The Semiotics of Emoji: *Infinite Jest* and the Yellow Smiley Face

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Abstract

"Infinite Jest" is an appropriate caption to the yellow smiley face: fixed, static, and permanently happy, it is a jest that never ends. The cultural history of the yellow smiley face indicates a semantic shift since its invention in 1963, from sincere positivity to an ironic association with false pleasure and consumerism. David Foster Wallace takes the latter as his starting point, making the face a sign of the counter-cultural terrorist organisation A.F.R.. Yet the role of the smiley face in *Infinite Jest* is not only semantic but structural; its appearance in unrelated points of the narrative reveals the extradiegetic force plotting the patterns of the text, connecting together various parts of the novel. The privileging of form of over meaning is associated with Avril Incandenza, who embodies the smiley face in this capacity: she connects rather than refers, facilitates rather than means. Like contemporary emoji, Avril's smiley face performs a linguistically "phatic" function, based on facilitation rather than semantics. Nevertheless, the yellow smiley face taps into Wallace's wider project of writing sincere fiction, and the solution to the formalistic smiley face of Avril is the sincere smiley face of Mario: a sign which means what it proposes to mean.

Keywords: Infinite Jest; David Foster Wallace; semiotics; affect; irony; sincerity; smiley face

Introduction

The sign chosen for the first David Foster Wallace conference, at Illinois State University in 2014, was a cartoon yellow smiley face wearing a bandana. The yellow smiley face was chosen as a synecdoche not only of *Infinite Jest*, but of Wallace's corpus as a whole. It is a detail which taps into the wider themes with which Wallace grapples, including issues of addiction, superficial happiness, and false signification: the smiley faces in *Infinite Jest* are not really smiling inside. Smiling is already semiotically complex, as a smile can be both an unconscious symptom of happiness or a deliberate communicative code. The yellow smiley face, abstracted from facial expression and made into a cultural artefact, undergoes a semiotic inversion: as a product of consumer culture, the smile is supposed to generate happiness rather than signify it. It correspondingly holds a semantic ambivalence; throughout its cultural history, the yellow smiley face has been used sincerely, ironically, and even threateningly. This is particularly evident in *Infinite Jest*, as the yellow smiley face is the sign of the A.F.R. terrorist group and the terrifying mask of addiction in Don Gately's nightmare. Nevertheless, the smiley face functions structurally as well as semantically. Joining up its appearances in the text unites particular points of the plot, and in this capacity it acts as a kind of mechanism, as embodied by the character of Avril who privileges form over meaning. Capturing the texture of 1990s America, *Infinite Jest* replaces the twin happy and sad masks of comedy and tragedy with the ambivalent hybrid of the yellow smiley face – uniting both under a single image.

The History of the Yellow Smiley Face

The yellow smiley face is widely held to have been invented in 1963, when the graphic designer Harvey Ball was commissioned to improve morale in the workplace of State Mutual Life Assurance Company in the U.S.A. (Stamp). In 1971, it was copied by Bernard and

Murray Spain, who added the slogan “Have a Happy Day” and produced their own novelty items aimed at young people. Up until then the smiley face was mainly an American phenomenon, but in 1972 the French journalist Franklin Loufrani began using it to indicate good news in the newspaper *France Soir* (Stamp). He then trademarked the yellow smiley face and launched the Smiley Company, selling smiley-themed items, and the company has since greatly expanded after Loufrani’s son took over in 1996. Today, the Smiley company makes over 265 million dollars a year and owns the rights to the logo in over 80 countries (Golby). Jimmy Stamp describes how Loufrani “formalized the mark with a style guide and further distributed it through global licensing agreements, including, perhaps most notably, some of the earliest graphic emoticons” (Stamp). As the yellow smiley face progressed through the internet age, graphic emoticons gave way to emoji, which originated with Shigetaka Kurita in 1990s Japan (Scall 382-3). Kurita noticed that emails and internet communication were less expressive of tone than traditional letter-writing, and so he drew from street signs, Chinese characters and manga comics to develop a new form of expression (Scall 382). Emoji were incorporated into American culture when Apple launched an emoji keyboard with the iPhone iOS 2.2 update in 2011 (Scall 383). Since then, emoji have become increasingly widespread and subjects of study in their own right, particularly in relation to writing systems and semiotics.[1]

As well as passing from corporation to corporation, the yellow smiley face was adopted by certain sub-groups, such as hippies in the 1970s or in 1980s Ecstasy culture. Its role in the latter began with the Shoom club in London, where Danny Rampling adopted the smiley face logo from a fashion designer who he once met covered in smiley face badges (Bainbridge 78). Rampling thought: “Wow! That’s it! The smiley face completely signifies what this movement is all about – big smiles and positivity” (Bainbridge 78). By January 1988, the smiley face logo, until then “the symbol of hippies and religious evangelists”,

appeared on a new flyer which introduced the “happy happy happy happy happy Shoom club” (Collin 62). Here, “Smileys bounced down the page like a shower of pills” (Collin 62). The idea of happy pills, of a substance labelled with a smiley face that aims to induce in the consumer a corresponding smiling face, also appears in *Infinite Jest*; just as the Ecstasy drug makes its user ecstatic, so does the film “Infinite Jest” make its viewers into “ecstatic” smiley faces (*Infinite Jest* 78). Nevertheless, there was also a darker side to the Ecstasy positivity, as the bereaved parents of twenty-one-year-old Janet Mayes burned her Smiley T-shirt when she died after taking Ecstasy pills marked by the tiny symbol of the yellow smiley face (Collin 80).

