaucracy” (491). While it is true that the structures of AA itself contribute a narrative shape to *Infinite Jest*, there are also parallels between the addiction spiral and the spiral system of postmodern literature. The point of Arminen’s article is that part of the therapeutic work of AA stems not just from speaking about the addiction experience, but from the reciprocal work of relating the individual’s story to those of other addicts. “[M]embers, again and again, invoke and mutually display their newly found identities” and while the focus is largely personal, “they also repeatedly refer to co-contributors’ turns of talk in order to make their own experiences recognizable to, understandable to, and ‘shareable with’ the recipients” (492). The necessity not just of speech, but of active participation that is implicit in the idea of ‘co-contributor references’ mirrors once again the conception of communication and responsive witnessing expressed throughout Wallace’s work (491).

Importantly, too, the reciprocal nature of the “sharing” in AA encodes the sharer’s identity within a specific set of symbols. The obligatory phrase uttered by each contributor at the opening of their narrative – ‘My name is X and I am an alcoholic’ – fixes the speaker’s identity as part of a group, in the kind of community structure Andrew Warren identifies when discussing jargon. Particularly in the context of a narrative of addiction, the AA system works in concert with Wallace’s broader project of identity. That is to say, the identifying phrase both separates one (I) as an individual and integrates one as part of a network, functioning as a narrative analogue of Ricoeur’s *idem/ipse* balance. This performance of ritual speech, especially the articulation of the name, guards against the danger implicit in addiction throughout *Infinite Jest*, which is the loss of the self, a threat that is embodied in the nameless addicts – yrstruly, C., even Don, who was known as Bimmy – who are known only by nicknames within the immediate group of addicts, like the anonymized characters whose identities are subsumed into their primary characteristics. Indeed, the vanishing of the addicted self is a common theme of narratives of addiction and alcoholism. Alienation, anonymity, and community are explored through the AA sections of *Infinite Jest*, which positions its adherents in a metacommunicative system without the need for identification. Alcoholics Anonymous offers an iteration of direct narrative interaction on a micro level, but the participants are members of a larger system, too, the commun(al)ity that is the unconscious community of communal experience. One subchapter of the novel contains unattributed snatches of dialogue from Ennet House residents in which

they discuss various aspects of their illness and recovery. The anonymity of these passages – a key attraction of the AA system for the founder of the Ennet House program – means that the dialogue is abstracted from its speakers, so that the passage becomes almost a snapshot of the non-specific concerns of the inmates of the halfway house, reducing the identity of the addict to a series of isolated clichés. This, of course, is mirrored in the traditional AA procedure, which encourages anonymity both in its insistence on first names only and in its removal of individual autonomy, wherein the addict surrenders to a higher power to give them sufficient strength to overcome the addiction that has already suppressed their autonomy. The Ricoeurian balance of *idem* and *ipse* is central to the healing process offered by Alcoholics Anonymous, where it appears in the guise of shared experience therapy; again, the necessity of a responsive witness, encoded in the AA structure, reflects Wallace's conception of the asynchronously reciprocal dynamic between author and reader. Structurally speaking, AA permeates the narrative beyond its narrative relevance, falling in with the theme of annularity so central to the novel as a whole.

The central AA motto 'one day at a time' "a long time ago anticipated the 'post-modern wisdom' that the identity is never fixed" (Arminen 492), which is central to Wallace's work and late postmodernism generally. The working of AA is interrogated by Gately, who, as part of his job as a resident staffer, observes and encourages new inmates, who are convinced that "this slapdash anarchic system of low-rent gatherings and corny slogans and saccharin grins and hideous coffee is so lame you just *know* there's no way it could ever possibly work except for the utterest morons" (Wallace, *Infinite* 350). Gately's perspective is from the step after this one, where he has come through the cynicism of the disappointed addict and has spent his time praying to "a God you believe only morons believe in" (350) and has reached the point at which the clichés become meaningful and true.<sup>4</sup> The adherence to this greater system – even cynical adherence – marks those in AA as connected, even if they are unacquainted, members of the commun(al)ity I mentioned earlier.

