



Universidad de Valladolid

FACULTAD de FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS
DEPARTAMENTO de FILOGÍA INGLESA
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The Mass Media in David Foster Wallace's Selected
Short Stories

Jurdana González Campano

Tutor: Berta Cano Echevarría

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the treatment of the mass media in a selection of short stories written by the American postmodernist author David Foster Wallace. The first section of the paper gives us a brief theoretical background about the genre of the short story in American literature, the life and works of the author, and the evolution of the mass media. Then, the second section focuses on an article written by the author which deals with television and its relation with American literature. Finally, the last three sections present the analysis of three of the most important mass media, which are television, advertising and press, in a selection of short stories extracted from two of David Foster Wallace's collections.

Key words: Advertising, postmodernism, press, short story, television, Wallace.

Este trabajo versa sobre el tratamiento de los medios de comunicación de masas en una selección de relatos breves escritos por el autor postmodernista americano David Foster Wallace. La primera sección del trabajo nos da un breve contexto teórico sobre el género del relato breve en la literatura americana, la vida y obras del autor y la evolución de los medios de comunicación de masas. A continuación, la segunda sección se centra en un artículo escrito por el autor que trata sobre la televisión y su relación con la literatura americana. Finalmente, las tres últimas secciones presentan el análisis de tres de los medios de comunicación de masas más importantes, los cuales son televisión, publicidad y prensa, en una selección de relatos breves extraídos de dos de las colecciones de David Foster Wallace.

Palabras clave: Postmodernismo, prensa, publicidad, relato breve, televisión, Wallace.

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INTRODUCTION

The mass media are very present in the daily lives of a great percentage of people in the world. They can be present in many different ways: Television, radio, Internet, press... it is very difficult not to be in contact with any of them. Just like mass media, literature is very present in our daily lives too, and in the literature of the second half of the 20th century and until the present days, it is quite frequent to find some of these mass media as central elements of the stories.

This inclusion of the popular culture and new technologies in literature is a characteristic of postmodernism, a cultural movement that occupies the second half of the 20th century and even the first years of the 21st century.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze some of the most important mass media in a selection of short stories by David Foster Wallace, an American author who belonged to this cultural movement and who included this topic in most of his writings.

The topic of the popular culture and the mass media in postmodernist literature has been widely analyzed. Starting by David Foster Wallace himself, who wrote an article which we will discuss later on television and literary fiction, other authors like Tim Woods or Julian McDougall, very influenced by the works of two of the most important theorists, sociologists and philosophers of the period -Jean Baudrillard (*Simulacra and Simulation* (1981)) and Jean-François Lyotard (*The Postmodern Condition* (1979))- have studied mass media, postmodernism, the influence both have had in culture and also how mass media are portrayed in the literature of this period. The author has had a huge reception both before and after his death. Many newspapers and magazines have dedicated some sections to his life, works, style and thoughts, and it is important to mention the publication of his first biography, *Every Ghost Story Is a Ghost Story* (2012), by D. T. Max, and *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (2012), a collection of interviews by Stephen J. Burn, as well as the realization of a biopic (*The End of the Tour* (2015), directed by James Ponsoldt) about the period of his life in which he published his masterpiece, which is based on *Although Of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (2010), written by David Lipsky.

In order to carry out this analysis of the mass media in the selection of short stories I have done a close reading of the stories putting them in the social context in which they were written,

that is, taking into account how the mass media were at the time in which the different stories are set.

In the first chapter of the paper we are going to see a brief theoretical background in order to have some context for the following chapters. We will talk about the short story in American literature from its apparition in the early 19th century, then we will talk about Wallace's life and works, and finally about the mass media and its development.

In the second chapter we will discuss "E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction", an article that the author wrote in 1993 about how television has influenced and still influences people in general and American fiction writers in particular. We will see that this article is important for the understanding of certain aspects that he expressed in some of the short stories we are going to discuss in the next chapters.

In chapter three we will start the analysis of mass media in the author's literature. Wallace published three collections of short stories, and we are going to work with some short stories from two of them: *Girl with Curious Hair* (1989), and *Oblivion: Stories* (2004). The first collection is composed by ten stories, all of them typically postmodernist which include elements such as irony, cynicism, metafiction and many elements taken from the popular culture. The second collection is composed by eight short stories which are longer than the ones in the first collection, and although they still have some things in common with the first ones, they have a more pessimistic tone.

Chapter three will be dedicated to television, the mass medium par excellence, and we will see how David Foster Wallace presents it in two short stories: "Little Expressionless Animals", from *Girl with Curious Hair*, and "The Suffering Channel", from *Oblivion: Stories*. Then, chapter four will be focused on advertising, a mass medium that goes hand by hand with television, and in this case we will analyze "My Appearance", from *Girl with Curious Hair*, and "Mr. Squishy", taken from *Oblivion: Stories*. To finish, we will talk about another mass medium that, although in decay, is still one of the most important ones: the press. For this analysis we will use just one short story: "The Suffering Channel".

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE AMERICAN SHORT STORY, THE MASS MEDIA AND DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

1.1 The American Short Story

It is a bit daring to say that the short story was invented in America, but it is true that it is the place where it has been developed the most. The short story appeared in America in the early 19th century, and although it had a strong European influence, the Americans, searching for their own identity, included some elements in their stories that ended up turning the genre into the “national art form” (Scofield, 1), both because of the themes they had and also because it was a very much practiced genre in the country.

During that century many writers became popular because of their short stories: Washington Irving, who used his texts mainly to try to show the American personality and the typical scenes of everyday American life; Edgar Allan Poe, for whom his mystery and suspense short stories were the texts that gave him more success and made him be one of the big names among the genre; Nathaniel Hawthorne, who started including his own thoughts in his narrations to the point of making them didactic, or Herman Melville, who also dealt with the topic of the American identity, were some of the most prolific and famous authors of that period¹.

Later on, by the end of the century and the first half of the 20th century, the short story continued being a widely chosen way of writing. Examples of authors who wrote them are O. Henry, whose short stories are known for having surprise endings; Stephen Crane, whose life, although short, was full of successful texts; and Ernest Hemingway, whose short stories are as appreciated as his novels, or even more in some cases. Obviously this did not finish here, for during the second half of the 20th century until nowadays the short story has continued being a very used literary form among recent American authors such as Raymond Carver or Robert Coover. These last two authors belong to that literary movement called postmodernism. Postmodernism expressed a new relationship between reality and language, because now language not only expresses how reality is but it also creates it. The authors use tools such as parody, irony, disruption of the chronology, metafiction or mixtures of different linguistic styles to play with language so that the reader gets confused and stays alert as he reads (Scofield, 217-218). However, in this literary movement there

¹ For a study on the 19th century American short story see Ross Danforth's *The American Short Story*.

are no rules, and each author would write the way he wanted, although most of them had something in common and it was that they presented their own reality rather than the supposedly “real” reality (Woods, 50).

During the 1980s, postmodernism changed because by that time the society changed too. Authors like Bret Easton Ellis or Jay McInerney reflected in their literature the consumerist society of the time (a “real” reality), and they also included many references to the popular culture of the moment. We can find many texts about television, drugs and the so-called yuppies (“Young urban professionals”, young businessmen who belong to the middle-high social class), among other topics (Woods, 62).