The darker side of the yellow smiley face was also illustrated by *Watchmen* (1986-7), a graphic novel which featured as its front cover and major theme a yellow smiley face stained with blood. *Watchmen* has four main characters looking into the death of “The Comedian”, one of two superheroes in the book. Dave Gibbons, the graphic artist, comments that he added the smiley face to the image of The Comedian because he thought that the character did not look enough like a comedian; from there, the “smiley face became a symbol for the whole series” (Dietrich 140). The face recurs both explicitly and implicitly, and Bryan D. Dietrich identifies how its components appear individually on the first page of Chapter V, “Fearful Symmetry”:

> Each of the eight syntagms – a circle, two eyes (one occluded), a smiling mouth, two colors (yellow and black), and a stain particular in both its shape and color – is present here, but disassociated from the others. (132)

He continues that we do not really see a smiley face, but “portents and signs of the sign”; the elements of the yellow smiley face appear like hidden codes which must be actively assembled into signs by readers (132).

Writing on *Watchmen*, Dietrich also comments that “though its authors hail from Britain, it is a quintessentially American book” (121). Perhaps this is because there is something quintessentially American about the yellow smiley face, linked to an affective trend; Christina Kotchemidova argues that the affective state of “cheerfulness” is particularly dominant in American culture. She traces the history of cheerfulness from an emphasis on “melancholy” during the seventeenth century to “good cheer” in the eighteenth, associated with increased modernization, individualism, and belief in human agency (Kotchemidova 7). Good cheer and good humour became signs of religious faith and social responsibility, leading to an encouragement of the “display of happiness as a sign of prosperity even when prosperity was not the case” (Kotchemidova 9). Kotchemidova analyses diary entries and records to argue that this cheerfulness was a distinctly American phenomenon, with visitors from Europe in the nineteenth century often remarking on the “good humour of the Americans” (9). In the twentieth century, the development of mass media and the increase in consumerism corresponded with an escalation of “cheerfulness”, where “smiling was linked to consuming and cheerfulness became a major emotional aspect of consumer culture” (Kotchemidova 18). The cheerfulness associated with consumption was expressed through toys, balloons, and the “paramount example” of the yellow smiley face, which sold over 50 million buttons at its peak in 1971 (Kotchemidova 20).

From this brief history, it is evident that the semantics of the yellow smiley face fluctuated between 1963 and the present. Its original purpose was to improve morale and convey positivity, which was achieved in the sixties, but in later decades an increasing cynicism seeped into wearing smiley face merchandise. In 1980s Ecstasy culture the smiley face signified positivity, but after Ecstasy deaths the implications darkened. Cheerful consumption of smiley face badges, t-shirts and bags was contemporaneous with the blood-stained cover of the *Watchmen* graphic novel. This ambivalence is encapsulated by the

double signification of the yellow smiley face in 2002. In the May of that year, Lucas Helder planted explosives in U.S. mailboxes, forming a pattern which, he told police, aimed to create a smiley face across America (Kirn). Clusters of bombs in Illinois/Iowa and Nebraska made up the eyes, while the mouth, which he never completed, would run from Colorado through Texas (Kirn). At the same time, since 2002 "pyrotechnical smileys have appeared in the skies over New York on the Fourth of July – perhaps, as a statement of the city's resolve to keep up its spirits after September 11" (Kotchemidova 20). Within the same two months, the sign of the smiley face was used both in a twisted attempt at mass murder, and in efforts to maintain a positive morale.

Although less dramatically, the smiley face in the internet age is also notoriously abstruse. Anne Fitzpatrick remarks that the smiley face emoticon "suggests a pleasant greeting yet is generally used with an ironic intent" (82). Irony is also present in the smiley face emoji, officially called "Slightly Smiling Face". This is the emoji which most closely resembles the traditional smiley, although there are other variations with smiling eyes or a grinning mouth. "Slightly Smiling Face" is popularly known to be ambiguous; Emojipedia comments that it can suggest "positive", "happy", "friendly", "patronizing", "passive-aggressive" and "ironic" sentiments. These are the same sentiments at play in *Infinite Jest*. The semiotic ambiguity of the yellow smiley face in Wallace's novel is drawn from a corresponding ambiguity in its cultural context.

The Semiotics of Smiling

In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Umberto Eco proposes a broad definition of "sign" as "*everything* that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*" (16). Eco distinguishes between conventional and natural signs, deliberately framing his definition to encompass the latter, which is excluded by other

definitions (15-6).[2] Natural signs are not intentionally emitted for communicational purposes, and they may come from humans or natural events (Eco 16). Common examples include smoke as a sign of fire, or symptoms as signs of illness. On the other hand, conventional signs are intentionally produced, and can make up artificial sign systems such as "military signals, rules of etiquette and visual alphabets" (Eco 15). Eco goes on to provide a comprehensive typology of signs, categorising the modes through which they are produced.

