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Disability as Narrative Prosthesis (The Lin/Wallace
Connection)**

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Post-postmodernist Aesthetics of Irrelevance: Textual Disability as Narrative Prosthesis (The Lin/Wallace Connection)

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Abstract:

The present article explores Tao Lin's Alt Lit novel *Taipei* (2013) as a hallmark in a post-postmodernist aesthetic continuum that was first theorized by David Foster Wallace in "E Unibus Pluram" (1993), and later instantiated in *Infinite Jest* (1996). In both novels, the exhaustion of postmodernist aesthetics envisioned by Wallace is depicted through a dystopian representation of the prosthetic use of analogical and digital media in the construction of human subjectivity inasmuch as it precludes sincere and meaningful connection with others. In both Wallace's early vision of post-postmodernism and Lin's later Alt Lit remediation of Wallace's proposal, their prosthetically enhanced texts rely heavily on the technologically induced disability of their characters. Drug and technology abuse, self-conscious narcissism, and existential irrelevance are matched by an exposure of human vulnerability *to* and *through* media that reinstates the narrative purposefulness, relevance and direction of these forms of post-postmodernist aesthetics that Wallace envisioned beyond the exhaustion of postmodernism. In both cases, however, the exposure or transparency of media itself is questioned as a calculated risk interfering with (Wallace) and/or enabling (Lin) this aesthetic project, signalling a change between the second and third digital generations of posts-postmodernist writers.

Keywords: Post-Postmodernism, Tao Lin, Cyber-consciousness

Such is the fame of the dumb man's Titanic strength.

Turgenev, "Mumu"

But the moment the mind of the speaker becomes cold, that moment every such expression becomes untrue in the external facts. And there is no greater baseness in literature than the habit of using these metaphorical expressions in cool blood.

Ruskin, *Modern Painters*

(Introduction) Post-Postmodernist Cyber-Consciousness

In February 2014, shortly after the publication of *Taipei* (June 2013) and probably as part of his novel's hype, graphic artist and (mostly) internet poet and novel writer Tao Lin, started a live-tweeting project for his "first complete reading (potentially) of *Infinite Jest*" (1996), an encyclopedic novel that took David Foster Wallace about six years to complete. In December 2015, after about 50 tweets over (roughly) two years, Lin posted his last tweet at @taoinfinitejest: "Making negative progress on Infinite Jest because I've long *forgotten* most of what I've read & my *interest*¹ level has decreased as well." Considering Lin's histrionic character and his pervasive use of performative literary strategies, one might wonder if this last tweet was not—also—his own intertextual contribution to the title of Wallace's novel, as well as a critical pointer for future academic approaches to *Taipei*.

Since Lin claimed this project was his first—though only potentially—"complete" reading of *Infinite Jest*, it could be assumed that there were previous unsuccessful attempts to read it in the past, and that he was well—though maybe partially—acquainted with Wallace's vast narrative while he

was composing *Taipei* (if only because it is explicitly mentioned in page 159 of Lin's novel). When briefly describing Lin's tweet project in the *Electric Lit's* news section (2014), Connor Saporoff Ferguson notices how Lin's "writing does contain a certain literary thread that can be traced back to Wallace" and imagines Lin as the future impersonation of Wallace's 1993 definition of a literary rebel after postmodernism: "willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'How banal'" (Wallace, *E Unibus Pluram* 1993: 193). Of a similar opinion is Robert L. McLaughlin, who identifies Wallace as a precursor of postmillennial literary anxieties that seem to be turning towards realism (2013, 289) and the decline of irony after its reification by the entertainment industry (2008: 113). In 2015, Brian Willems also quoted Wallace when describing Lin's attempt "to back away from ironic watching" and "endorse single-entendre values" (Wallace, *E Unibus Pluram* 1993) as post-postmodernist.

Recently, Aislinn Clare McDougall has also identified Lin's narrative as an instance of what is known as "New Sincerity" in contemporary literature, a post-postmodern return to sentimentality, realism and credulity that is (again) traced back to "E Unibus Pluram" and often related to "Alt lit," or alternative literature.² Although Lin is the alleged leader of Alt lit in the USA (Morrell 2014, Krmpotic 2014: 35), one would hesitate to describe *Taipei* as a novel displaying typical Alt lit stylistic features related to the "cult of the self (*culto del yo*)" (Krmpotic 2014: 35) such as emotional exhibitionism, teenage sincerity and honesty in the expression of affection (Morrell 2014, Krmpotic 2014: 36), but it certainly thematizes the effects that human overexposure to and through the alleged transparency of digital media has on the experience and communicability of emotion.

Yet the cult of the self is central to Lin's novel in a way that is also typical of Alt lit; the narcissistic, pointless, over-exploration of the literary self; the search for instant gratification (Morrell 2014) in the form of the anesthetic effect of drugs, entertainment and connection; the weariness caused

by the illusion of instantaneous satisfaction, and a certain sense of vital emptiness and loneliness (Krmptic 2014: 35-36). In fact, aesthetic positions typical of Alt lit such as narcissistic self-referentiality and a certain pointlessness have been perceived as engaging with—rather than discontinuing from—postmodernist literary practices (Morrell 2014).