AA, of course, is not the only instance of this kind of unconscious community; we might think also of sufferers of depression, as depicted in "The Depressed Person" (1999), of the many alumni of McDonald's advertisements, seen in "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," or of parents, tennis players, IRS agents, misogynists, wanderers in a corporate desert, all of whom appear in one guise or another throughout Wallace's writing. The importance to the self of being witnessed is also explored in a less edifying way by the recognition of the self as object of observation, which I have discussed at greater length elsewhere. For example, in *The Pale King*, awareness of the physical self is often presented as a response

to the gaze of some powerfully subjective other, whose mere observation of the self traumatically decenters it. Cusk's sweating arrives with puberty, when, as observed in a footnote, "psychodynamically, he was, as a subject, coming to a late and therefore traumatic understanding of himself as also an object" (92, n. 1). Cusk's sweating problem is related to his awareness of his self, not just as a self but as an other, echoing LaVache's estimation of Lenore's self-image. It becomes particularly pronounced when he is aware or afraid of the gaze of other subjects: relinquishing his subjectivity and becoming an object has made him lose control of his body. Here, then, the masculine subject is problematized by the awareness of the possibility that it may not only be a subject. This violent decentering is contrasted by both the dreamy self-othering of the boy in "Forever Overhead" (1999) and by the story of Toni Ware in *The Pale King*. The decentered self, of course, is not a specifically masculine experience, though it is here literalized in the masculine body; rather, it is one of the central characteristics of the postmodern, and one of Wallace's central concerns with respect to solipsism and living an authentic life. Warren's articulation of narrative modeling as fundamental to Wallace's ethical project is pertinent to a reading of both *Infinite Jest's* use of AA and *The Broom of the System's* reliance on narrative self-definition, offering membership of a narrative commun(al)ity as an anodyne against alienation; by extension, we as readers – "putting in our fair share of the linguistic work" (McCaffery 138) – become part of a similar commun(al)ity. In the end, solitude and solipsism function, for Wallace, as two sides of the same problem of isolation. Solitude is reparable, redeemable – frightening, perhaps, but not fatal – while solipsism rings the death-knell of self-hood. In either case, it is perhaps mildly ironic that separateness is the key. Throughout his work, teeming, deafening, lonely, Wallace offered the condition of the witnessed self in isolation as the solution to solitude.

## Notes

1. The story was originally published as "On the (nearly lethal) comforts of a luxury cruise" in *Harpers Magazine* (January 1996) and republished as the title essay of the collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997).
2. An important point here is that Ricoeur was writing in French, in which the words for 'story' and 'history' are the same, 'histoire'.
3. A number of critics have traced the structural significance of AA in *Infinite Jest*, including Burn and Carlisle in their companion volumes. While AA is narratively significant to swathes of the plot of *Infinite Jest*, its more pervasive influence is largely architectural.

4. The AA system as it is presented here contains an echo of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in the protagonist's injunction to his mother to "assume a virtue if you have it not . . . refrain tonight/and that shall lend a kind of easiness/to the next abstinence" (349), advice mirrored in AA's fake-it-till-you-make-it doctrine.

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## Alone in the Crowd: Urban Recluses in US-American Film

**Abstract:** Filmic representations of urban solitude often depict it negatively; the urban recluse is a kind of threat to his or her environment. The reason lies in the particular constitution of urban solitude: because human contact is theoretically possible at all times and spatial distance minimal, the urban recluse is in a position of perpetual liminality.

### 1. Right Next Door: The Recluses Among Us

The bulk of studies of solitude, hermitism, and reclusion focuses on the withdrawal of a person to an isolated place like a hut in the forest, a cave in the desert, or some other place in the wilderness far away from urban hustle. To be sure, most critics acknowledge that solitude does not inevitably and exclusively mean significant spatial distance from other people; but most then go on to discuss – abundantly available – narratives of retreat into the natural wild. However, as Ina Bergmann points out in her introduction to this collection, reclusion and hermitism are also possible and indeed frequently practiced in an urban context. In fact, as she elaborates, both ‘natural’ and urban solitude have a long tradition. It is unsurprising, then, that at a closer look, US-American literature and fiction film should be full of urban recluses.