Some signs, however, fit into several categories. Eco fittingly gives the example of the smile, which can be a "*symptom* or the *replica* of a *stylization*, and sometimes even a *vectorialization*" (259). As a "symptom" it is a natural sign, an automatic expression performed unconsciously when an individual is in a certain emotional state. However, a smile can also be a conventional sign, an intentional expression with a deliberate purpose of communication. By "replica", Eco refers to cases where the sign's "type" (form) is distinct from its "token" (concrete manifestation) (50). The sign of a smile is the "type" which can manifest itself through various "tokens", such as a face, a piece of paper, or a carving in a rock. A "stylization" is a sign which is recognizable more because of its resemblance to a conventional way of representing an item rather than to the item itself (Eco 238). Examples include the sun represented by a circle, or a smile represented by a single curve (Eco 208). A "vectorialization" is a feature that is only recognized in combination with a cluster of other features; for instance, a curve might only be recognized as a smile when there are two dots above it as eyes.

The yellow smiley face can be seen as a sign of a sign (a human smiley face), and its ambiguity also stems from the ambiguity of the smile: a person might be smiling because they are happy (as symptom), because they wish to communicate friendliness, or because it is part of a code or a policy – particularly, as Kotchemidova discussed, in a culture of "cheerfulness". David Foster Wallace identifies these nuances in "A Supposedly Fun Thing

I'll Never do Again", his 1996 essay for Harper's magazine detailing his experience on a luxury cruise ship. Here, Wallace criticises commercials that pretend to be essays, remarking that "an ad that pretends to be art is – at absolute best – like somebody who smiles warmly at you only because he wants something from you" ("Supposedly Fun Thing" 289). This smile, continues Wallace, offers a "perfect facsimile or simulacrum of goodwill without goodwill's real spirit" ("Supposedly Fun Thing" 289). The smiley face originated as a symptom of happiness, but in a culture where cheerfulness is a social code, it has become something supposed to generate "happiness", which has itself become a form of social capital. Kotchemidova identifies this reversal when she discusses how "William James first noted that emotion display triggers feeling, just as feeling triggers emotion display": by assuming a moping posture, one might come to feel melancholy (5). This is the consumer logic of the yellow smiley face; the implication that wearing the smiley face might make one happy leads to an increased consumption of smiley face merchandise.

Wallace elaborates on the false smile in a footnote, where he discusses how "this is related to the phenomenon of the Professional Smile, a national pandemic in the service industry" ("Supposedly Fun Thing" 289). He comments that he has received more Professional Smiles on the cruise ship *Nadir* than at any other point of his life. The Professional Smile is described as

> the strenuous contraction of circumoral fascia w/ incomplete zygomatic involvement – the smile that doesn't quite reach the smiler's eyes and that signifies nothing more than a calculated attempt to advance the smiler's own interests by pretending to like the smilee. ("Supposedly Fun Thing" 289)

The expression is "strenuous", "incomplete", and "calculated", a deliberate and stylized replication rather than a natural symptom. Like the advert pretending to be art, "high doses of this smile produce despair", as its lack of real meaning creates a corresponding emptiness in

its recipient (“Supposedly Fun Thing” 289). The Professional Smile is compounded by the “have a nice day” slogan, which Wallace mentions in *This is Water*: “you finally get to the checkout line’s front, and you pay for your food, and you get told to “Have a nice day” in a voice that is the absolute voice of death” (*This is Water* 71).

Like the Professional Smile, the “have a nice day” phrase is functional rather than meaningful. In linguistic terms, it is known as “phatic”, a term coined by Bronislaw Malinowski. Malinowski’s “phatic communion” describes words that are not used to convey meaning, but which “fulfil a social function and that is their principle aim” (315). Roman Jakobson similarly comments that phatic messages are “primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication” (355). They do not communicate in themselves, but are rather mechanisms of communication. The same could be said of the yellow smiley face, particularly in its most current form in the context of emoji. Marcel Danesi, in *The Semiotics of Emoji*, remarks that emoji frequently have a phatic function, acting as utterance openers, utterance closers, and ways of avoiding silence by filling in the gaps; their “main use is to keep interactions friendly and cheerful” (18-20). In *Infinite Jest*, the yellow smiley face is illustrative of a society increasingly saturated with phatic functions, based on facilitation rather than meaning, on conjunction rather than signification, from the macro level of social structure right down to the micro level of individual interaction.

The Semantics of the Yellow Smiley Face

The smiley face is implicitly present from the opening page of *Infinite Jest*; just as its individual features appear scattered throughout *Watchmen*, left for readers and critics to assemble into a face, so does *Infinite Jest* open with hints of fixed smiles and yellow faces. The Dean questioning Hal is a “lean yellowish man whose fixed smile nevertheless has the impermanent quality of something stamped into uncooperative material” (*Infinite Jest* 3). The

skin is notably “yellow”, and the smile “fixed” and “stamped”, implying that it was created by industrial rather than natural mechanisms. Hal continues to think that the man is a “personality-type I’ve come lately to appreciate, the type who delays need of any response from me by relating my side of the story for me, to me” (*Infinite Jest* 3). As a “type”, he is a single instantiation of a general identical pattern. He speaks *for* Hal, indicating the substitution effect of the smiley face: it stands *in place* of emotion, substituting speech for slogan, spontaneous expression for fixed type. The cluster of signs is reinforced when the Dean is described as having “a flat yellow face” (*Infinite Jest* 6), the flatness recalling the two-dimensionality of the yellow smiley face as a sign or representation rather than a real face. Later in the conversation, there is another allusion:

> ‘Coach White could accompany Mr. Tavis and his associate out to reception,’ the yellow Dean says, smiling into my unfocused eyes. (*Infinite Jest* 8)

Yellowness and the smile are put together again. All of the components of the yellow smiley face appear throughout this first scene, but, like Eco’s “vectorialization”, they only cohere into a sign upon rereading, when the yellow smiley face has been established as a motif.