In 1993, Wallace already envisioned that after decades of “high-dose spectation,” mass media would develop “an Audience whose attention span and appetite for complexity” (Wallace, E Unibus Pluram 1993: 65) would *naturally* wither—which would obviously explain the (intended?) failure of Lin’s twitter project. It would then *naturally* follow that the emotional exhibitionism of Alt lit would have a lot to do with a post-postmodern commodification of attention that needs to trade on sensationalizing the sincere exposure of one’s personal intimacies. *Ironically*, however, this would have to be done by Alt lit authors carefully staging the sincere pose as a heavily aestheticized ideal, and by self-consciously giving “a vision of themselves as witnesses” (Wallace, E Unibus Pluram 1993, 24) in order to keep their readers’ disbelief sincerely suspended. The tragicomic dimension of this aesthetic approach in existentialist terms is that for the still Neo-Baroque,³ self-conscious subjectivity of Alt lit authors, there is no clearly telling the subject from the pose.

After Wallace, the post-postmodern was described by McLaughlin in 2013 as “as retreat, revision, and *reiteration*”⁴ of postmodernist concerns regarding “the operations of power [and] the possibilities for being human within an alienating culture” (2013: 294). Indeed, following the identity-based criticism of the later twentieth century, the post-postmodern conception of the human presupposes an ironic self-awareness of its already posthuman nature as a condition for its sincerity. Recently Cory M. Hudson has endorsed this claim about Wallace’s fiction, the intimacy and sincerity of which he presents as a metafictional pose operating through the intended dissimilarities Wallace establishes between his fictional “Wallaces” and himself (2018).

However, in the acknowledgement of the self-referential nature of representation that post-postmodernism inherits from postmodernity, Robert McLaughlin sees “an impulse to break through to a reality outside language” (2013, 215-216) that Mary K.Holland (2018), Marshall Boswell and Lee Konstantinou agree to find in Wallace’s fiction (in Hudson 2018). In *Infinite Jest*, communication technologies and entertainment industries are unfailingly depicted as interfering with its characters’ representation of their true selves to others by imposing on them an external focalization that makes them too self-conscious to be honest. The media through which they present themselves imports a distance from rather than true mirror to, their sincere thoughts and feelings. In the novel, Wallace alternates first-person and third-person omniscient focalization to express his characters’ concern for their self-image as perceived by others, and how this affects the way they want to present themselves to others. The distance established between this internal and external focalization allows readers to distinguish their public poses from their true selves, which are depicted as especially vulnerable due to their use of and exposure to and through such technologies.

(Materials and Methods)

Between Wallace’s visionary depiction of post-postmodernist anxieties regarding the effects that communication technologies and entertainment industries had on the experience and communicability of human emotion in the last decade of the twentieth century and Lin’s post-millennial enactment of Wallace’s vision, a technological development in digital media has altered human experiencing of emotions together with the means to communicate them. Since the development of Web 2.0 (social networks) in the new millennium, what Piret Viires has called the “Third Digital Generation” (3DG) of writers (2017) of the Internet Age play with the spatial and temporal immediacy of digital media to convey simultaneously “ironic and sincere, cynical and naïve, accurate and false” accounts of themselves (Abramson 2014).

In 2019, Aislinn Clare McDougall coined the term “cyber-consciousness” to refer to “a post-postmodern narrative mode that embodies the intermediation between human consciousness and digital machinery in fictional narrative” (2) that she identifies with Lin’s main character in *Taipei*. In fact, according to McDougall’s definition, what makes cyber-consciousness a specific case of post-postmodernist literature, is the extensive use of analogies exploiting the lexical field of diverse digital technologies. In the same line, Manovich has described Alt lit as digital transcoding, or the substitution of “cultural categories or concepts [...] on the level of meaning and/or language, by new ones that derive from the computer ontology, epistemology and pragmatics” (in Boerrigter 28-29). Cyber-consciousness is not essentially different from any other self-conscious use of technological prostheses in the configuration of human subjectivity, but there is a transparency, a temporal and spatial immediacy to it, an excessive dimension of scope and a reciprocity in digital media that make them specially suitable for the intended sincerity or sense of unmediatedness that the new imagist (Wallace 1993, 173) post-postmodernist aesthetics of the authentic envisioned by Wallace would intend to convey.

It is in this sense that the “cyber”-consciousness could be considered the epitome of self-consciously “sincere” post-postmodernist subjectivity, since unlike the analogical opaqueness of television, the transparency and immediacy of digital media can provide direct, allegedly unmediated access to human thoughts and emotions. However, in 2015, Byung-Chul Han described the shameless exhibition of intimacy in contemporary social media as the commodification of the human countenance, the transparency of which reduces Otherness to Narcissism: “Lack of distance is not proximity,” he claims, “If anything, it destroys it” (14). Similarly, digital acceleration deprives both narratives and individuals of a sense of direction (Han 2015, 29-30) in human experience. It thus follows that the cyber-conscious literary rebel of a post-postmodernist Alt lit aesthetics can

give a sincere, naïve and accurate account of his feelings while retaining a certain ironic or even cynical distance that has a sense of falseness in it.