Going back to the concept of short story, we might say that it is a concept difficult to define, because depending on the time in which they were written, short stories may have some characteristics or others. Just the concept of “short” in this case is difficult to define because it is very relative. In order to know what “short” means in this case, we have to take as a model of reference a typical novel of between two hundred and four hundred average pages long. There is a kind of composition shorter than the novel, the “long story” or “short novel”, which is normally between fifty and a hundred and fifty average pages long, and the composition shorter than a long story would be the short story, which can be defined as a literary composition written in prose of between one and fifty average pages long.

We can say that many writers decided to write short stories instead of novels because they were cheaper to print, publish and distribute, but before short story authors collected their stories for a further publication, they published them in magazines. This was something very common since the apparition of the genre, and from the 1930s onwards the publication of short stories in magazines became especially popular. *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Harper’s Magazine* and especially *The New Yorker* were famous magazines that published texts written by the most popular authors of the time so that even people that normally would not read books could have access to them and read them (Scofield, 6-9).

1.2 David Foster Wallace

David Foster Wallace belongs to that wide list of authors of the second half of the 20th century who wrote both novels and short stories and became popular because of them. Born in

1962 in Ithaca, New York, he went to Amherst College in Massachusetts and majored in English and Philosophy. Actually his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987) was initially his thesis for his major in English. After his graduation he never stopped writing. He published his first collection of short stories, *Girl with Curious Hair*, in 1989, and he continued writing while he worked as a Literature teacher at Emerson College, Boston, by the beginning of the 1990s. Although his masterpiece is a novel (*The Infinite Jest*, 1996), he was also well known for his collections of short stories (*Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), *Oblivion: Stories* (2004)) and by his essays, which he also collected (*A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997), *Consider the Lobster* (2005), *Both of Flesh and Not* (2012)) (Burn, 17-22).

If we inquire into his personal life, the fact that both his academic and professional careers were so successful and prolific can be surprising. David Foster Wallace suffered from severe depression during half of his life, and he also fell into drinking, drugs and even television and Internet addiction as a way of escaping from his own reality, although that only worsened his condition. Thanks to his medical treatments, his periods in rehabilitation and also thanks to the stability that his marriage gave him, he had periods of time in which he could have a productive life, working as a Creative Writing teacher at Illinois State University and at Pomona College and also writing his own texts which he continued publishing, but in the end he could not beat his depression, which finally led him to his suicide in 2008.

For many readers and critics, David Foster Wallace is considered more a chronicler or a reporter of the consumerist society that he was living in than a narrator, but the thing is that in his fiction he also talks about that society and the "life in the society of corporative consumerism"² (Ferré and Trejo, 31), which makes that fiction actually be no-fiction. For him, the idea of being famous was a nightmare. He did not want to be praised because he was afraid that people would eventually stop praising him. He did not want to be known because he did not want to be forgotten later. He was afraid that if he gave interviews or appeared on television people would think that he was doing it because he wanted to be more famous and sell more books. He did not want to be an icon, an author craving for constant attention whose main concern was to be known and not to actually write. All in all, he was afraid of becoming a brand. An example of that fear is the fact that he always wore a bandana. In an interview he was asked why, and he started to think that that tiny fact about himself or about his appearance was going to become his symbol, and therefore, he

² "La vida en la sociedad del consumo corporativo" in the original text.

would become a brand. However, on the other hand, part of himself wanted that attention and that recognition for his work, he knew that he deserved that (*The End of the Tour*, 35'-77'). Wallace was aware of the power that mass media have because he had been a victim of that power, and related to this, the mass media are very present in many of his works.

1.3 The Mass Media in Narrative Fiction

The mass media are the group of media that send messages that are reached by a large amount of people at once. Mass media “dominate” the society we live in. They are everywhere; they are so present in our lives that we are almost fused with them. We use the Internet every day, we watch television for hours, we read print and online press, we see advertisements on television and in the streets... Nowadays we use media for many different purposes such as sharing our thoughts with other people in a fast way, maintaining personal relationships with people who live many kilometers away from us, discovering what happens in the rest of the world, or simply spending our free time. Of course, media has not always worked the way it does today.

We can set the beginning of mass media in 1455, back when the printing press was invented by Gutenberg. From that moment magazines, newspapers, manuals and all sorts of books started to be progressively distributed widely and more and more people could access them. At first, those printed texts had just that: text. Photography did not appear until the early 19th century, a century full of very important inventions in the field of communication: the Morse code, the telephone and moving images (what was later called “films”). Although we can say that mass media started in the 15th century, we tend to see it more like a “modern” thing because for us, mass media are linked with digital technology, something more connected to our days. Something from the 20th century, when television and radio appeared, and also something from the 21st century, when the Internet became something indispensable in our lives.

David Foster Wallace’s short stories are set in the late 20th and the early 21st centuries, so what he presents is a postmodernist view of the mass media. According to that view we can say that there are two important concepts: truth and reality. Postmodernist texts about media challenge those two ideas, introducing the notion that, when facing postmodernist texts, we cannot trust the truth and the reality represented because they might not be true or real. “The postmodern perspective on media is that there are always competing versions of truth and reality, and

postmodern media products will engage with this idea.” (McDougall, 90). We see a supposed reality, which for us is real because we see it, but what is represented may not be real. That line between reality and fiction is very blurry under the postmodernist point of view, and this happens not only in mass media, but also in literature, where it is very frequent since it is one of the main characteristics of postmodernism. When we are living in a world in which we are in touch with the media every day, it is difficult to distinguish between those two dimensions. In fact, for the American society, mass media and especially television are vital for the creation of their social and cultural identity: “The cinema and TV are America’s reality!” (qtd. In Woods, 194). Postmodernist television presents some characteristics such as the use of irony and parody, the importance of the medium and the form over the message and the content, the extreme concern about the external appearances, the self-referentiality of many television programs in which they talk about themselves or other programs, the way it plays with reality and how television programs explain their contents (Woods, 196-198).

The most mentioned mass medium in David Foster Wallace’s short stories is television, and actually, in 1993 he wrote and published an article titled “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction”, in which he talks about how mass media, especially television, has influenced and is still influencing people and the narrative of the last decades in a lot of different ways.

2. DAVID FOSTER WALLACE – “E UNIBUS PLURAM: TELEVISION AND U.S. FICTION”

In this article titled “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”, published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* journal in 1993, Wallace tries to show how television is having more and more influence on American fiction writers and the way they narrate their stories. He supports the idea that commercial entertainment influences us (everyone, not only writers) to the point that we even change our relationship towards everything else, and American fiction writers are changing their relationship towards the texts they write.

The title of the article makes reference to the motto that appears on the seal of the United States, “E Pluribus Unum”, which means “One out of many”. In this case the title means the opposite, “Many out of one”. Wallace implies that television is that one element out of which many people create their personalities, because people who watch television are influenced by it. The understanding of this article is important for the analysis of television and advertising in Wallace’s short stories, so the purpose of this section of the dissertation is to explain what the author had to say about those two mass media so that when we analyze the stories we can see if he expressed his ideas in his literature.

According to Wallace, fiction writers’ muse is their environment. Everything they see around them, their reality when they walk down the streets, when they are in a social event or when they are using the public transport, every human situation is their source of creativity. Television is also something that is present in their environments, so they also use it. “If we want to know what American normality is –what Americans want to regard as normal—we can trust television. For television’s whole *raison* is reflecting what people want to see. It’s a mirror.” (Wallace 1993, 152). If television is a mirror in which American society is reflected as it would like to be like, it is clear that fiction writers look at that mirror in order to see more about those human situations they use for their writings. But, in television, not everything we see is true. It is a mirror, but you can act in front of a mirror, and when you act you can be a different version of the person that you really are. According to Wallace, people that appear on television are totally aware of the fact that there are millions of people observing them on the other side of the screen. Those people are their public, and they are there for the public to observe them. Fiction writers are not really observing human situations because most of those situations are fake, but people that appear on television make the

viewers feel as if the situations we saw were natural. They are professionals. Non-professional people would normally just feel uncomfortable in front of the camera because they would be aware of the people that will be watching them. This is why most of the people we see on television are professionals, and they make it all look natural to the point that, if we watch them every day for many days, Wallace says we eventually feel them as real close friends.