In fact, all of US-American literature is – and has been ever since it made sense to speak of ‘urban’ in an US-American cultural context – full of urban recluses. The short stories of Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Harold Brodkey, John Cheever, Richard Russo, Joyce Carol Oates, and many more regularly feature urban recluses, not to mention the countless pieces of detective, crime, thriller, or horror fiction. Better-known novels would be Malamud’s *The Tenants* (1971), Bellow’s *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* (1970), Oates’ *Zombie* (1995) or, it seems, every other novel by Paul Auster. The list could be extended to include plays by Tony Kushner, Suzan-Lori Parks, or Neil LaBute; poetry by Jorie Graham, Louise Glück, or Sharon Olds; and comics such as Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000) or the *Sandman*-series (1989–1996) by Neil Gaiman.

There are many more examples in US-American film of characters living a more or less secluded life in an urban environment and with a narrative that develops from the intrusion of the ‘outside’ into the mental and/or spatial reclusion of the protagonist. Entire genres more or less centrally feature an urban recluse: many

superheroes keep their ‘private’ identity secret and live in urban reclusion when they are not out to hunt villains; serial killer films and other thriller-staples frequently stage an urban recluse as an unknown threat right next door. If we take into account minor characters, the number of urban recluses in US-American film multiplies.

Interestingly, though, filmic representations of urban solitude frequently tinge this form of reclusion negatively; quite often, the urban hermit is a kind of threat – not necessarily physical – to his or her environment and its particular social/political/moral order, or portrayed as a more or less sociopathic outsider, though not necessarily violent. The key reason for this lies, I argue, in the particular constitution and dynamics of urban solitude, which are significantly different from those of ‘natural’ solitude, even though they share fundamental features. Because human and social contact is theoretically possible at all times and spatial/physical distance minimal, the urban recluse is in a position of perpetual liminality, of presence and absence, much more so than the ‘natural’ recluse, who is not as conspicuously ‘present while absent’ (and vice versa) in a social environment. The effect of this difference between urban and ‘natural’ solitude is compounded by the medial and narrative demands of fiction film and the particular US-American cultural context.

Accordingly, in this essay, I will discuss the representation of urban recluses in recent US-American film. Specifically, I will analyze and categorize their visual representation; the particular kind and degree of withdrawal, especially where and how they live, which kind of society they withdraw from for which reasons, and the degree and quality of interaction with other people, if at all; its ideological investments and repercussions; as well as the narrative, medial, and generic embeddedness of the reclusion. The aim is to identify, contextualize, and categorize recurrent and prevalent types of urban reclusion in US-American film and their cultural historical significance.

## 2. What is the ‘Nature’ of Urban Solitude?

Although there are numerous different definitions of solitude, most of them share a fundamental understanding of solitude as the withdrawal and disengagement from other people for some time that does not, per se, say anything about its spatial realization, physical absence of other people, and emotional and social charge. For example, Philip Koch, in perhaps the most detailed discussion of solitude and related concepts, defines solitude as “a time in which experience is disengaged from other people” (27). Later, he replaces “time” by “state” (43). Frances Ferguson defines solitude as “cultivated as a space for consciousness in which the individual is not answerable to others” (114). Christopher Long and James Averill define

solitude as the “disengagement from the immediate demands of other people” (23), a condition “in which a person is alone and unobserved but not necessarily separated by formidable barriers or great distance from others” (23). Svend Erik Larsen states that solitude is “an emotional state of singularity” (28), “of being absolutely detached, not just isolated from something specific or specifiable, but from everything in terms of space, meaning, value and identity” (27). Consistently, he distinguishes between ontological and emotional solitude. And Robert A. Ferguson asserts that solitude comes with a “different understanding of the self and its use of time and space” (1).