It might then be argued that *Taipei* can be seen as an Alt lit transcoding of Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. With a plot completely subservient to the cult of the self that the novel develops through its protagonist, *Taipei* presents a succession of animated self-portraits of its main character Paul in different (though oddly similar) situations and from different perspectives that are (nonetheless) all Paul's and designed by Paul to be consumed by (mostly) Paul. Although the narrative voice of the novel is a third-person omniscient one, its pervasive use of indirect free style basically deprives readers from perspectives of Paul other than Paul's (and yet strictly speaking, still external to him).⁵ However, thanks to Paul's compulsive use of the diverse digital devices he employs to portray himself, readers can access allegedly transparent, digitally-mediated pictures of Paul in diverse situations that he wishes to see himself into as well as be seen by others. Typically,

[Paul] went with Erin to her apartment ... where, using iMovie on Erin's MacBook, they recorded themselves on MDMA answering questions each had prepared for the other, then continued recording, sitting on Erin's bed, as they showed each other things on the internet, wanting to later be able to see how they behaved in MDMA (2013: 129).

McDougall argues that this "cyber-consciousness," that she identifies in *Taipei* as paradigmatic, "emerges as the post-postmodern product of the composting of expired, modern [sincerity, stream of consciousness and flâneurie] and postmodern [hyperreality and self-parody] literary tenets within a twenty-first century digital context" (McDougall 2019: 2).

In Wallace's self-referential concern for a reconnection with the real and Lin's realistic depiction of cyber-consciousness, the technological and chemical prosthesis their characters use to

experience and project enhanced images of themselves in the real or virtual worlds, have the paradoxical effect of producing and exposing their human vulnerabilities. Although technologically induced and spectacularized, their narcissistic addictions, their social insecurities, their emotional bluntness and existential emptiness, are *authentic*. In Wallace's view, it is the vicarious experience of their suffering "what we come to art for" in order to nourishing our existential loneliness in the real world (McCaffery 1993, 127). And yet the (self-consciously and intentionally) construed nature of these vulnerabilities and the fact that they are exploited by characters and narrative voice alike as means of entertainment, establish a certain ironic distance from this authenticity.

In this sense, Mitchell and Snyder's definition of "narrative prosthesis" in 2000 becomes useful to determine the narrative function of a disabled subjectivity and aesthetics within post-postmodernism in general and Alt lit in particular. To Mitchell and Snyder, narrative prosthesis is a narratological device that instrumentalizes the representation of disability at the expense of people who actually experience disability in their lives. By heavily relying on the spectacularization of this disability (Garland-Thompson 2009: 66, 68), narrative prosthesis operates as a "metaphorical signifier of social and individual collapse" that triggers a "primary impetus" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 47), a sort of or "textual obstacle that causes the literary operation of open-endedness to close down" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000: 50). It is not difficult to see how to a post-postmodernist audience with a withered attention span for the exhausted irony that Wallace envisioned in the early 1990s, the spectacularization of a disability they can experience as authentic themselves would have a fresh appeal. In this context, narrative prosthesis can be monetized in terms of increased pathos by engaging more directly with emotion (rather than with reason-based

irony), and would provide narrative interest out of its exhaustion. It is not difficult to see the irony in it either, though.

(Results) The Spectacular Honesty of Post-Postmodern Vulnerability

When he theorized about post-postmodernism in “E Unibus Pluram” in 1993, David Foster Wallace was already immersed in the composition of *Infinite Jest*, where he was exploring the consequences and conditions of what seems to be one of the aesthetic targets of postmodernism: the construction of a self-conscious text engaged with a sort of enhanced aesthetic experience that Wallace’s novel dystopically pictures as mere immanent entertainment. Marshall Boswell labels the novel as a “diagnosis and critique” (Boswell 2003: 119) of a societal narcissistic search for pleasure, mainly through vapid and jaded entertainment. On examining the effects of this search, characters seemingly become externally fabricated figurants as an indicator of the reiterative overexposure to entertainment. Indeed, Mary K. Holland’s observes technology and the mediated world as “key catalyst[s]” (2006: 228) of “this pathological recursivity” (2006: 233) that disables Wallace’s characters rather than enhance their experience of pleasure.

One of the means used by Wallace to expose the direction that a media-conscious and media-dependent subjectivity is heading to in *Infinite Jest* involves the depiction of characters who construct their “screen-conscious” identity as they engage with entertainment technologies (films, TV programs, games) the use of which, while supposedly designed to enhance their lived experience, end up limiting their self-determination by means of narrative interpellation. The result is that instead of controlling their own self-conscious subjectivities, they end up surrendering their self-determining will to the ready-made identity patterns they prosthetically incorporate into their subjectivity in order to enhance it. In doing so, they become consumer products for others to watch and are significantly depicted as disabled or deformed by their exposure to entertainment

technologies while also presenting the same kind of disabilities in the form of anxieties and insecurities as Lin's transcoded protagonist will exhibit two decades later.