Although most of what we watch on television is fiction, that does not mean television cannot be taken seriously. It is another tool for entertainment as good as any other. Wallace claims that many people criticize television because they see it as cultural decay, an object in which we can see that real people are not so real because they act as real people should do, which actually makes them unreal, and also an object in which we see that the only things that matter nowadays are beauty, power and fame (Wallace 1993, 156). But still, many of those who criticize television cannot help but watch it, maybe just to criticize it with full knowledge, maybe because they know it really entertains. Not many people seem to pay attention to that criticism, and it is obvious that television itself does not pay attention to it either, because it still exists and it is not less powerful than it was. Wallace believes that television does not need that type of connections with the real world, connections by which it gets damaged, and people that watch it know what interests them and what does not, so they do not care what critics say.

In the next part of his article, Wallace explains that during the 1960s we can see the emergence of a new way of writing fiction: metafiction. Metafiction is, for example, writing about someone who is writing. In terms of television, metafiction would be a television program about a television program. Metafiction is fiction that acts as if it was not fiction although it is, and this reminds us of how irony works. When using irony, the author tells something in a certain way but what he really means is actually the opposite of what he says. Wallace claims that irony is the common point between television and fiction (Wallace 1993, 161). Irony is an essential and predominant element in the American television of the late 20th century. In this case we do not have a text with a hidden meaning but images with sound, and what we hear may be the opposite of what we are actually seeing. "Since the tension between what's said and what's seen is irony's whole sales territory, classic televisual irony works not via the juxtaposition of conflicting pictures or conflicting sounds, but with sights that undercut what's said." (Wallace 1993, 161).

Going back to the question on the cultural status of television, Wallace again defends that, although he thinks that it has affected culture somehow, television is not bad for the society as long

as it is used with moderation. Television is considered a low art (Wallace 1993, 162). This is not because it is culturally low and vulgar but because its main goal is to please as many people as possible so that it is watched as much as possible. Many people consider television to be low and vulgar, and still they watch it more than they should. Wallace, as someone who has suffered from it, says that television can be literally addictive. It can produce addiction in people who watch it more hours a day than they should because the more they watch it, the less they live their lives outside the screen. Television, because of its goal of having as many viewers as possible, not only entertains us and distracts us from the problems we have but it also shows us a life full of things that we would like to have and people we would like to meet, and for some people that is better than their real lives.

There is an obvious element in postmodern fiction and it is the constant mention to brands, celebrities, television programs and other elements of the popular culture of the late 20th century. Low culture mixed with high culture. Television mixed with literature. This is because commercial culture was becoming more and more important as it was getting bigger. "Americans seemed no longer united so much by common feelings as by common images." (Wallace 1993, 166). This was not seen as a good thing because the introduction of those elements in fiction was seen as a way of showing the dull reality of the American culture. According to Wallace, there are two groups of fiction writers depending on how they introduce cultural elements in fiction: writers under forty and writers over forty. This division is also affected by television. For older writers television is not something that forms part of their lives as much as it does for younger writers. Young writers do not have memories of a life without technology, it is part of their lives, but for old writers, technology is something very new, so they do not include those elements as much as young writers will. Those elements can be introduced in two ways that should not be confused: we can see popular and televisual references in literary texts, or we can see techniques used in television applied to literary texts.

According to Wallace we can see two other elements that, together with irony, television and American fiction share: silence and fear of ridicule. These elements appear in what Wallace says is a new subgenre of postmodernist fiction which tries to "transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal and television" (Wallace 1993, 171) in a world in which television has become so powerful that it has become invulnerable to change. That subgenre is what some authors call "post-

postmodernism” and some others call “hyperrealism”, although it is also known as “image fiction” by some readers and writers.

Image fiction (we will use this name since Wallace also uses it in the article) uses the elements of pop culture (television, any kind of objects, famous personalities...) as a whole world in which fictions about real things are created. This is not only a literary technique similar to what was used in realism adapted to the socio-technological novelties of the 20th century but also something that tries to make the reader aware of the (sometimes unhealthy) relationship of people with those elements. Realism tried to make people get closer to things that were normal but were not by their hands³, while image fiction tries to make people feel strange about familiar things. “Realism made the strange familiar [...] “realistic” fiction is going about trying to make the familiar strange.” (Wallace 1993, 172). It is, for example, to show the behind the scenes of a television show, or the real life of a celebrity. But the problem, according to Wallace, is that image fiction does it in a way that it looks like a parody, because image fiction authors use irony and self-consciousness, just like postmodernist authors did. So what we have is that instead of making strange again what now is normal for us, we keep considering normal what once was strange. This means that television cannot be made strange for us anymore because it is so deep inside us that it would be impossible to make us feel that way.

Image fiction does not accomplish its mission of “saving” us from television by making us feel it is something strange in our lives, as Wallace claims. At the beginning of the article, he had already said that he does not think television is a bad thing, but it is a bad thing if it is consumed without restraint. The fact that all we see in television are supposedly role models and pretty faces attached to pretty bodies, and also the fact that everyone loves them, make us want to be pretty faces and pretty bodies too, and that damages our minds, our relationships with other people and also our self-esteem, triggering mental diseases of very different kinds on us. But it is also safe to say that not everything in television shows that kind of content, because television also has a more serious and “healthy” side.

The truth is television is mostly about persuading the audience to do something, Wallace says. It tries to sell us a product (a person, an object, a lifestyle...) and in that task the role of advertising is crucial. During the early years of television, advertising was made for those lonely

³ Believable facts that may not happen to certain people but may happen to other people who live under different circumstances.

people who watched a lot of television because it kept them in company. These people were presumably easier to influence than people who watched television in groups (Wallace 1993, 174-175). Later on, advertising became something more directed to groups, and those advertisements actually showed groups of people having fun, something that would make a lonely person want to join a group. But surprisingly enough, advertising in the US during the last decades of the 80s was, again, directed to individuals, but in a different way. Now those advertisements, the stand-apart advertisements as Wallace calls them (Wallace 1993, 175), try to make those individuals be proud of their individuality and feel good and special about it. If they buy X product, they will be unique and special individuals. This is quite ironical because if each individual buys X product, there will be a group of individuals with that X product, and they will not be special or unique anymore. Then things changed again and the most popular advertisements were, again, about groups, but now groups are presented as something homogeneous, "a mass of identical featureless eyes" (Wallace 1993, 176). It is curious that those individuals that watch television in their houses, alone, are part of the homogeneous group of individuals that watch television in their houses, alone.

Wallace says that the reality behind stand-apart advertisements is that, apart from selling a product, they try to make the viewer want to be inside television and not on the other side. They try to convince the viewers of how necessary is television for their lives, and how necessary are they for television too. People watch television to soothe their minds, to fight against them, and television, or the many different channels that form it, fight against each other for the attention of the audience, and also fight against new technologies that permit the audience to ignore advertisements. If television and publicists do not want people to ignore advertisements, Wallace explains that they can do two different things: They can make advertisements as appealing as television shows, or they can make horrible advertisements so that people change the channel and at least that channel comes off well. Obviously, the first option is the one that has been being practiced until our days. "Commercials are becoming more like entertaining films." (qtd. In Wallace 1993, 177). It is true that advertisements are now as appealing as television shows, but television shows have also been through a transformation by which they also look like advertisements. Television and advertising are becoming one little by little.