Note that all of these definitions characterize solitude as a mental state of more or less willing disengagement from the world and other people, while none of them necessitate the literal absence of other people (‘being alone’) or spatial distance (‘being isolated’). On the contrary, a “person can experience solitude while in the presence of others” (Long and Averill 23), or “[o]ther people may be physically present, provided that our minds are disengaged from them” (Koch 15). Moreover, as Robert A. Ferguson, Koch, and Bergmann emphasize, solitude does not inevitably go hand in hand with loneliness since it is often a “sought condition” that is experienced as liberating (Ferguson 1; see also Koch 15). Even where it is involuntary, it may be “deliberately constructed” (Koch 18). In other words, all of these definitions on principle allow for urban solitude (even if many of them do not expressly say so), and none of them require a retreat into the wild – what I have been calling ‘natural’ solitude. In fact, in his detailed discussion of solitude, Larsen points to the long tradition (Kierkegaard, Descartes) of being alone in a “densely populated place.” He calls it a “social paradox” that “crowded modern urban life, paradoxically and inevitably, generates solitude as in a desert” (25).

Furthermore, we have to be careful to distinguish solitude from related but incommensurate terms such as isolation, aloneness, privacy, and alienation. Koch defines isolation as a state of “being separated from other people” that is “not easily overcome” (34), but that is not necessarily lonesome. He defines privacy as a state with “no unwanted observers of one’s *rightfully* reserved thoughts, words, activities” (37). Lastly, he points out that the concept of alienation derives from a Marxist critique of the estrangement of people from other people and from society as the result of economic processes (43). It becomes clear that the terms/concepts of isolation, loneliness, aloneness, and privacy, while all potential correlatives of solitude, are not identical to it.

Most importantly for my argument, solitude is never complete (Cahir xiii), but rather dialogic and ambivalent. Apart from this, “the mental experience of solitude is ineluctably as social as any other psychological experience” (Long and Averill 22).

If we understand solitude as the more or less voluntary (mental) disengagement from other people for some time, then the preposition already entails some kind of negotiation and articulation (in the semiotic sense). Solitude requires a “permanent negotiation between need for the other and an opposition to the other” (Larsen 29–30) and is only one side of the oscillation between the “contradictory states of isolation and community” (Cahir xiii). There is, thus, always an ambivalent connection between solitude and the social world (Long and Averill 21). This interplay is a “recurrent subject through all of American letters” (Cahir xiii).

If this is generally true for solitude, it is all the more so for urban solitude. As I have argued above, for the urban recluse, human and social contact is theoretically and easily possible at all times, and the spatial/physical distance from other people is minimal. The urban recluse may also observe his or her surroundings and the social life of other people. Moreover, an urban context is, contrary to a wilderness context, fundamentally ‘social,’ its inherent potential for (desert-like) isolation notwithstanding. For urban reclusion to make sense, these urban spaces must be populated, so deserted cities (e.g. after an apocalypse) are not considered here, because they turn into deserts. In addition, they must be populated by humans, not vampires or zombies or some other such species. In other words, films such as *I Am Legend* (2007) are not included into this consideration. One does not ‘withdraw’ from zombies or vampires, one runs from them, and one does not refuse ‘interaction’ with them, one simply does not want to be eaten.

As a consequence, the urban recluse is – much more conspicuously and knowably so than the natural recluse – simultaneously present and absent, both mentally and physically, and thus in a position of perpetual liminality (as conceptualized by Victor Turner in his landmark study *The Forest of Symbols*, 1967) and potentiality. While I would hence agree with Larsen that solitude is a construction of the respective context, I would disagree that this turns it “into a readable sign we can interpret” (30). On the contrary, I would argue that the urban recluse is a signifier whose signified constantly eludes us, turning it into a sign we may want to (or feel compelled to) read, but cannot as long as liminality is upheld. This raises the interesting question of what the narrative attraction of urban reclusion is, in which there is little or no inherent interpersonal conflict (Roorda xiii), but instead constantly deferred signification and a high degree of ambivalence. This is a crucial issue for narrative fiction film, which, I argue, it deals with in particular and revealing ways.