Because they are required to meet the entertainment demands of the audience of the "Show," the residents of the Enfield Tennis Academy (E.T.A.) undergo a 7-day exhausting drilling training that is supposed to enhance their performance as well as their physical appearance. After the training though, and as a result of their public overexposure as "freak-show performer(s)" (Wallace, *Infinite Jest* 1996, 66) for the entertainment industry, Wallace will describe the players' resulting vulnerability as machine-like, assembled, or deformed (Wallace 1996: 118, 100, 636). Still, the ETA players are not only disabled as consumer *products* of the entertainment industry. As they seek release from this insidious media overexposure, the ETA players engage in recreational activities that will further disable them by developing addictions to drugs and technology. Top-rank tennis player Hal Incandenza fails to show a socially adequate emotional response as a result of his use of and overexposure to the entertainment industry. When janitor Kenkle comments on Hal's failure to show empathy towards Ortho Stice's accident, Hall unsuccessfully strives to adjust his facial expression to respond to Kenkle's demands:

'what may we ask is so amusing, then?' Kenkle asked ... 'why the hilarity?' to which Hal responds 'What hilarity?' Kenkle looked from [Hal] to Brandt to [Hal]. 'What hilarity he says. Your face is a hilarity-face ... At first it merely looked *a*-mused. Now it is open-ly *cach*-inated' [Hal then] consciously *composed*⁶ [his] face into something deadly-somber. 'How about now?' (Wallace 1996: 875).

Wallace's novel depicts Incandenza's emotional bluntness as a disability by having him attend "grief-therapy" (Wallace 254) and exploits it as narrative prosthesis in a self-reflective exercise of freak-show performance that reads as a metadiegetic pose. Incandenza's disability is accentuated

even more by his purported use of DMZ, a very potent hallucinogenic drug that significantly, makes him unable to speak his mind.

In Lin's Taipei, Paul's overexposure in social media makes him especially vulnerable in meatspace social situations, reaching high levels of anxiety, shame or nervousness that lead him to isolate himself from others, "commit[ting] to not speaking in almost all situations" (Lin 2013: 40), while also panicking if people unfollow him on Tweeter or defriend him on Facebook. In order to lessen the effects of this exposure, Paul spends long periods of time isolated in his room, and when he is forced to interact with others, his expression is typically described as neutral, blunt, or directly as expressionless; a stereotypical "socially dysfunctional" (Lin 2013: 122) character. But because Paul's description is focalized through Paul's stream of cyberconsciousness, it is impossible to discern if Paul's expressionlessness and social dysfunction are defense mechanisms against overexposure or whether they have already become actual disabilities he is expos(t)uring to make himself more appealing and less boring to others as a human being and as an authorial persona. This is so to an extent that Stephanie Hsu has related Lin's style in general and Paul's characterization in particular (anti-social tendencies, alienation, non-communicative vocalization, highly original or nonsensical speech) to autistic behavior (2016: 203).⁷

In order to compensate for the anxiety and boredom caused by continuously having to calculate the nuances of his usual "stance of postmodern irony towards life" (Willems 2015: 230), Paul would ingest a series of drugs that would palliate the tension existing between his expressionlessness and sustained attention span.

To determine what amount of what drugs—MDMA, LSD, any benzodiazepine, amphetamine, opiate—he should ingest, on what days, to minimize anxiety and *boredom* for himself *and others*,⁸ he'd edited a seven-page itinerary ... He'd printed a final draft ... that said he should

ingest something—specified, in most instances, by type and amount—before twenty-two of his twenty-five events.(93)

Although Hsu has positively considered drug use and autistic behavior in Lin's character an experiment in autistic jouissance, a non-separation between the subject and the object (2016: 203) that is an authentic experience of the self because it is not mediated by the Symbolic Other (2016: 200); Hsu and Willems agree in interpreting the effect that drugs have on Paul from a pharmacological perspective.⁹ If this were so, the Paul exposed by the novel while on drugs would be a socially functional one, one who would express his true emotions uninhibitedly, whose stress about being under continuous public scrutiny would be lessened, or one who would not need to use drugs when unexposed or alone.

But the Paul in the novel uses drugs indiscriminately, rationalizing their use to others as much as to himself like any addict who has trouble acknowledging his addiction would (Lin 2013: 113), and encumbering his social interactions. Also, contrary to Hsu's argument, Paul's drug intake is too self-conscious to be "authentic" and not meant to escape attention at all, but rather the opposite. Against Willems' opinion, Paul's drug abuse does not diminish his anxiety at showing his vulnerabilities in public, but rather becomes the vulnerability that makes him socially anxious. As an example, after ingesting

... one and a half capsules of MDMA and two Ritalin and an energy drink [...] a cofounder of *Vice* [...who...] reacted to Paul's robot-like extroversion with ... confusion, which Paul tried to resolve by overpowering any possible awkwardness in what seemed to be intimidation ... which caused Paul, who felt he solely wanted to interact with mutual sincerity, to hesitate a little, which maybe the cofounder of *Vice* sensed as anxiety (Lin 2013: 112).

Autistic *jouissance* or drug-induced escapism are not, in Lin's novel, the authentic, immediate, post-ironic Sublime postured by Alt lit/New Sincerity and according to Hsu, arguably envied by ableist postmodernist interpellations (2016: 201). In fact, when describing Paul's perceptions and behavior while on drugs, the novel employs specific disability-related lexicon, such as "inability," "lethargically," "collapsing," "catatonically," "handicapped," or "impaired" (Lin 2013: 99-101).