The first explicit appearance of the yellow smiley face is on the “Infinite Jest” film cartridge received by the near Eastern medical attaché. The cartridge is described as black, with “another of these vapid U.S.A.-type circular smiling heads embossed upon it where the registration- and duration-codes are supposed to be embossed” (*Infinite Jest* 36). Information, locations, registrations and durations are all replaced by the simple smiling face. It becomes its own system, its own code. The face on the cartridge is a mirror of how, when the attaché watches the film, he will also become smilingly “vapid”; when he is found by his wife several hours later, “the expression on his rictus of a face nevertheless appeared very positive, ecstatic, even, you could say” (*Infinite Jest* 78). The attaché looks “positive”, an abstract word which, typed into Google Images, still reveals yellow smiley faces on posters, mugs and

balloons. At the same time, he is “ecstatic” according to its etymological root of “ek-stasis”: out of place. He is out of himself, absent. Rodney Tine, the Chief of the Office of Unspecified Services, later thinks about the effect of the cartridge on those who have viewed it. He recalls them as “docile and continent but blank, as if on some deep reptile-level pithed” (*Infinite Jest* 548). Incidentally, in *The Chicago Reader* in 1993 Cecil Adams called the yellow smiley face a “nickel-sized depiction of a guy who’s just had a prefrontal lobotomy” (Adams). This corresponds precisely with Rodney Tine’s “pithed”, which means “to pierce, sever, or destroy the upper spinal cord or brainstem of (an animal), so as to cause death or insensibility” (OED). Both the viewers and the smiley face are described in the same language of brain incapacitation; the analogy between them is confirmed even from outside the text.

That this is a sign of the A.F.R. does not become manifest until later, in the scene where the Wheelchair Assassins murder the Antitoi brothers. Here, one member of the A.F.R. is wearing the

> worst mask of all, a plain yellow polyresin circle with an obscenely simple smily-face in thin black lines, who is speculatively dipping a baguette’s heel in Betraund’s metal soup-cup and popping the bread into his mask’s mouth’s cheery hole with an elegantly cerise-gloved hand. (*Infinite Jest* 486)

The smiley face has become anthropomorphised. While it originally represented a facial expression – the smile as symptom – it now conceals a facial expression. David Hering notes that “the sequence in the Antitoi’s shop also [occurs] at the exact midpoint of the novel, centering the Antitois in the overall narrative schema” (Hering 100). This also centers the yellow smiley face at the midpoint of the novel: just as its components appear subtly in the opening scene, it also appears in the center as an implicit pivot or hinge in Wallace’s narrative structure.

Through the cartridge and the A.F.R., the yellow smiley face represents addiction and a counter-cultural terrorist group which co-opts a sign of American consumerism towards its own ends. It diverges from its original referent of positivity: the yellow smiley face does not really mean smiling and happiness, even though its appearance suggests that it does. These associations are corroborated by the Ennet house plot strand with Don Gately. During the testimony of John L. in an AA meeting, the narrative is interspersed with a description of the road to rock bottom. This involves a moment where the substance, which "you thought was your one true friend", has

> finally removed its smily-face mask to reveal centerless eyes and a ravening maw, and canines down to here, it's the Face In The Floor, the grinning root-white face of your worst nightmares, and the face is your own face in the mirror, now, it's *you*, the Substance has devoured or replaced and become *you*. (*Infinite Jest* 347)

Like the A.F.R. in the Antitoi brothers' shop, the smiley face appears in the form of a mask. At the same time, like the "Infinite Jest" cartridge, it is a mask which becomes a mirror: just as the yellow smiley face on the cartridge made the viewers like to itself, so does the yellow smiley face of the substance conceal a deprivation which the consumer will eventually become. The centerless eyes, "ravening maw" and fangs constitute the truth of the yellow smiley face. They are its hidden referent, and the mask is a spatialization of signification, concretizing the distinction between the smiley signifier as the surface and the terrifying signified behind it. Connecting the plot points together, these features can be deduced to be figuratively equivalent to the ecstatic expressions of the brain-dead viewers of "Infinite Jest".

While this description is given by the narrator of *Infinite Jest*, the yellow smiley face also appears in the minds of the characters, as evident in Don Gately's dream. Gately dreams that he and other U.S. citizens are kneeling on cushions in a church, where whenever anybody stands up, a figure with a big stick like a shepherd's crook pulls them out forcefully

out of the church, leaving the cushion empty (*Infinite Jest* 358-9). The figure wears a "mask that was simply the plain yellow smily-face circle that accompanied invitations to have a nice day" (*Infinite Jest* 359). Gately traces the source of the dream back to real life, thinking that

> AA's disciplinarian looked damn good and smelled even better and dressed to impress and his blank black-on-yellow smile never faltered as he sincerely urged you to have a nice day. Just one more last nice day. Just one. (*Infinite Jest* 359)

Yet Gately realises that the disciplinarian, in a wider sense, is "always and everywhere Out There" (*Infinite Jest* 359), ready to pull him back to the world of addiction at any slightest sign of relapse, at any urge to rise from his knees. Gately's AA disciplinarian joins the masked "Face In The Floor" and the A.F.R. murderer wearing the smiley face mask: all are dispensing surface happiness which exists, crucially, at the level of signifier but not signified. The "black-on-yellow" smile is "blank"; its meaning is absence, ek-stasis, and with absence despair.