But no matter in what ways television shows or advertisements change, the important element for them to be alive will always be the viewers and their opinions. The viewers are comfortable watching television while they are doing it, however when they are not, they are not

happy about the fact that they have to be watching television to feel happy. They are not comfortable with feeling part of that group of viewers. And here, irony appears again. As Wallace had said earlier in his article, television took some elements from postmodernist literature, and it has made them evolve to the point that it presented a solution to that double thought of the viewer who is happy watching television but not happy about being happy watching it. This solution supposed a change in the American perceptions about art.

[...] a transition from art's being a creative instantiation of real values to art's being a creative instantiation of deviance from bogus values. And this wider shift in its turn paralleled both the development of the postmodern aesthetic and some deep philosophic change in how Americans chose to view concepts like authority, sincerity, and passion in terms of our willingness to be pleased. (Wallace 1993, 178).

Advertisements started to be ironic in the sense that they made fun of themselves, of the rest of advertisements and even of the audience. The audience was capable of getting the joke and seeing through the irony. Those advertisements mocked the conventions of television advertising, and the audience knew that they were doing that on purpose. Wallace gives us the example of a Pepsi commercial whose slogan was "The choice of a new generation", but the people in the advertisement did not really have the choice of not consuming Pepsi. This advertisement, with its slogan, was joking about the possibility of not consuming the product, which was non-existent. The same happened with television programs, they laughed at themselves and at the rest of the programs before someone else did it. In this case, Wallace gives us the example of the sitcoms (situation comedies such *The Simpsons*) and the late-night shows (comedy-oriented talk shows). People felt more attracted to television and did not feel bad about it, because since they had that knowledge about the jokes that television and advertising made, they felt superior, and they wanted to watch more to keep on feeling that way. This use of irony that television practiced was like being extremely sincere. Since television looks so "sincere", people watch it to learn how to act in their daily lives. Television became a source of information about life (Wallace 1993, 179-181).

American fiction's source of information is the society and the culture it lives in, and the media are a very important part of that American society and culture. The connection between television and American postmodern fiction comes from the 1960s-1970s, when postmodernism was the "intellectual expression of the rebellious youth culture" (Wallace 1993, 182). Television helped a lot in that expression, because it was a medium which could reach many people at once.

Television helped to make irony and hypocrisy public as responses to the unrealistic society people were living in.

[...] U.S. TV was a hypocritical apologist for values whose reality had become attenuated in a period of corporate ascendancy, bureaucratic entrenchment, foreign adventurism, racial conflict, secret bombing, assassination, wiretaps, etc. It's not one bit accidental that postmodern fiction aimed its ironic cross hairs at the banal, the naïve, the sentimental and simplistic and conservative, for these qualities were just what sixties TV seemed to celebrate as "American." (Wallace 1993, 182-183).

But the problem was that the use of irony stopped having that effect of rebellion when used in media and literature. We can say that irony was so present everywhere that it was not useful anymore. It did not have that rebellious effect because people did not take anything seriously since that had interiorized that everything was ironical. That is why people do not believe anything that happens on television, they do not believe in what they see in advertisements, and they do not believe in certain types of press.

The last part of the article deals with the ideas of George Gilder, a media futurologist. He analyzes the upcoming new technologies that are replacing the old ones, and he says that those new technologies are going to change education, business, people's interactions with others and with their jobs and in sum, our lives. He claims that soon, the audience will be able to control what, when and how to watch television. This, says Wallace, will make people that already spend hours watching television, spend even more hours doing it, because the more comfortable and real the experience of being part of the audience is, and the better technology is, the harder we get "addicted" to it.

The ideas expressed in this article can be a good starting point for the analysis of Wallace's short stories about three of the most important mass media, although we have to have an open mind in order to analyze them because the author may not have expressed his own ideas in his writings.

3. TELEVISION

Television is the most recurrent mass medium throughout David Foster Wallace's short stories. It has been seen as something bad, something that blinds people and reprograms people's brains, but it has also been seen as something good, something educational and enriching. As we have previously said in the first chapter of this paper⁴, postmodernist television presents some specific characteristics that it did not present before, and some of these characteristics are taken from postmodernist literature. In the analysis of these short stories we will see how television is represented and also some of those common characteristics.

3.1 "Little Expressionless Animals", from *Girl with Curious Hair*

In "Little Expressionless Animals" we are introduced to a group of people that is on the other side of the screen at which the spectator is not able to take a look. The story is set during the 1970s and the 1980s, and it takes the reader inside the famous American television game show *Jeopardy!*, a television show that consists on a quiz competition in which a group of contestants have to answer questions in order to win money.

At the beginning of the story we are presented the main characters with flashbacks alternated with scenes set in the present. As we can see the timeline is not clear in the story, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the past and the present events. This is a typical element of postmodernist literature, the disruption of the chronology. Some of the characters, such as Alex Trebek, the host, and the creator of the program, Merv Griffin, are real, so Wallace does not only include a real television show in this short story, but he also introduces real celebrities. Julie, a twenty-year old woman, is the most popular contestant the show has ever had. She is in a relationship with Faye, the person in charge of creating the questions that are going to be asked during the shows. Faye is the daughter of Dee, the executive producer, and Janet, the director, is the ex-wife of Dee's current husband. All these people together with Alex Trebek and Muffy, the public relations coordinator, are reunited because apparently Julie is not showing up for the program anymore. They are not worried about her, or the reasons why she is not there. They are worried because if she does not show up, that will be really bad for the audience rating of the

⁴ See chapter one, section 3.3.

program. If Julie is not there, the program is over. Here, reality and fiction are mixed, because Faye is in a relationship with missing Julie outside the program, so now she has to excuse her and be the mediator between the director of the program and Julie, between television and real life.

After the presentation of the characters we can see a flashback with both a remarkable and an absurd part in which Dee is in her office having a few drinks and having a conversation with the television. It actually is a conversation, because television talks to her and she answers. The television tells her that they have to carry on with the program, and she has no doubts about that, to which the television answers "We bring good things to life" (Wallace 1997, 8). Here we can see how Wallace is humanizing the television, it is defending itself from the critics of those who say that television is bad. The conversation goes on as Dee changes from one channel to another, and the television says things to her like "Does your husband still look at you the way he used to?" or "You deserve a break [...] The more you hear, the better we sound. Aren't you hungry for a flame-broiled Whopper?" (Wallace 1997, 9). It is like television was trying to persuade Dee to act or think in a certain way. This may look contradictory if we take a look again at the part when television is defending itself saying that it brings good things to life. That is what television normally does, it tries to persuade people to do things, but in this case television is actually speaking to her, it is reproducing with words that message which is normally under the surface and gets to us without words. While Dee was having that conversation with the television, Julie and Faye were observing her thinking that she should drink less. Julie says that the host entered the engineer's booth and played with the "Applause" sign, so people applauded during the most inappropriate moments. This fact presents people as mere television puppets. They are in the studio, seeing what is happening at the very moment it is happening just a few meters away from them, and they only applaud when the sign tells them to. They do not seem able to realize when the sign is wrong. Television, again, is presented manipulating people's minds even when these people are inside of it.