Yet the possibility that the novel's pressing concern with the disabling effects of addiction might be a calculated narrative risk should not be ignored. If this were so, Paul might just as well be simply adding drug addiction to the possibly *spectaculable* vulnerabilities he can sensationally exploit for online exposure as a form of narrative prosthesis. The fact that drug abuse is part of Paul's cyber-consciously calculated pose, that through them, he can design the moods and intensity of mental awareness he wants not only to experience but to be perceived as experiencing in every occasion, does not make his "sincere" expos(t)ure the less dependent on them, nor him the less addicted to such drugs. In fact, it is impossible for readers to access drug/media-free Paul because the character has already always been disabled/reified by expos(t)ure and its further disabling effects for the sole purpose of monetizing his vulnerability as narrative prosthesis.

Characters in *Infinite Jest* become vulnerable sites due to their willing exposure to entertainment media, just as the novel itself becomes vulnerable to the pervasive sense of ennui that would make Lin unable to finish it. The vulnerability resulting from the overuse of and overexposure to entertainment technologies depicts human subjectivity as disabled to a level of existential irrelevance that, also in Lin's novel, culminates in death. After the progressive disablement of physiological functions, death is the apparently inescapable outcome of watching James Incandenza's *samizdat* movie "The Entertainment" or "Infinite Jest." As the results of the only existing study of what this lethal entertainment does to its viewers show, one subject's "mental

and spiritual energies abruptly declined to a point where even near-lethal voltages through the electrodes couldn't divert his attention from the Entertainment" (Wallace 1996: 549). Although it is the lethal voltages that actually kill its viewers—like the overdose that causes Paul's near-death experience in Lin's novel—, what makes them all vulnerable to the effects of drugs and technology is the existential irrelevance of their narcissistic demand of and surrender to entertainment in a mediated setting. Interestingly enough, when Steeply's father dies after the last episode of M*A*S*H— "a sort of entertainment" (Wallace 1996: 639) that slowly consumes him—, Wallace's narrative describes his death experience in terms that evoke the prosthetic nature of Paul's cyber-conscious self as "trapped in some sort of middle. Between two things" (Wallace 1996: 647), as partaking from the virtual as from the real. The dystopian picture of entertainment that Wallace conveys in his novel relies heavily on the hyper-real nature of an aesthetic experience that is prosthetically mediated by either drugs or technological devices the purpose of which is to merely enhance and continue entertainment for its own sake—a sort of infinite jest. Be it as producers or consumers of entertainment, the characters in Wallace's novel become subservient to and even disabled by forms of entertainment that virtualize and reify their subjective experience.

Yet the post-postmodernist aesthetics Wallace prefigured around the icon of television, only come to be fully realized for Alt lit through digital media. Lin's story seems to self-consciously want to become the autobiographical near-future dystopia Wallace imagined in his narrative.¹⁰ Like in Wallace's novel, a substantial portion of Lin's is dedicated to a detailed description of Paul as he engages in recreational video watching. Like Wallace's characters, Paul is also engaged in a pointless consumerism (in the form of drug and shoplifting addictions). But the references to Wallace as a self-reflective interpretive key of his novel or of his authorial persona as the self-conscious realization

of Wallace's description of the post-postmodernist author, are intertextually embedded in the novel so they cannot be possibly missed.

In an interview, Paul poses "as if" considering the interviewer's questions (Lin 2013: 120), while he rates the exposure risk of his fiction-writer face as "probably seeming genuine[e]" (Lin 2013: 120). That he is merely posturing as Wallace's description of fiction writers as people who tend "to be terribly self-conscious. Devoting lots of productive time to studying closely how people come across to them ... wondering nervously how they come across to other people" (Wallace 1997: 27) *must* become obvious to readers when in a book reading only a paragraph below, Paul will—otherwise pointlessly—ask "is David Foster Wallace really big in America?" (Lin 2013: 120). While "five or six people, ahead of him ... shifted a little in their seats" (Lin 2013: 120) to show their awkwardness at his apparently pointless question, readers—perhaps also sadly unaware of the trick—can comfortably install themselves in the ironic detachment allowed by his intertextual link, as they acknowledge Paul as the ridiculous victim of his own self-conscious posturing. In this sense, Simon Dedeo has argued that "the gestures many see as 'sincere' or 'childlike' in Lin's work, are in fact efforts to assume power by seeming to reject it," an attitude "that is not only posturing, and not only aware that it is posturing, but also smugly aware of its awareness of its posturing" (in Moore 2011).

But what strikes most of this baroque theatricalization, while also making Wallace's shadow denser in Lin's novel, is its utter pointlessness and irrelevance. The infinite jest of an art and a life spent in providing/obtaining immediate satisfaction through representations of simulated realities or hyper-realities (discursively, digitally or drug-induced) that become the actual center of human experience until the very experience of what means to be human cannot be distinguished from its prosthetic additions, has in Lin's novel—as much as in Wallace's—certain adverse effects.