Gately begins to see the face everywhere. Soon after the dream, he has a conversation with Joelle. After she gives a long explanation on why her problem with a particular AA slogan is less semantic than grammatical, Gately is suddenly horrified, and

> for a second the blank white veil levelled at him seems a screen on which might well be projected a casual and impressive black and yellow smily-face, grinning, and he feels all the muscles in his own face loosen and descend kneeward. (*Infinite Jest* 366-7)

The smiley face haunts Gately just as it haunts the novel as a whole, and in response to it his own face loses form as his muscles "descend kneeward": the construction of one face is at the expense of the other. Gately's yellow smiley face of addiction recurs when he is in the hospital with the M.D. towards the end of the novel. He "imagines the M.D. smiling incandescently as he wields a shepherd's crook" (*Infinite Jest* 886), tempting him back

towards the road of addiction through medicinal drugs. In response, Gately tries to tell the M.D. that he does not want medication by drawing a "skull-and-bones" which ends up looking more like a "plain old smiley-face" (*Infinite Jest* 887). Greg Carlisle glosses this moment as "Gately's choice not to accept medication that will make him happy (glad, with a smiling face) is equivalent to the choice of not watching the Entertainment cartridge" (430). This is also significant semiotically, as the sign of the smiley face is drawn accidentally. As a "sign" of addiction, it is also a warning; Gately has progressed from clinging to the warnings handed to him, in the form of the AA slogans that he had to follow without believing, to inadvertently drawing his own warning signs. He has become self-governing, reminding himself of the yellow smiley face's presence. What he accidentally drew is, for him and for readers, equivalent to what he intended to draw: the yellow smiley face *is* the skull and bones, since *Infinite Jest* has established the former as a sign of the latter. He has inadvertently used an appropriate signifier for his intended referent.

The smiley face is also a point of connection between Gately and Hal, highlighting the parallels between the two protagonists. At the end of the novel, Hal is unable to communicate, and his expression is stuck in a smile. When he meets the caretakers Kenkle and Brandt, Kenkle asks "why the hilarity?" (*Infinite Jest* 875). To Hal's subsequent confusion, he responds: "Your face is a hilarity-face. It's working hilariously. At first it merely looked a-mused. Now it is open-ly *cach*-inated" (*Infinite Jest* 875). Something is semiotically wrong: like the smiley face, Hal is signifying smiles and laughter when the referent is absent. Yet Hal has been branded with the yellow smiley face since childhood. In Orin's description of the mold incident,

> here comes my little brother Hallie, maybe like four at the time and wearing some kind of fuzzy red pajamas and a tiny little down coat, and slippers that had those awful Nice-Day yellow smile-faces on both toes. (*Infinite Jest* 1042 note 234)

The smiley face slippers link the moment of Hal eating mold to his grinning, incommunicative, smiley-face state at the chronological end of the novel, reinforcing the possibility of a causal connection.

Katherine Hayles diagnoses the malaise of the world of *Infinite Jest* as "an ideology that celebrates an autonomous, independent subject who is free to engage in the pursuit of happiness […] without regard for the cost of that pursuit to others" (92-3). She continues to suggest that this is why the smiley face appears on the "Infinite Jest" cartridge, as a mask for the A.F.R. murderer, and in Don Gately's dreams (Hayles 93). While the smiley face does stamp certain parts of the plot with a sign of false and individualistic pleasure, it does not always signify the same thing at every point of the novel. Dave Gibbons, the illustrator of *Watchmen*, told Jimmy Stamp:

> It's just a yellow field with three marks on it. It couldn't be more simple. And so to that degree, it's empty. It's ready for meaning. If you put it in a nursery setting… It fits in well. If you take it and put it on a riot policeman's gas mask, then it becomes something completely different. (Stamp)

The simplicity of the smiley face allows it to absorb multiple meanings in a way which, in *Infinite Jest*, is also cumulative. Hal's slippers are smiley faces that appear in a "nursery setting", but any implications of innocence are polluted by preceding associations with the A.F.R., addiction and "Infinite Jest". The smiley face, having passed through these narrative events, now takes on a different tone from its first appearance on the anonymous film cartridge. As Hal's slippers are mentioned later in the narrative, the yellow smiley face creates a fateful loop by inserting all of the implications gathered throughout the text into the beginning of its chronological timeline, implying that the yellow smiley face was lying in wait the entire time.

Form and Facilitation: The Phatic Smiley Face

Many of the appearances of the yellow smiley face in *Infinite Jest* are internally unrelated; there is no causal reason for the same symbol to appear on Hal's childhood slippers, as a sign of the A.F.R., and in Don Gately's dreams of addiction. These connections draw attention to the text as a construction, as the yellow smiley face is evidently motivated by an authorial force beyond the diegetic level of narrative events. This is substantiated by its appearance on multiple levels of diegesis, such as the narrator's description of addiction's smiley-face mask and then Don Gately's visualisation of the same mask in his dream. There is the impression that the yellow smiley face is not only dotted across the text, but that it seeps through all of its levels, embedded deep into the texture of *Infinite Jest*.