In his article, Wallace says that in television we normally see pretty faces and pretty bodies, because that is more likely to be seen and enjoyed by the audience. In this story we can see a brief conversation between the host and other men that work for the show. Apparently one of them has some problem with his teeth, and he does not want the creator of the show to know about it. The host tells him that he would not do that, and asks him if he looks like that kind of person, to which the man answers "You look like a game show host" (Wallace 1997, 14). Then, the host answers "Probably because of my perfect and beautiful and flawless teeth" (Wallace 1997, 14). This may be

interpreted as something ironic, but as Wallace observes rightly in his article, we can say that there is a certain type of people that, because of their appearance, tend to appear on television more than other people with different physical attributes. The host has a perfect smile, he has been chosen by Merv Griffin because he is “waxily handsome” (Wallace 1997, 15), but the other man does not want the boss to know that his smile is not perfect because if he knows, he will never be in front of the camera.

In the next part of the story we are told how Julie got to be the number one contestant ever in *Jeopardy!*, and how the process of recording the programs is. Three or four programs are recorded each day, and in television they create the illusion that each program is recorded the same day it is broadcasted. The contestants change their clothes and the assistants redo their make up so that they do not look tired on screen. When the cameras are off, Julie looks absent, tired, as if she did not want to be there, but when cameras are on again she has to look good, and even the host’s face “falls into the worn creases of a professional smile” (Wallace 1997, 17). Everything is an illusion, but television, apart from illusion, is a show. In the story, Julie is caught crying while she is answering all the questions she is being asked, and when the program is over and she has won one more time, she, in front of the millions of people who are watching her, gives the host the finger, something that makes the audience ratings go crazy in a positive way.

As it is presented at the beginning, Julie becomes little by little the soul of the program. She is necessary for its success.

This girl not only kicks facts in the ass. This girl informs trivia with import. She makes it human, something with the power to emote, evoke, induce, cathart. She gives the game the simultaneous transparency and mystery all of us in the industry have groped for, for decades. A sort of union of contestantional head, heart, gut, buzzer finger. She is, or can become, the game show incarnate. (Wallace 1997, 25).

However, the producers start thinking about the moment when Julie is finally defeated, and that is when they discover that Julie has a brother. The problem is her brother is in a hospital because he is autistic, and all the money that Julie wins in the program is for his well-being. But television is a show, and tragedies call people’s attention, so they want to see if Julie’s brother can beat her. They do not care about the sick person, they do not care if they humiliate people; they only care about the spectacle, and they want Julie’s brother to be the one that beats her. Faye, once again, becomes the mediator between Julie’s television and reality, and she eventually tells her that

everything is prepared and her brother is going to be the contestant that defeats her. This is another prove that television is an illusion, and nothing happens spontaneously.

During another flashback we can see Dee and Muffy watching television. As spectators, they do not think it is correct to humiliate people on television just because there is a final prize, but as television shows-makers they do not realize how bad that is. They also criticize the aspect of the host of the program they are watching, and Dee says she is glad he is on the other side of the screen and she can turn the television off whenever she wants. Here Muffy says something very coherent, because since they both work on television, the situation could be the other way around, and people could turn them off too, to which she answers that they are in that business so that that does not ever happen. This is the war between television channels about which Wallace will talk about in his article some years later. Television channels have a constant civil war because they all want audience. They all have their weapons to fight that war, and those weapons are their programs and the people that appear on them, for example, Julie. During that same conversation, Muffy talks about something that Wallace will also mention in his article: the lonely people whose only company is television and whose whole world is on the other side of the screen, and how some of these people sometimes get to appear on television. When these people see themselves on screen it is like their two worlds are only one, and reality and television are joined as ever.

3.2 “The Suffering Channel”, from *Oblivion: Stories*

In “The Suffering Channel” we can see that the main protagonists are press and television, and at some points of the story both are intertwined, but for this part of the paper we will only focus on television.

The protagonist of the story is Skip Atwater, a journalist that works for *Style* magazine and who is in charge of writing an article about a new television channel called *The Suffering Channel*, a channel which will consist on showing photographs in loop that produce anguish and suffering on the viewer. On its first stage this channel will not have advertisements or sounds, only those images that are related to pain in different ways. Some weeks after the release of the channel, on the second stage, photographs will be gradually replaced by short videos that produce the same feelings on the audience.

Skip had been involved with another channel, the *All Ads All The Time Channel* (which showed advertisements in loop), so he just had to make some calls to see if someone knew about the new channel. In those emails he writes everything about the channel, and he describes every single detail of every video that is going to be shown. Apparently Skip did not need to make a big effort to have someone that informed him about the channel, but we do not get to know if it finally airs or not at the end of the story.

We can say that the fact that this channel would show those images which would make the audience suffer may seem crazy, a channel like that would never work or would never be admitted, but the truth is that we already have channels like that in our televisions. People watch the news every day, and they also watch documentaries about other people who live in awful situations, or about natural disasters around the world, and most of what we see in all those channels and television programs is suffering, pain and disgusting images, so why would not a channel with all those images in loop work? We watch that type of images every day while we are with our families, so the idea of a channel like that is not that crazy because nowadays there are many “suffering channels” on air. We could say that Wallace here is making us see how the television we watch every day and a fictional television channel of that type are not that different from each other because sometimes reality is crazier than fiction.

As we said before, in this story the other protagonist is press, but press and television are somehow joined because the protagonists of the article that Skip is going to write may appear on television after they are famous because of the article. The protagonist of the article is a man who is capable of producing pieces of art when he defecates. One of the *Style* workers thinks about the future and says that, since nowadays there are reality shows about everything, and since The Suffering Channel is going to be real, the next logical step would be to create a reality show about celebrities defecating.

[...] a channel devoted wholly to images of celebrities shitting. [...] Celebrity bloopers, celebrities showing you around their homes, celebrity boxing, celebrity political colloquy, celebrity blind dating, celebrity couples counseling... [...] the logic of such programming was airtight and led inexorably to the ultimate exposures: celebrity major surgical procedures, celebrity death, celebrity autopsy. (Wallace 2005, 295-296).

Reality television is the ultimate way of introducing the audience inside the television in a supposed real world. These lonely television watchers about whom Wallace talks in his article are

the main target of those programs. They do not have a life, most of their life is television, and with reality shows they can see other people's lives from different points of view (love, friendship, work, family, cohabitation...) in order to fill their own empty lives.

As a conclusion we could say that absurdity, the unclear vision of reality and fiction and the disruption of the chronology are three characteristics very present in these stories and also in the television programs they present. In the case of the first one we cannot say that television is the main protagonist, but it is the frame in which most of the action takes place, and Wallace makes the reader see how a program of that type works from the inside, and in the case of the third story Wallace demonstrates that something that apparently looks like a really crazy idea for a television program is actually something that we already have in our televisions every day.

4. ADVERTISING

Another of the most mentioned mass media in David Foster Wallace's short stories is advertising, which is closely related to television since during the last decades of the 20th century it had a very important role in television (advertisements not only appeared in the cuts that the television shows made but also started to appear during the television shows through the conductor of the program and became almost as important and remarkable as television shows themselves⁵). Advertising has developed throughout the years, and nowadays we could say that it is also a form of art, as controversial as it may sound. Just like any artwork, advertisements get people's attention, influence other artists and artworks and have much creative work behind them, and even some of the most famous advertisements in history are now exhibited in museums because their value has been recognized.