Diéguez (2017) has used similar terms (purposelessness in life, absence of vital desire) to qualify the technologically enhanced transhuman of the new millennium: an otherwise enhanced¹¹ form of human existence that shares many features with the authorial personae and literary subjectivities depicted in post-postmodernist Alt Lit. In her analysis of *Infinite Jest*, Holland also establishes a similar relation between the technological promise of full satisfaction of human desires and a resulting pathological disaffection of pointless entertainment (2006, 228-229) that she intriguingly relates both to the “hip emptiness” of dehumanizing irony and “this need to release oneself into the pure need of the infant” (2006, 230).

So a few features already emerge from these considerations about Alt-lit cyber-consciousness in relation to post-postmodernist predicaments, and that are somehow connected to each other within the wider frame of the cult of the self. The most salient feature seems to be an exacerbated self-consciousness that is expressed inwardly as narcissism and outwardly as exhibitionism and that is possible thanks to the prosthetic use of digital technologies. Yet paradoxically enough, the production and consumption of digitally-induced, self-conscious images of oneself targeting self-empowerment through instantaneous self-gratification,¹² also has the side effects of overexposure to uncertainty, insecurity resulting from self-conscious vulnerability, a sense of existential irrelevance or pointlessness, and a certain vital emptiness.¹³ In narrative terms, this transhuman subjectivity might certainly be described by what Morrell would identify as “pointlessness” and Krmptotic as “vital emptiness” in Alt lit, what McDougall categorizes as the “expired, modernist” (randomness of the) stream of consciousness and flânerie in her definition of “cyber-consciousness,” or Willems recognizes as absolute hospitality towards the “unexpected” in Paul’s (and Lin’s) exposure to the transparency of digital media (2015). It is the pointlessness of mere entertainment as the aesthetic target of James Incandenza’s *samizdat* movie what makes it

lethal for its author and the movie's audience, and it is the self-satisfying cult of the self professed in Alt lit what makes Krmpotic diagnose it as vital emptiness.

If there is something that pervades the whole of Lin's novel apart from cultivating cyber-conscious Paul, this is certainly the total absence of purpose for both main character and narrative. It is not only that because he was a child or under the effect of drugs, Paul temporarily displays random behavior, but because he becomes estranged from the purpose of his own experiences and intentions:

... Paul stood in a corner and stared at his room without thinking anything or, he realized after a vague amount of time, moving his eyeballs. He sat on his yoga mat and stared at his Gmail account, remembering after a few minutes that he'd wanted to stand in a corner and look at his room ... around fifteen minutes later, Paul looked up from where he'd remained in his yoga mat, absently scrolling through ... Wikipedia (Lin 2013: 156).

Also, cyber-consciously aware of the digital, hyperreal component of the expos(t)ured self he identifies with, Paul ponders on the utter irrelevance of his life for the further enhanced intelligence he would actually be already an undifferentiated part of:

intuiting that, from the perspective of the computer at the end of everything, which he would be a part of and which would synthetically resemble an undifferentiated oneness, it didn't matter if he had never kissed a girl, was too anxious to communicate with his peers, had no friends, etc. (Lin 2013: 167)

Finally, it is Paul's awareness that his impossibility to distinguish not only the real from the hyper-real, but also life from death at the end of the novel, what reveals his existence as purposeless:

“oh my god ... I can't believe I OD'd” and failing to view his death—the horrible, inexcusable mistake of it—as interestingly absurd or blackly comic or anything ... with an eternity to practice ... he would only believe, as he once had, that he was alive. (Lin 2013: 245, 248)

As it describes Paul's inconsequential and irrelevant life, the episodes described in the novel are of no relevance or consequence for its plot, which also seems to follow a random direction as well as a seemingly pointless sense of repetition: one party after another, one dose after another, one girl after another, one novel after another, one year after another, one trip to Taipei after another: “Every act” Chang claims “from a subway trip to oral sex—is deadeningly deadpan,” which “makes its author a guinea pig and a victim” that Chang does not hesitate to qualify as “pathological.” It is irrelevance what lies behind Paul's stream-of-cyber-consciousness *flâneurie* and willing hospitality to the unexpected.¹⁴ It is as if the novel's reflexive (self-conscious) constructedness pressed on denying purpose or relevance in plot development in favor of a merely ludicrous aesthetic project such as Wallace's *Incandenza's*. Yet in Lin's novel, one hesitates whether there might be irony or tragedy in this.

Although one would agree with Chang in perceiving such pointlessness, purposelessness or randomness as disabling for character as much as for plot construction, randomness is actively sought as a signal of the authenticity or realism any self-conscious piece of fiction would seek as an act of mimesis. For an ex-pos(t)ure that cannot possibly claim any actuality beyond posturing, it is not the real, but the seemingly real what counts. In Lin's novel, it is the irrelevance of its infinite simulation—disabling Paul as character and Taipei's plot as narrative—what becomes the spectacular focus of readerly attention, and what becomes the ultimate narcissistic purpose of the novel.