Recalling *Watchmen*, one task of readers is to discover and connect the appearances of the yellow smiley face into a cohesive story, uncovering the symbolic logic which holds them together. Here, the yellow smiley face acts as a formal mechanism, putting parts of the plot in dialogue with each other. The smiley face connects the film cartridge of "Infinite Jest" with the masked A.F.R. murderer of the Antitoi brothers, conceptually combining catatonic "death" through Entertainment and physical "death" through murder. The smiley face also connects Don Gately's dream of addiction's mask with Hal's fixed, grinning expression. It unites Gately, Hal, the film and the A.F.R. in the graveyard scene, where Gately and Hal are digging up James Incandenza's head, trying to discover the Entertainment's master copy before the A.F.R.. Here, the yellow smiley face becomes Gately's political enemy as well as his personal one, yoking the macro- and microcosmic plot-lines in a manner appropriate to the fractal Sierpinski gasket.[3] In joining these various instances of plot and theme, the yellow smiley face performs a structural narrative function.

The yellow smiley face as structural mechanism in *Infinite Jest* is associated with Avril Incandenza. As evinced by her obsession with grammar, Avril privileges the structural

over the semantic; she aims to facilitate rather than to refer, to connect rather than to mean, recalling the phatic function of certain linguistic phrases and the smiley face emoji. When Joelle has dinner with the Incandenza family, she notices that Avril "directed every fourth comment to Orin, Hal, and Mario, like a cycle of even inclusion" (*Infinite Jest* 744). Avril facilitates equality by proceeding according to an overarching set of rules, predetermined and quantifiable. Her "cycle of even inclusion" is superimposed on the conversation, but this means that conversation does not progress according to organic, internal principles where each topic would generate the next. Just as grammar determines the relations between words, Avril organises the relations between family members; she "worked unobtrusively hard to put everyone at ease and to facilitate communication" (*Infinite Jest* 744), and "Joelle imagined her with a conductor's baton" (*Infinite Jest* 745). She performs the role of the family's executive function to the extent that members cannot interact without her. Jim tells Joelle that "he simply didn't know how to speak with either of his undamaged sons without their mother's presence and mediation" (*Infinite Jest* 743) and Orin correspondingly

> couldn't seem to communicate with Himself without his mother's presence and mediation. It wasn't clear how the Moms mediated or facilitated communication between different family-members, he said. (*Infinite Jest* 743)

The word "facilitated" recurs as Avril is the phatic smiley face of the family unit, channelling communication between its members. Like most characters in *Infinite Jest*, Avril has an addiction, but Orin says that she has not been formally diagnosed with O.C.D. because "the Disorder doesn't prevent her from functioning. It all seems to come back to functioning" (*Infinite Jest* 1039 note 234). Discourse surrounding Avril always comes back to functioning and facilitation, and this is the purpose of phatic language: to "keep interactions friendly and cheerful" (Danesi 20).

As well as embodying phatic communication, Avril is associated with the features of the yellow smiley face. Joelle notices that "the whole Thanksgiving table inclined very subtly towards Avril […] like heliotropes", and Joelle "found herself doing it too, the inclining" (*Infinite Jest* 745). This analogy is emphasised by Orin's childhood view of his mother as his "emotional sun" (*Infinite Jest* 738). The two sun references evoke the yellow circle at the base of the smiley face. The next feature appears when Joelle "noticed that pretty much everybody at the table was smiling, broadly and constantly" (*Infinite Jest* 746). Like the inclining, Joelle finds that she "was doing it herself, too, […]; her cheek muscles were starting to ache" (*Infinite Jest* 746). The smile references recur throughout the text, such as another description of Avril as "a person closing in, arms open wide, smiling" (*Infinite Jest* 1052 note 269). Avril is the central smiley face of the dinner table, and in the manner of the "Infinite Jest" film, she transforms the other members of the family into smiley faces through her power as phatic facilitator of communication. She is the means, but at the cost of meaning. Orin's friend Marlon Bain identifies this formalism when he describes Avril's strange reaction when Orin kills her dog; Avril responds by

> being overly solicitous and polite toward Orin, upping the daily compliment-and reinforcement-dose, arranging for favorite foods at E.T.A. meals … basically making the thousands of little gestures by which the technically stellar parent can make her child feel particularly valued. (*Infinite Jest* 1051 note 269)

Wallace's language reveals the hidden forces at work here: being "polite" and "technically stellar" indicates a mechanistic formality; "dose" suggests a pill or drug; "gesture" implies a codified action. Avril's "love-and-support-bombardment", given in doses, could be figured in the shower of tiny yellow smiley face pills decorating the leaflet for the Shoom club. Just as the desperate and addicted consumers of Ecstasy require increasingly more pills in order to fill an increasing absence or need, Avril responds to Orin by becoming "even more cheerful

and loquacious and witty and intimate and benign" (*Infinite Jest* 1051). The greater the smiley face, the greater the emptiness it conceals.