4.1 "My Appearance", from *Girl with Curious Hair*

In this short story television and advertising are the most important elements. The main character of the story is Edilyn, an actress who is very successful because of her television series and her movies, and who has recently appeared on a television advertisement for *Oscar Mayer*. Edilyn is going to be interviewed in the famous television show *Late Night with David Letterman*, and her husband, Rudy, and one of her friends, Ron, are afraid that Letterman does to Edilyn the same he does with all his guests: ridicule her in front of the audience. The two men train Edilyn on how she should answer all the questions in order to keep Edilyn's image intact.

At a certain point of the story, Edilyn's friend explains the concept of *anti-show*. *Late Night with David Letterman* would be an anti-show because it mocks the traditional form of a talk show, which consisted on serious interviews about different topics. In order to explain a similar concept to Edilyn, her friend uses another famous television show, *Saturday Night Live*. He says that this television show used to make parodies of advertisements between sketch and sketch, and that those parodies were so good that it took a while to realize that they were not real advertisements. He calls those fake advertisements *anti-commercials* (Wallace 1997, 189), because they laugh about real advertisements, just like anti-shows laugh about real talk shows. Ron continues by explaining

⁵ See chapter two.

Edilyn that it got to the point that people liked those fake advertisements more than the real ones, so what happened was that companies started to make advertisements that looked like the fake ones, and it was even more difficult to tell which advertisements were real and which were parodies: “[...] the sponsors had turned the anti-commercials’ joke around on SNL and were *using* it, using the joke to manipulate the very same audience the parodies had made fun of them for manipulating in the first place.” (Wallace 1997, 189). So the audience was doubly tricked, first because *Saturday Night Live* was showing anti-advertisements and people thought they were real, and then because real advertisements started to look fake. Once again, the line between the real and the fake is blurry, but this time the real is never real because we are talking about the advertising world, which is in itself fake.

Once Edilyn is in the television show and she is already being interviewed by Letterman, he seems to be very interested on the fact that she, being a successful actress as she is, has decided to appear on an advertisement. He cannot mention the brand of the advertisement because that would be an advertisement too. We can say that to mention the name of a brand on a television show which is being emitted on *prime time*⁶ can have two consequences: One is that people could discover the brand and buy the products of that brand as if they had watched a normal advertisement, and the other one is that the television show would be publicizing that brand for free, without having any kind of reward for it, and that is not what the television channel (or Letterman in this case) wants.

Going back to Letterman’s intentions, he wants to know why she has appeared on the advertisement. He guesses she might have done it because it was very well paid. He thinks that acting in an advertisement when she already was a successful actress may hurt her career: “[...] you didn’t think the weiner-commercial thing would hurt your career, is the explanation.” (Wallace 1997, 195). Television advertisements at this point are not as valued as television shows, but as Wallace says in his article when he quotes an expert on mass media, later on advertisements will become as entertaining as television shows or movies (Wallace 1993, 177). So we could say that Letterman’s commentary there could be Wallace’s attempt to make the reader see how advertising was seen during the late 1980s for someone who works in television and specifically for a channel whose money comes from advertising.

⁶ The period of time in which more people is watching television, between 8 pm and 11 pm.

Edilyn does not think that appearing on an advertisement could hurt her career at all, and defends that advertisements are very hard to do, they are like small pieces of art and require acting skills that not everyone has. Letterman keeps on saying that she must have got paid an enormous amount of money to do that type of advertisement being a famous actress, and here is where she finally shuts Letterman up by saying that she has actually done it for free, because she wanted to do it. We can say that, in this story, Letterman would represent the old views on advertising, when advertisements were mostly ignored, and Edilyn would represent the new view on advertising by which advertisements are more than they appear to be and start to be as appealing as any other thing that appears on television. This would be the view by which advertising is seen as another form of art, because Edilyn, as the person who has made the advertisement possible, knows the work and effort it requires.

4.2 “Mister Squishy”, from *Oblivion: Stories*

In this story set in 1995 the reader is introduced into the insides of a food company called *Mister Squishy*. This company is about to launch a new product, and the first thing we find in the story is the description of a focus group. A focus group is a technique commonly used for commercial purposes which consists on gathering a group of people, normally with similar characteristics, under certain rules that a facilitator will provide, and make those people discuss a product, an idea or anything related to the company. In the case of this story, there are more than one focus group with different people on them and different purposes, and they are gathered in the Reesemeyer Shannon Belt Advertising’s building to test *Felonies!*, the new *Mister Squishy* chocolate snack cake.

The first important thing we have to mention about the product is its name, “Felonies!”. By calling the snack like that, Wallace is playing with language and trying to portray a company that is playing with the costumers’ minds. “Felony” means “crime”, so it can be saying two different things: that the snack is so good and tastes so great that it is nearly sinful, and that a snack like that is forbidden for people who are health-conscious and it would be a crime for their bodies to consume it.

After a detailed description of the product, we see an explanation on how the test works. The facilitator of the first focus group is a man called Terry Schmidt, a statistical field researcher who works for the company. Apart from him and the people who are there voluntarily, there are also

some workers of the company and even some facilitators who are incognito within the group. They learn about the fabrication of the product and what is what they want to achieve with the test, and after that they have a turn for questions and answers. Then, they can try the product as much as they want to.

Schmidt, as a field researcher, knows that the results of the focus group are not that important in the end. The important results are in the minds of the clients when they buy the product, and he knows that the clients are not silly, and that an advertisement will not make them like the product immediately. “Advertising is not voodoo” (Wallace 2005, 17). What Wallace tells us about advertising and manipulation in his article is said from the point of view of someone who watches advertisements, but here the author introduces us into the mind of someone who works making advertisements. He studies the products and the consumers in order to make appealing campaigns, and he does not take people for granted, he knows not everyone will be absorbed by advertisements. Here we see that Wallace wants to make a point: he wants the reader to understand that not everyone acts or is influenced the same regarding advertising. On the other hand, although Schmidt says that about advertising and the clients, he says that “Some of TFG⁷ strategies could be extremely manipulative or even abusive in the name of data” (Wallace 2005, 18). The company manipulates the people of the focus groups so that the results are the ones they want to have, which makes this type of tests useless.

The action of the story does not stay inside the building in which the tests are being carried out. Outside there is a man climbing up a building, and there are people gathering on the floor to watch him as he climbs. The building belongs to a famous clothing brand, so people think it is a kind of “alive advertisement”, but there is nothing in him that tells us that that is his intention. We get to know a lot about the climber’s clothes and the objects he carries with him while climbing, and the most intriguing object is something that looks like a gun. Apart from the great amount of people who are observing him from the floor, some police cars and helicopters start to surround the area since the climber is apparently carrying some type of gun with him and people are afraid that he starts shooting at them. At a given moment, the climber starts activating some buttons and his clothes start to inflate. We do not get to know what happens with the climber, but according to the way he looks once his clothes are inflated we could interpret that the climber is Mister Squishy, the image of the company which had been previously described as “a plump and childlike cartoon face

⁷ The Focus Group. Wallace tends to use a lot of initials throughout this story.

of indeterminate ethnicity with its eyes squeezed partly shut in an expression that somehow connoted delight, satiation, and rapacious desire all at the same time” (Wallace 2005, 4).

Meanwhile, inside the building the test goes on, and we are told some of the reflections that Schmidt has had during his years working as a researcher. He says that companies that distributed their products on a regional or national level depended not only on the individual consumers but also on the groups of individual consumers (Wallace 2005, 22). This reminds us of something that Wallace says in his article about the lonely, individual people watching television on their own who were part of the group of lonely individuals who watched television on their own and they did not even know they were part of a group. They are a group, but they are individuals. As it happens in the majority of the groups, people influence each other, so we can say that if someone buys a product and that someone likes it and recommends it to another someone and so on, that would be more interesting for the company creator of the product than aiming such product to a homogeneous group of people that will not influence each other because they are already similar.