As a disabled narrative depicting cyber-consciousness as disabled, Lin's text overexposes its vulnerability to “the ever-present threat of rejection” that Garland-Thompson has related to the

experience of disability (2009: 69). In order “to be granted fully human status by normates,” Garland-Thompson argues,

disabled people must ... use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve non-disabled people of their discomfort ... If however, disabled people pursue normalization too much, they risk denying limitations and pain for the comfort of others and may edge into self-betrayal associated with passing (2009: 69),

which as a disabled character, Paul certainly strives to do with his self-conscious posturing. It might be true that to a certain extent, Lin’s novel may “pass” as a postmodernist one; ironic-self detachment, intertextuality and metadiegesis being so obviously pervasive in his style. But the novel’s insistence on and exploitation of character and plot disability as cases for spectacular exposure rather points to their function as the calculated risk of a post-postmodernist narrative prosthesis.

A post-postmodernist narrative prosthesis would rely on the spectacularization of both ironic and post-ironic textual disability, operating metaphorical signifier of textual and authorial collapse. In terms close to Mitchell and Snyder’s definition of narrative prosthesis (2000, 50), this would trigger a primary impetus or textual obstacle that causes the literary operation of hospitable vulnerability to open-endedness to close down. To an audience whose attention span, like Lin’s, is too withered to care for or even believe in the political predicaments of postmodernism, it is only the boredom in infinite jest—the spectacle of its sickness—what may become truly entertaining. Narrative disability composted as narrative prosthesis can be monetized in terms of increased pathos by engaging more directly with emotion (rather than with reason-based irony), and would provide narrative interest out of its own over-exposed exhaustion. But most importantly, the instrumentalization of the disabled subjectivity/exhausted textuality of post-postmodernist

literature would involve interpellating readers with a subtly ableist (in structuralist terms, functional) desire for plot direction and resolution (closing-down open-endedness) in the form of cathartic release, epiphanic revelation, and even true suspension of disbelief.

If following Wallace's lead, one considered Lin's novel from a purely ludicrous point of view as mere entertainment, its exploitation of narrative prosthesis could be assimilated to the logic of the *potlatch*.¹⁵ In Chang's words, the novel is thus "autoimmune" to its own vulnerability, triumphing as a narrative mimetically abled in terms of authenticity, reliability and transparency: its posturing, because it is a self-conscious one, is honest and real. This explains why as a specific development of post-postmodernism, Alt lit is sincere (honest, authentic) as much as it is ironic¹⁶ Although Lin's dystopian depiction of postmodernist self-referentiality engages with Wallace's prediction of a post-postmodern back-away from ironic detachment, "neither America nor the fiction that seeks to represent it can return to a state of pre-postmodern innocence regarding language and the processes of representation" (McLaughlin 2008, 114). It must therefore be a cyber-conscious innocence then; the spectacular honesty of an ironic vulnerability.

(Discussion) Conclusion

In 1993, Wallace envisioned post-postmodernism as a sort of disenchantment with a postmodernist idealism that was still based on radical ableist premises: "the assumptions behind this early postmodern irony ... were still frankly idealistic: that *etiology and diagnosis*¹⁷ pointed toward cure" (Wallace 1993: 183). Therefore, his composition of a novel he initially intended to subtitle "A Failed Entertainment" ((Lipsky 2010, 79)), would propound a more realistic aesthetic ideal in that it acknowledges that the failure or impairment that supposedly disables fiction is in fact what constitutes its true prosthetic ontology: that fiction is always already an (im)posture. Lin's indisputable assertion that Wallace's *Infinite Jest* failed him as entertainment is tautologically based on the calculated

ludicrous trick of the *potlatch*; since the novel's failure is attributable to a low interest level in readers matching the novel's high demand for attention in an already media saturated environment. So as a failed entertainment, the novel is in fact, a success. The celebration of an impostured fiction is also an acknowledgement of its limitations—though not as a failed or disabled reality, but as the impairment that enables it not only as fiction, but as honest fiction.

In this essay, we have theorized the concept of cyber-consciousness by presenting Alt lit as the literary transcoding of a post-postmodernist aesthetics that presses on the cultural, discursive and technological conditions and possibilities to convey a sense of authenticity through literary representation in the new millennium. In order to do so, we have instantiated this concern by identifying a continuum between David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Tao Lin's *Taipei*, where the exhaustion and continuation of the postmodernist ethos in post-postmodernism is visualized through the spectacularization of human (existential and social anxiety, addiction) and narrative disability (irrelevance, boredom, complexity). In both novels, this spectacularization functions as a narrative prosthesis signaling the social and individual, as well as aesthetic collapse that the reification and commodification of exposing human suffering by the entertainment industry brought to the last decade of the twentieth century. The irony in it is self-consciously existential, a sort of suicidal exposure of narrative and human vulnerabilities that are as authentic as they are metafictional.

The immediacy and transparency of the digital media that Lin chooses to technologically update Wallace's aesthetic project for the second millennium somehow emphasizes and dissolves this irony by making it impossible to distinguish the authentic from the pose; the self from its image or the time narrated from the real time. If one had to imagine Lin within Wallace's picture of post-postmodern literary rebelliousness, he would certainly count among the postmodernist "lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law" (Wallace 1993: 193). Yet while

facing the irrelevance of a self-satisfying aesthetics of mere entertainment that is doomed to failure, Paul considers that if he went to jail, he would “just write *Infinite Jest*”¹⁸ to “be relieved, to be removed from the confusing, omnidirectional hierarchy of his life” (Lin 2013: 159). By submitting the vulnerabilities of his narrative cyber-consciousness to open scrutiny and criticism, Lin also embodies Wallace’s description of the post-postmodernist fiction writer as a “real rebel” who takes risks (Wallace 1993: 193) no matter how hard he calculates them.