This darker side to Avril and the yellow smiley face – indeed, to Avril *as* the yellow smiley face – is also intuited by Joelle. Molly Notkin reports that Joelle saw Avril's "constant smile" as "the rictal smile of some kind of thanatoptic figure" (*Infinite Jest* 790), "rictal" being the exact same term used for the expression of the medical attaché watching "Infinite Jest". Joelle feels "half-crazed" by Avril at the Incandenza dinner table:

> She could detect nothing fake about the lady's grace and cheer toward her, the goodwill. And at the same time felt sure in her guts' pit that the woman could have sat there and cut out Joelle's pancreas and thymus and minced them and prepared sweetbreads and eaten them chilled and patted her mouth without batting an eye. And unremarked by all who leaned her way. (*Infinite Jest* 747)

Avril's smiley face is terrifying because of its facilitatory force and its semantic emptiness. It is fixed and static, mechanistic and empty, and so it can be put towards any function: the same smiley face can cover tragedy and comedy, and Joelle senses this potential in Avril, who is elsewhere described as "impossible to read" (*Infinite Jest* 1029). The last appearance of Avril in *Infinite Jest* is in Hal's imagination of her sleeping with John Wayne. She is "staring upward, motionless and pale" (*Infinite Jest* 957), while Wayne is also "motionless", "his eyes unblinking", "his thin tongue outthrust like a stunned lizard's" (*Infinite Jest* 958). The blank expressions, the stasis, and the lizard reference recall Tine's description of "Infinite Jest" viewers as "on some deep *reptile*-level pithed" (*Infinite Jest* 548) [Italics mine]. In the constellation of connections facilitated by the yellow smiley face, the faces of the viewers resemble the faces of Avril and John Wayne, who are also potentially associated with the A.F.R. and their smiley face masks. As well as playing host to a myriad of

significations, the yellow smiley face is the facilitating function which connects these implications together: a crucial link in the chain of Wallace's structure.

A Contranym

Irony is Wallace's starting point in *Infinite Jest* rather than his conclusion. While diagnosing a malaise of his culture to be a proliferation of signs divorced from their original referents, he seeks to go beyond the identification of the problem towards offering a solution – and the solution is sincerity. The question of sincerity in Wallace's fiction is a vast topic and a matter of debate. Firstly, there are Wallace's own statements of sincerity; in "E Unibus Pluram" he calls for "single-entendre principles", and in his interview with Larry McCaffrey he denounces irony, claiming that "irony's gone from liberating to enslaving" ("E Unibus Pluram" 81; McCaffrey 49). These statements are supported by critics, as Marshall Boswell suggests that Wallace achieves sincerity through blending "cynicism and naïveté", and Adam Kirsch proposes that "this sovereign sincerity, this earnest hostility to irony" has exerted much influence on writers after Wallace.[4] On the other hand, Mary K. Holland contends that Wallace is trapped by the same problems of irony and reflexivity that he attempts to surpass.[5] Adam Kelly delves into the nuances of the concept of "sincerity" and identifies a paradox of performativity: that the self-conscious attempt to communicate sincerity might inhibit true sincerity by putting too much emphasis on what sounds true, rather than what is true (135). He concludes that "the guarantee of the writer's sincere intentions cannot finally lie in representation – sincerity is rather the kind of secret that must always break with representation" (Kelly 143). For its fullest realisation, sincerity requires response, informed by a "dialogic appeal to the reader's attestation and judgement" (Kelly 145).

Viewing this debate from the lens of the yellow smiley face, I wish to follow Kelly's suggestion of a sincerity that achieves fuller expression by remaining implicit, requiring

readerly work in order to be accessed. Through the smiley face, Wallace exploits the power of the "contranym": the term that comes to mean its opposite, such as "cleave" meaning both to divide and unite. The semiotics of the yellow smiley face in *Infinite Jest* reveal both alternatives of signification, the ironic and the sincere. Yet in a world dominated by the ironic, the sincere remains a germ or a briefly glimpsed possibility, a hidden and covert solution which must be extracted and assembled in order to counteract the dominant irony. It remains, as put by Kelly, below the surface of representation.

The character through which Wallace seeks to restore meaning and sincerity to the yellow smiley face is Mario Incandenza. Mario is widely regarded as a model of sincerity; Allard den Dulk comments that he "provides an alternative to the hyperreflexive irony of *Infinite Jest*'s […] characters", and Timothy Jacobs identifies him as the only character who is "neither cynical nor ironic", instead "sincerely joyful" (Dulk 180; Jacobs 272). Mario's resemblance to the yellow smiley face is initially as implicit as Avril's. Like Avril, he wears a "constant smile", although his is "involuntary" (*Infinite Jest* 314) rather than deliberate, closer to a symptom than a mask. Joelle notes the smile at the Incandenza dinner party, observing that "[d]eformed Mario's broad smile was so constant you could have hung things from the corners of it" (*Infinite Jest* 746). However, Mario is also the only character in the text who is explicitly compared to a yellow smiley face, in the episode where he fails to react angrily to Hal when Hal admits the secrets that he has kept from him. Hal remarks that "[y]ou can get hurt and mad at people, Boo" (*Infinite Jest* 784), and when Mario still fails to be angry, Hal frustratedly exclaims: "Jesus it's like talking to a big poster of some smily-faced guy. Are you *in* there?" (*Infinite Jest* 784).

This reference seems like an anomaly, as Mario does not exhibit the other qualities associated with the yellow smiley face. He is not emotionally empty, hypocritical, or an organisational facilitator; rather, he is physically disabled and emotionally genuine. The latter

quality is encapsulated in the episode where Barry Loach tries to prove to his depressed brother that the basic human character is not as "unempathetic and necrotic" as his brother thinks (*Infinite Jest* 969). Loach goes about this by acting homeless and despondent, and asking passers-by to touch him. Months pass, and while passers-by occasionally leave him money, nobody touches him. When Loach is close to actually becoming what he was supposed to be simulating, Mario Incandenza, naturally and obliviously, "extended his clawlike hand and touched and heartily [shook] Loach's own fuliginous hand" (*Infinite Jest* 971). The act of kindness catalyses a chain reaction, eventually leading to Barry Loach's employment at E.T.A..