In the story we can see an example of this influence. Teenagers are influenced by fashion, music and all they see around them: “And if you wondered why your kid was wearing them of course the majority of the answer was simply that other kids were wearing them” (Wallace 2005, 23). Schmidt says that this influence (which he calls Metastatic Consumption Pattern, or MCP) is stronger than advertising, which normally was the trigger and fuel of this type of movements. If a product was already very famous without advertisements, companies that wanted to make advertisements of such product would make them for much less money. But in the case of the story, the product’s ideal consumers are not teenagers but adults between 18 and 39 years of age, so this pattern in the case of this age group is not that common, and we could say that normally, an adult who buys a product like a chocolate snack will not influence another adult into buying it.

Later in the story we can see some more information about those MCPs, which are also called “Antitrends” or “Shadow Markets” (Wallace 2005, 35) because it is a phenomenon that goes on a parallel line in regard to the trend of the moment. We could say that a product like *Felonies!* would be an antitrend of healthy products, because it is not healthy, but healthy people can buy it. The world of these “unhealthy” products, as well as the world of the healthy ones, is full of conflicts. People that consume unhealthy products are constantly reminded that they should not consume them (television advertisements remind them of that), so they start consuming healthy products. Then, when they consume those products that are aimed to healthy people, advertisements again

tell them that they should enjoy other type of products too, because a healthy life without pleasures – without *Felonies!*, for example- is boring. We can come to the conclusion that people are like sheep in a herd, they do what others (advertising in many cases) tell them to do. This influence that advertising has on people not only has to do with attitudes but also with purchases, which is the most important aim of advertising: they are made to make people buy things.

As a conclusion of the analysis of both short stories we can say that, in the case of the first one, advertising is seen, on the one hand, as something almost pejorative, something that is not taken seriously and that can even hurt the career of an actress that has been successful, and on the other hand, as something positive, something that can enrich the career of an actress that has decided to work on that; while in the second story we see it is crucial for the future of the brands and the companies and it is not taken for granted at all. We could say that the general feeling we get from these stories about advertising is pretty positive. We have to take into account that the first short story belongs to a collection of texts that was published in 1989, while the second one belongs to a collection of texts published in 2004 but is set in 1995, so although it is not a significant lapse of time, when we talk about technology and mass media a few years can mean a lot of changes regarding the opinion that people have about it and the uses they have, and this may be an example of those changes.

5. PRESS

In this third and last section of the dissertation we will talk about another important mass medium: the printed press. The printed press during the last years of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century started to be on decay because of the numerous technological advances that started to appear. Among all those advances, the most important one was the Internet, which supposed a way of keeping people updated about events, discoveries and anything they could imagine without the necessity of buying physical newspapers or magazines anymore. However, although the printed press was and still is nowadays on decay, it is still consumed and read by millions of people, and it is still an important medium.

5.1 “The Suffering Channel”, from *Oblivion: Stories*

We previously mentioned this short story when we talked about television⁸, and now we are going to see what it tells us about the press. The story is set in the mid-late summer of 2001, and the protagonist is Skip Atwater, a journalist that works as an editor for *Style* magazine. Atwater is one of the salarymen⁹ in charge of a section of the magazine called “What in the World”, and he is trying to convince everyone in the magazine to let him publish an article about a couple, the Moltkes, because the man has a gift: he is capable of defecating sculptures, real works of art, without manipulating them. Atwater is aware that it can be a controversial article to publish, but he is sure that it is going to be a success.

Atwater defends that the article would be about art, not about excrements, but the associate editor thinks that a magazine like *Style* could never include an article of that type because people, and not only *Style* readers, think it is disgusting, and also because it does not fit in the publication at all: “Not even to mention the high percentage of fall ad pages that are food or beauty based” (Wallace 2005, 244). We have already talked about advertising in television, but before television, advertising appeared on newspapers and magazines too. In this case what we see is that an article about excrements (or pieces or art made of excrements, but excrements anyway) cannot be included in a magazine in which it would be surrounded by advertisements of beauty products

⁸ See chapter three, section 3.2.

⁹ Originally Japanese term used to designate low-rank executives who work for big companies.

and food, because that way advertisements would not have any positive effect on the readers, and that would be bad for the brands. Brands pay the magazines to appear on them so that people know about them, so if a brand suffers the negative effects of being advertised in a magazine that talks about feces, it will not want to appear in that magazine anymore, causing it important economic losses. So as we can see, what the associate editor defends goes beyond the maintenance of the aesthetics of the magazine.

On the other hand, Atwater defends that, although it is not a pleasant topic, everyone has experiences regarding it, and at some point of their lives everyone has talked about it openly, so we could say that an article like that would not cause an effect of utter repulsion towards the magazine. What Atwater defends is that sometimes people like to read about things that are familiar to them rather than read about things that are out of their knowledge, even if those things are not pleasant, although in the case of this specific topic we can say that, although not pleasant, the article would be funny and even interesting to read. This is what Wallace, using the voice of Atwater, calls “the transfiguration of disgust”: “My point is that the whole embarrassment and distaste of the issue is the point, if it’s done right. The transfiguration of disgust. [...] The triumph of creative achievement in even the unlikeliest places” (Wallace 2005, 245).

Atwater finally arranges an interview with the couple, and from the first moment that the Moltkes are presented, we see that they are very particular. We have Brint, the shy husband and artist, and Amber, the extroverted wife. The first thing that Atwater wants to know is how the artist does what he does. Atwater has a recorder to record the interview, but he is constantly taking notes in a notebook: “He was, as a matter of professional persona, old school and low tech. Today’s was a very different journalistic era” (Wallace 2005, 253). In this passage we can see what we have said in the introduction of this chapter. The story is set in 2001, and journalism was adapting to the new technologies, especially computers and the Internet, but for journalists who had been working for years it was difficult to adapt to those new technologies.

The first part of the interview is mostly the wife asking questions to the journalist and he answering them and not the other way around. Amber seems to be very interested in how the article is going to be once it is published, so the impression we get is that Amber is something like her husband’s manager, the one who wants to make him famous (which would make her famous too), and that the artist does not want to make a huge show of what he does (he had exposed his sculptures in some fairs before, but nothing apart from that). The second part of the interview finally

contains the testimony of the artist, but still, it seems like the one who directs and decides everything about the artist is the wife. In fact, she tells Atwater off the record information about Brit's life.

Atwater says that once the article is out, everyone will know about it, and Amber starts daydreaming with the idea of being on television and on other magazines around the world, and even with the idea of opening an art gallery and maybe selling the sculptures for huge amounts of money. Here is where we clearly see that the wife has other intentions, and that for her all of this is just a way of making easy money with the help of mass media. Atwater feels like Amber is using him as a way of reaching that goal that she has. The Moltkes live in a tiny village in Indiana, and Atwater lives in New York city, so we could say that Amber here is considering the idea that all the people that live in big cities and have jobs in big companies are connected by their way of thinking. Amber does not think that Atwater is going to consider strange the idea of getting money from something that is not hers because she thinks that is something pretty much common between this type of people.

As we have said earlier in this chapter, Amber sees her husband's gift as a business, and she sees this as an opportunity for her to be famous.