### 3. Urban Solitude in Fiction Film

The medium-specifics and narrative demands of (conventional) fiction film inevitably shape its representation of urban solitude. As a medium, film typically creates

a three-dimensional fictional visual world, a space into which the audience looks through the frame of the shot as if through a window – at least that is the illusion. As a fictional narrative, film typically portrays transformation, conflict, and more often than not interpersonal relations (even if the ‘persons’ are animals or objects), all of which are usually resolved through some kind of closure. In these respects, it would seem that fiction film is less than ideal for the representation of urban hermits. Their solitude tends to be represented as predominantly spatial, focusing on the visible rather than the mental disengagement. In terms of narrative, most films spend little screen time on the actual solitude rather than on the backstory and the transformation and gradual renouncement of this solitude in the direction of the (return to the) social. Consistently, the liminality and ambivalence of urban solitude are eventually resolved through one of several possible closures. To make the liminality and ambivalence more palatable and ultimately ‘readable,’ films frequently employ genre frames such as the superhero who hides his ‘real’ identity, the serial killer who lurks in the shadows of the big city, the sage whose wisdom needs reclusion and who inspires the coming of age of an intruder, etc.

In other respects, fiction film is actually very well suited for the visual representation of urban solitude, because it is multimedial, and because its form can easily generate disjunction and conjunction at one and the same time. For one, *mise en scène* and cinematography can create a frame which places the urban recluse in immediate proximity and yet stark separation from society, highlighting simultaneous presence and absence. And second, sound, lighting, and editing may convey mental disengagement within even the shortest sequence. Thus, fiction film not only has an assortment of means to stage the liminality and ambivalence or urban solitude in general, but also to stage it in a host of different ways without resolving it. Theoretically, it could do justice to the many facets and aspects of urban solitude without imposing closure.

In effect, however, the majority of films stage the retreat from the social within an urban context as the result of a traumatic experience, as something that is mostly unwholesome, and as a state that should eventually and ideally be overcome. And while there are numerous different films that represent urban solitude in a variety of ways, it seems to me that most of them follow two ‘meta-narratives:’ the urban recluse as threat and the urban recluse as benevolent sage.

In the threat-version, reclusion means that the recluse is uncontrollable, unknowable, hard to discipline, and yet always close, always potentially present. He or she is a threat to society or to a particular part or members of society. The question, of course, is what or who exactly is threatened. This type appears in uncountable horror movies as a psychopath and/or serial killer, most notoriously in *Seven*

(1995), *The Collector* (2009), *Creep* (2004), *Maniac* (2012), and so on, but also as a more positive vigilante figure who threatens and sometimes even actively fights an immoral order/society, for example in *Ghost Dog* (1999), *The Equalizer* (2014), or *The Brave One* (2007). Typically, at the end, either the old order is reestablished or a new, 'better' order installed.

In the sage-version, the recluse is an enlightened genius, a potential mentor, 'unspoiled' by the toils and compromises of social life, a site and source of superior insight and knowledge. The narrative in these films usually has the recluse 'disturbed' by another member of society so that the recluse, at first reticently, interacts again, ultimately to become a productive (usually transformed) member of society, or at least a happier (paradoxically more 'social') recluse. The 'disturber' is also transformed and enlightened. Typical examples are *Smoke* (1995), *The Man Without a Face* (1993), *The Caveman's Valentine* (2001), and *Finding Forrester* (2000).

Notice that the sage can also be a threat to a certain order, and that the psychopath may also be a kind of sage. Because they share their reclusive position and its ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological consequences, they also share its fundamental function and signification upon which the filmic representation rests.

Just how different the filmic representation of urban solitude is from its sibling, the filmic representation of natural solitude, despite their shared foundations, is put into relief when we consider for a moment how natural solitude is usually rendered in fiction films such as *Cast Away* (2000), *Into the Wild* (2007), or *Wild* (2014). Here, a lot of screen time can be spent on the actual solitude, not only because the natural landscape can be exploited for breathtaking – often sublime – wide-angle extreme long shots (visually suggesting liberation, freedom, and voluntary disengagement more easily than the image of a confined space, if that is the aim of the film), but also because nature can become the second protagonist and a source of 'interpersonal' conflict. Just like in films about urban solitude, genre frames often prefigure the narrative of natural solitude films. These narratives, however, are substantially different: the natural hermit is neither a threat nor a sage but usually someone seeking enlightenment and liberation from the constraints of society (thereby occasionally becoming a sage). Where they are stranded, as in *Cast Away*, they typically seek their return to the safe and much more comfortable haven of civilization, even if their re-integration is bumpy. Liminality and ambivalence in these films occur mostly when the natural hermit returns to society, if at all, and they often last for a short time only before being resolved. Thus, while liminality and ambivalence form the core of urban recluse films, they are much less significant in natural recluse films.