In this parable, Mario is the paradigm of kindness, empathy and compassion. The question remains, then, as to why he is explicitly described as a "smily-faced guy". The solution – like many others in *Infinite Jest* – might be found in the symmetries of Wallace's language. Slightly earlier in the conversation, Mario had told Hal: "Hal, pretty much all I do is love you and be glad I have an excellent brother in every way, Hal" (*Infinite Jest* 772). Hal replies: "Jesus, it's just like talking to the Moms with you sometimes, Boo. […] Except with you I can feel you mean it" (*Infinite Jest* 772). A logical equation can be identified here. There is a syntactical parallel between Hal's "Jesus, it's just like talking to the Moms" and "Jesus it's like talking to a […] smily-faced guy". If the Moms can be equated with the yellow smiley face, then perhaps the first caveat "except with you I can feel you mean it" can be applied to both statements; Mario is "like" the Moms, just as he is "like" the smiley face, but the use of simile reinforces that he is emphatically *not* the Moms, nor the smiley face. Mario is the "except": he means what he says. He is not the abstracted smiley face divorced from its referent, neither is he the phatic "have a nice day" which has become a facilitatory mechanism. Instead, he is the smiley face that means a smiley face; the "have a nice day" that

means “have a nice day.” Referentiality and sincerity have been restored, and Mario is the solution to Avril: one smiley face is the solution to the other.

In *Infinite Jest*, the yellow smiley face is a contranym, expressing two opposite meanings at the same time. The semiotic precedent for this can be traced to medieval sign theory, when St. Augustine titles Book III Chapter 25 of “On Christian Doctrine” with “The same word does not always signify the same thing” (Augustine 3.25). He gives the example that a lion can stand for Christ in one context, and for the devil in another. The same sign can stand for good or evil, depending on its context; correspondingly, the yellow smiley face can stand for both tragedy and comedy. Discussing *Watchmen*, Dietrich comments that we

> see [the yellow smiley face] or its variants (signs and portents) more than fifty more times in the book. Taken together, the first stain and its permutations underscore a postmodern theme that makes comedy into tragedy. (124)

This same theme runs through *Infinite Jest*, expressed by the same sign: the yellow smiley face is stamped on the “Infinite Jest” film, a comedy which conceals a tragedy. Yet while the first step is to identify the tragedy that lurks beneath the ostensible sign of comedy, the second step is to recover the comedy back from the tragedy.

Conclusion

The yellow smiley face stands for many things in Wallace’s novel: the A.F.R., the film “Infinite Jest”, addiction, emptiness, death, false pleasure, false communication, and, simultaneously, genuine joy and forgiveness. Outside the text, it even stands for the 2014 David Foster Wallace conference. From conference to author to narrator to character, the yellow smiley face permeates all levels of diegesis, puncturing the narrative of *Infinite Jest* just as the contemporary emoji punctures sentences. In its structural capacity, it connects internally unrelated moments of the text, and as a phatic formalism, it is embodied by the

character of Avril Incandenza. Between the 60s and the 90s, the yellow smiley face shifted from a sincere sign of positivity to an ironic sign of superficiality and consumerism. Written in 1996, *Infinite Jest* begins at the ironic end of the spectrum, but buried in the text is the possibility of restoring the smiley face to its original meaning. Encoded in this motif is Wallace's wider project of recovering sincerity from irony, of making the signifier mean what it seems to mean, as exemplified by Mario Incandenza. Nevertheless, the equation between Mario's smiley face and meaningful signification is only completed through inference. The true yellow smiley face in *Infinite Jest* is overshadowed by its ironic and empty "happy pill" counterparts; it is left up to readers to distinguish true from false, comedy from tragedy, when both appear under the exact same sign.

Notes

1. For a discussion of emoji in the context of writing systems, see Marcel Danesi, *The Semiotics of Emoji*, pp. 1-16.
2. For instance, Ferdinand de Saussure, widely regarded as one of the founders of modern semiotics, remarks that the "main concern" of semiology will be the "whole group of systems grounded on the arbitrariness of the sign", rather than natural signs. See *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 68. Eco wishes to take into account a "broader range of sign phenomena", including symptoms (16).
3. In an interview with David Foster Wallace, Michael Silverblatt identified the structure of *Infinite Jest* as "fractal", a shape where the same pattern is replicated on every scale, making the microcosm identical to the macrocosm. This was confirmed by Wallace, who commented that he structured *Infinite Jest* according to the Sierpinski gasket which is composed of triangles within triangles to infinite regress. See Silverblatt, "Interview with David Foster Wallace".
4. Marshall Boswell argues that Wallace combines "cynicism and naïveté", "irony and sentimentality", in a way which both continues the postmodern trajectory and takes it in a new direction towards sincerity. See *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, pp. 18-19. See also Kirsch, "The Importance of Being Earnest".
5. Mary K. Holland observes that Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram" essay, often read as the manifesto for advancing beyond the dead end of irony, ends on an ironic note. She remarks: "How can a writer, however well-intentioned, survive his own unconscious addiction to irony?" (Holland 220).

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