She'd thought on the whole business long and hard [...] Mrs. Moltke said how she'd thought about it and realized that most people didn't even get such a chance, and that this here was hers, and Brint's. To somehow stand out. To distinguish themselves from the great huge faceless mass of folks that watched the folks that did stand out. On the TV and in venues like *Style*. (Wallace 2005, 283).

In this extract we can see how Amber is using her husband to be somehow known by everyone when she says that this was her chance, and Brint's, to stand out. She positions herself first when she is not the one that has a gift, and she says this is her chance, and then her husband's chance too. We can also see the importance of mass media in order to reach that dream of standing out. If you do not appear on television or in a magazine, you are nothing. Amber wants to be seen by the "huge faceless mass of folks" that consume television and press.

[...] what Amber Moltke was confiding seemed to Atwater very close to the core of the American experience he wanted to capture in his journalism. [...] The paradoxical intercourse of audience and celebrity. The suppressed awareness that the whole reason ordinary people found celebrity fascinating was that they were not, themselves, celebrities. [...] The conflict between the subjective centrality of our own lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance. Atwater knew [...] that this was the single great informing conflict of the

American psyche. [...] It was the feeling that celebrities were your intimate friends, coupled with the inchoate awareness that untold millions of people felt the same way – and that celebrities themselves did not. Atwater had had contact with a certain number of celebrities [...] and they were not, in his experience, very friendly or considerate people. Which made sense when one considered that celebrities were not actually functioning as real people at all, but as something more like symbols of themselves. (Wallace 2005, 284-285).

In this passage we can see what Wallace said in his article about how the audience sees people that appear on television once they have been seeing them constantly. They feel as if celebrities were their close friends, they admire them, and they know that this feeling is shared by millions and millions of people around the world, but they also know that celebrities do not feel the same way, and that they are not really how they seem to be on television, and yet they do not change the way they feel towards them. Celebrities keep the audience in company, those people who are lonely feel less lonely, and those who are not lonely just share some time with them. Amber Moltke is one of those people. She has been having celebrities as friends for a long time and wants to be on the other side. She has been fascinated by celebrities long enough and now she wants to be a celebrity too, she wants to be seen and admired by the audience. She wants to become a symbol of herself.

Style magazine belongs to a group of magazines of the same type which is called BSG, initials that stand for Big Soft Glossy (Wallace 2005, 296). The contents of BSG magazines include “celebrity profiles, entertainment news, hot trends, and human interest, with human interest representing a gamut in which the occasional freakshow item had a niche” (Wallace 2005, 298). BSG magazines can be confused with tabloids because of their contents, but not because of their target readers. Readers of BSG magazines are interested in curious yet true and believable stories, while readers of tabloids do not care about the credibility of the contents, they are interested in the morbidity of the contents. Since *Style* magazine is a BSG magazine, Atwater now tells the artist that they will need to prove somehow that what he does happens the way he says so that the article is credible and readers do not consider the magazine a tabloid.

At the end of the story the author tells us that finally, Amber and Brit got to appear on television. In chapter three, when we discussed this short story, we talked about The Suffering Channel, a television channel that showed disgusting images of people in different situations. Among those images, the channel decided to show some of Amber and mostly Brint while Brint was expelling his pieces of art. The article of the magazine was also going to be published after all the controversy and the people who were against it, but at the beginning of the analysis we said that

the story is set in the mid-late summer of 2001, and throughout the story we can see several times that *Style* magazine offices are placed in one of the World Trade Center towers, so although we do not get to know it, we can suppose that the September issue of *Style* magazine in which the article was going to appear was never released, and that Amber's desire of being famous never came true after all. This is a good example of that blending of reality and fiction which is very characteristic of postmodernist literature. Wallace is introducing a real historical event like the 9/11 terrorist attack, and he is blending it with the publication of a fictional article in a fictional magazine.

The 9/11 terrorist attack was one of the most shocking events in the American history and in the history of the world. David Foster Wallace wrote an article for the October 2001 *Rolling Stone* magazine issue titled "9/11: The View from The Midwest"¹⁰ in which he expressed what he felt that day and what he observed in the rest of the people. After reading that article we could say that the fact that Wallace did not mention the attacks in the story in an explicit way was simply because the events were not too far away in time (they had happened just three years before the publication of the collection), and the American society was still hurt and sensible. Just by mentioning where the *Style* magazine offices were and the date in which the issue of the magazine should have been published is enough to let the reader know what is going to happen, Wallace had no need to be explicit.

As a conclusion after analyzing this short story we could say that, first of all, absurdity and irony are the most important elements of the text, and they are all around the story from the beginning: a man who defecates pieces of art, pieces of art made of human excrements, which make us believe that the material of the piece of art shadows the actual piece of art no matter its value and the effort put on creating it; a journalist obsessed with publishing an article about the artist in a magazine that would never publish an article involving the nature of the artworks, a woman who is outside the canon of beauty according to the supposed norms imposed by the society and who wants to appear on television and press and be famous, and everything happening around an article that eventually will not see the light because of very tragic reasons. We can also consider that in this

¹⁰ In this article Wallace explains that he watched the attacks on his neighbor's television surrounded by other people after hearing about them on the radio. He talks about how old people seemed to be calmer than young people because the young ones had already seen things like that in movies and on the internet, and he compares this to the postmodernist complaint that everything has already been done. He also mentions that everyone in the US became much more patriotic after the attacks and everyone put flags on their front doors and windows. He asked some people about that and most of them said that it was to show unity and strength, and to show that the terrorists had messed with the wrong people.

story, Wallace is mocking BSG magazines by portraying a BSG magazine that is going to publish a very detailed article about something that a magazine of that type would never publish. This part of the press that we can see in the story is not very serious or formal, but it is the one that interests most of the people: The one with celebrities, eccentric stories and, to sum up, content which may be pointless but highly entertaining.

CONCLUSIONS

For this dissertation we selected some short stories by David Foster Wallace in which three of the most important mass media, television, advertising and press, are the main protagonists, and after analyzing them we can say that Wallace presents the three media as related at some points: television makes money from advertising, advertising needs television and press to be seen, and the three of them have effects on people depending on the side they are in. We can notice some differences between the representation of the mass media in the short stories published in Wallace's first collection and the ones published in his last one. In the case of the first ones we can see how the author dismantles the media and the people that work for it, letting us see its more frivolous and carefree side; while in the second ones we see a more serious and pessimistic side of the issue, and they show us the real effects that mass media can have not only on their consumers but also on their producers. It is also noticeable that many of the ideas that Wallace presents in his article are also present in both the stories he wrote before and after its publication. The author was interested in the world of mass media regarding its relationship with culture and society, and this interest is very clear if we take a look at his fiction, not only the stories that we have analyzed, which are good examples, but also the rest of his literature. The topic is almost everywhere.

We have also seen that postmodernist literature and mass media are closely related, not only because the mass media frequently appear in the stories but also because they share certain characteristics, and we can say that the disruption of the chronology, the difficulties in the distinction between reality and fiction and the use of irony are the most important and present ones. The inclusion of the mass media in literature is, in general, something common and important in contemporary literature, but the relationship between mass media and literature does not stop there. Television, advertising and press are very powerful tools by which literature can be spread and reached by anyone in the world, so not only the mass media appear in literature, but also literature appears in the mass media.

David Foster Wallace's life (and specially death) may sometimes shade the figure of Wallace as a writer, but it is doubtlessly because of his writings, his style and his ideas that he is considered one of the greatest, most praised, most read and most important writers of the last decades.

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