The butt of Wallace’s criticism, Paul would seek direction in the purposefulness of a task that is worth completing and meaning endowing: following Wallace’s steps. In Lin’s pseudo-autobiographical depiction of Paul as a self-conscious addict, there is a maybe-ironic but also almost-sincere elegy for Wallace’s suicide and literary legacy. Paul’s near-death experience at the end of *Taipei* works perfectly as a true account of Wallace’s death: the termination of a human life that however goes on in its virtual version so authentically, there is no telling the real from the pose. It is ok to cry for Wallace at the end of *Taipei*.

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Notes

¹ Our italics.

² In 2014, Andrew Morrell included post-ironic, profound existentialism, poignancy and meaningful sincerity as some of the literary features of Alt lit, which he describes as an internet-based literary production "at times eerily personal despite its surface blandness and bleakness" that is led by the figure of Tao Lin.

³ In 1992, Omar Calabresse listed theatricality and transgression of conceptual limits among the features representing a taste of the times that he identified with Neo-Baroque aesthetics as an alternative to the historical restrictions that constrain the use of the term 'postmodern' (1992, 13). His list also included complexity, fragmentation, randomness and fractal structural arrangement; a series of Neo-Baroque features that are perpetuated in *Taipei*.

⁴ Our italics.

⁵ In a most obvious Neo-Baroque style, by making *Taipei* a pseudo-autobiographical novel, Lin is intentionally blurring the metadiegetic borders between author, narrative voice and protagonist. But claiming this is an authentic portrait of Lin himself is impossible because the novel is intentionally subtitled “a novel,” pressing on its status as fiction. That Lin and Paul are so coincidental in so many aspects points to sincerity as much as to the possibility that Lin’s public image is a promotional, self-conscious projection of the novel’s main character. In any case, the dual essence of irony still casts its long shadow over this post-postmodernist fiction. That Lin chooses a novel rather than social media to insist on these concerns should suffice to make this point.

⁶ Our italics.

⁷ Ian Chang has also referred to Lin’s work as “autistic realism,” although he prefers “autoimmune realism” as “a better *diagnosis* [our italics]” of Lin’s style in *Taipei*. Whatever the chosen term, what Chang seems to take for granted is that Lin’s style is somehow diseased.

⁸ Our italics.

⁹ Hsu argues that Paul’s drug abuse is such a self-centered experience that it constitutes “the opposite of attention-seeking behavior” (Žižek in Hsu 200) and must therefore counter the effects of continuous exposure to people’s attention.

¹⁰ 2013, the year *Taipei* was published, is roughly the future-time setting of *Infinite Jest* (Burn 2006, 26).

¹¹ The technophilic (not only extropian) transhumanist promise of human enhancement includes the advocacy of economic and political liberalism; and the right of self-determination (literalizing Haraway’s metaphor of the cyborganism), as well as the augmented intellectual capacities that would be required for self-determination to be self-conscious (Kurzweil’s notion of Singularity), and the (suspiciously nazi) eugenic celebration of physical prowess (epitomized by radical ableism and life extension).

¹² Of course, if instantaneous feedback is negative, the vitalist mood swings to melancholic (Krmptotic 2014, 35) or becomes the butt of a joke for readers to enjoy.

¹³ “vacío vital” (Krmptotic 2014, 36).

¹⁴ In this sense, Fernández-Santiago has recently made the point that Lin’s aesthetics of exhaustion corresponds with a dystopian approach to transhumanism depicting cyborgian subjectivity as rationally, emotionally and teleologically disabled (2019, 60), and mentions readerly hyper-exposure to saturated syntax as textual devices targeting the readers’ exhaustion (rather than mere boredom) at narrative inconsequence (2019, 67).

¹⁵ In Johan's Huizinga's classic on the ludicrous, *Homo Ludens*, potlatch is described as a game practiced by some Indian tribes in British Columbia in which "one proves one's superiority not merely by the lavish prodigality of one's gifts but, what is even more striking, by the wholesale destruction of one's possessions just to show that one can do without them" (1955, 58).

¹⁶ Unlike post-truth, and despite all the posturing, Alt lit is still sincere.

¹⁸ One might wonder if it is with or without "atavistic" (Wallace, E Unibus Pluram 1993, 58) irony that Lin's Mu-Mu publishing house and internet literary production uncannily evoke the "samizdat" movie linking the four main plots in *Infinite Jest*. Except for the jail part (which adds to Lin's efforts to emphasize literary banality), Vladimir Bukovsky's 1979 description of the samizdat as a writing process in which: "I write it myself, edit it myself, censor it myself, publish myself, distribute it myself, and spend jail time for it myself" (141) fits internet writing as a means to escape external control of literary content and format while it grants authors the individual creative freedom that Lin's devised randomness strives to convey. *Witz* is an 824 page-long novel by Joshua Cohen published in 2010 that Lin might have managed to read in full.