#### 4. Urban Solitude in *Finding Forrester*: Recluse as Threat – Recluse as Sage

I have chosen *Finding Forrester* as an example because it contains elements of both the urban recluse as threat and as sage. It is also an almost prototypical example for the filmic staging of urban solitude. The recluse figure in this film is an elderly white writer who has not published any major work for decades, but whose debut novel once made him instantly famous. Among a series of newer tenement buildings on Manhattan Island, he lives on the top floor of an older apartment building, which he never leaves. No one in his – predominantly black – neighborhood knows who he is, but everybody seems scared of the unknown recluse among them. The other protagonist is a young black teenager who, it becomes clear, is not only an extraordinary athlete but also – unknown to everyone except his family – a brilliant student who reads and writes a lot and is awarded a scholarship to a prestigious private school on the basis of his intellectual and physical talents.

Dared by his friends, the boy illicitly breaks into the recluse's apartment one night, is discovered – and scared to death, one might add – by its owner, and forgets his backpack with all his notebooks as he flees the building. Up until this point, the film might very well be a horror movie; the recent *Don't Breathe* (2016) is based on a similar premise. The writer browses through the boy's notebooks, apparently finds his writing worthy, and taunts the boy back to his apartment, where they very slowly begin to build a cranky but obviously warm-hearted friendship. Over the course of the film, the writer teaches the boy to hone his talents, while the boy teaches the writer to go out into the world again. In the end, the writer dies, but not before having left his apartment for good as well as having finished his last book, to which the boy is supposed to write the foreword. This is a very abridged summary. The film contains various subplots and complications. In many ways, though, the film is a fairly conventional and straightforward coming-of-age story, albeit a double one: not only the boy, but the writer, too, experiences a kind of awakening, in which he makes peace with life before dying.

As I have stated above, the film, for the most part, almost prototypically stages the main characteristics and dynamics of urban solitude, both narratively and visually: liminality, ambivalence, and contrast/oscillation of presence and absence, and of disjunction and conjunction. The writer lives in an apartment building among other people in what is obviously a densely populated urban neighborhood. While he never goes out and is never seen, and, consequently, is an unknown entity to his neighbors, he does observe the outside and his neighborhood through binoculars. In a way, he is thus participating in their lives, if only passively. Also, his neighbors clearly know that he exists, although they do not know who he is and what he does.

As a result, he becomes a kind of ghost, a haunting absence and potential threat, metaphorically as well as in the Derridean sense. This contrast is exacerbated by the fact that he is old, white, educated, and affluent, as we later find out, while his neighborhood is predominantly young, black, poor, and without higher education. The contrast is also visually staged by juxtaposing the old building the writer lives in with the newer tenement buildings that surround it.

This initial set up is developed by the narrative. When the boy and the writer first meet, it is in the darkness of the apartment and under less than favorable circumstances: after all, the boy has just broken into the apartment. When we first see the writer, we see him from the perspective of the surprised and frightened boy: a (justly) outraged and ferocious man. But we also see, despite the darkness, massive amounts of books everywhere in an almost labyrinthine arrangement of rooms. This is, of course, no coincidence. In terms of cinematography and *mise en scène*, the apartment is shown as a dark, strange, and confusing space for the boy, who certainly did not expect a library, befitting of what we might expect of a recluse. One could argue that the apartment is almost cave-like. Even when the writer and the boy first meet during the daytime, the atmosphere is still ambivalent: the apartment is dark, the writer acerbic – though not violent – and sarcastic. He plays with the boy's, and the audience's, anticipations and stereotypes by insinuating that he might be a homosexual, a pedophile, and a racist.

It is only in the course of the narrative that the contrasts and ambivalences turn out to be irrelevant and indeed productive. Ironically, the boy is also an outsider and a kind of recluse. None of his friends know that he is brilliant and that he writes. Various shots show him alone in his room reading, disengaged from his surroundings. In fact, then, two different kinds of urban recluses meet and help each other through their shared love of literature and writing, which obviously – and that is one of the messages of the film – can overcome any kind of boundary and difference. Visually, this is accompanied by the apartment getting brighter and brighter and by long shots providing orientation around the initially confusing space.

Ultimately, and somewhat predictably, both writer and boy are transformed over the course of the film. The writer writes again, as we find out in the end, which is important because writing is an act of communication and participation. More importantly, he finally leaves his apartment, and we see him cycling through the crowded city on his way to publicly read a story in order to help the boy out. The point could not be more obvious: through the friendship, he becomes an active and productive member of social and cultural life again and can die in peace. With regard to the boy, he changes in that he – also publicly – embraces his intellectual talents and liberates himself from the expectations other people have of him. He,



too, becomes a productive and, more importantly, integrated member of society. What we have here is the perfect ending for a coming-of-age story.

The message, it seems, is that reclusion and solitude may be productive and acceptable for some time, even necessary for reflection. The film thus reiterates the idea that solitude is a “basic condition for individual and cultural self-reflection as an ongoing process, shaped as an imagined and constructed platform for a creative human contemplation of *la condition humaine*” (Larsen 26). But ultimately, temporary reclusion should be overcome because in the long run, participation in the social life is healthier, more auspicious, and more productive. Thus, the initial liminality and the ambivalence that the film sets up in the form of urban solitude are dissolved – indeed resolved – and the contrasts sublated. Therefore, while the film stands in the long tradition of American individualism understood as the right to solitude and privacy, in the end it supplants this idea by staging liberation through solidarity.

## 5. Urban Solitude Will (Usually) Not Hold

This kind of transformation narrative and its resolution are fairly typical of a majority of US-American films that have urban solitude as a central theme or which contain urban recluse figures. If the recluse is staged as a threat, this threat is removed and order reestablished. Alternatively, the necessity for the threat – some immoral order – is removed and a new order is established. In this case, the recluse ‘may live,’ but usually willingly withdraws somewhere else, presumably to continue his or her fight against the immoral order. If the recluse is staged as a sage/genius/mentor, reclusion may continue but is regularly alleviated by the adoption of a new mentee, which, in effect, ends the liminality and ambivalence of the reclusion because it has become functional and readable. It is arguable whether we can still speak of reclusion in this case. Alternatively, the reclusion ends through the reintegration of the recluse into society or his or her – reconciled – death. In some cases, the genre frame demands that liminality be upheld in order to allow for serial continuation. Reclusion here needs to continue because it is an essential feature of the protagonist. A good example of this would be the recent *The Dark Knight*-trilogy (2005–2012) by Christopher Nolan.

All scenarios share the idea that independence and self-reliance, liberty and privacy, which Bergmann identifies as typically American values in her introduction, only remain powerful and viable if they remain perpetually liminal. In the majority of cases, the social compact ‘wins,’ either by colonization, integration, or death. In the context of a discussion of privacy, Karsten Fitz and Bärbel Harju point out that, ironically and claims to the contrary notwithstanding, there is more of it, not less,

and that the public sphere is invaded by private matters. The result is, they argue, “the decline of the public sphere through its permeation with private matters, a lack of reticence, and a more general privileging of emotion and therapeutic sensibilities” (5). In light of this, the predominant representation of urban solitude – which, after all, is premised on the right to be alone – in fiction film as a state that should eventually be overcome for the sake of the social appears particularly fitting. If we agree that “more intentional solitude in society and, yes, more loneliness ... might not only be inevitable in the modern world, it may be a good thing” because it allows for a “sense of perspective” (Balcom 276–77), then this is bad news indeed.

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