

SELF REFLECTION IN CONVEX LENS IN *LITTLE EXPRESSIONLESS ANIMALS* BY DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

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Abstract

This article aims to elaborate *Little Expressionless Animals*, the story written by David Foster Wallace, to present a criticism regarding how heavy television watching serves to distract individuals from the real world and creates blankness in their inner world and makes them ‘expressionless animals’.

The author attempts to illustrate that the frequent exposure to the television programs and its distorted images cause the false perception of reality, the personalization of visual images and the loss of the self in an artificial world.

The confusion of existential reality and visual, arbitrary environment lead to failure to distinguish the image ‘signifier’ and the real thing ‘signified’. The individuals living in a delusional world created by the television confuse signifier (TV images) with signified (real life occurring, events or objects).

The author uses faces as metaphors with concave – convex expression and was inspired by John Ashbery’s poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” based on the portrait painted by Parmigianino. Wallace, as well as Ashbery demonstrates irony and paradox reflecting inner and outer of self.

Key words: *Self, Signifier-Signified, Television, Mask*

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David Foster Wallace'in *Küçük İfadesiz Hayvanlar* Öyküsünde Konveks Lenste Kendi Yansıması

Özet

Bu makalede aşırı televizyon izlemenin bireyleri gerçek dünyadan uzaklaştırarak kendi iç dünyalarında boşluk yaratıp onları nasıl 'ifadesiz hayvanlar'a dönüştürdüğünü eleştirmek amacıyla David Foster Wallace tarafından yazılmış *Küçük İfadesiz Hayvanlar* öyküsünü incelemiştir.

Yazar öyküde bozulmuş görüntüleri ve televizyon programlarına sık sık maruz kalmanın, gerçekliğin yanlış algılanıp, görsel şekillerin ise kişileştirilerek oluşturulan yapay dünyada kişinin kendini kaybetmesine sebep olduğunu göstermeye çalışmıştır.

Varoluşsal gerçeklik ile görsel ve keyfi ortamın karıştırılması, görüntü olan 'gösteren'i ve gerçek şey olan 'gösterilen'i ayırt etmede başarısızlığa yol açar. Televizyon tarafından oluşturulan bir sanrısız dünyada yaşayan bireyler gösteren (TV görüntüleri) ile gösterileni (gerçek hayatta olan olayları, etkinlikleri veya nesnelere) karıştırabilirler.

Yazar içbükey (konkav) - dışbükey (konveks) ifadesi ile yüzleri eğritileme olarak kullanır ve Parmigianino tarafından yapılan bir portreye dayanan John Ashbery'nin şiiri "Dış Bükey Aynada Kendi Portresi"nden esinlenmiştir. Hem Wallace, hem de Ashbery ironi ve iç - dış benliği yansıtan paradoksu göstermişlerdir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Benlik, Gösteren-Gösterilen, Televizyon, Maske*

Writings of Wallace are often concerned with irony. For him, television has an ironic influence on fiction writing, as he states in his essay *E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*:

I want to convince you that irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive of those features of contemporary U.S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is a part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose weird pretty hand has my generation by the throat. I'm going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fictionists they pose terrifically vexing problems. (171)

Using many forms of irony, Wallace's writing demonstrates hollowness of American entertainment culture and artificialness of the outside world. For Wallace, the postmodern narrative strategies have also become commercialized by being used by TV commercials, especially postmodern irony. Holland pointed out that "television's adoption of irony as its dominant mode in both advertising and programming ruined the constructive possibilities of irony,

making it such an invisible part of our environment that it was transformed from reactionary to the norm”(219).

This paper elaborates *Little Expressionless Animals*, the story written by David Foster Wallace, the first and one of the longest in his book *Girl with Curious Hair* to present a criticism regarding how television serves to distract individuals from the real world and create blankness in their inner world which conveys a loss of self. In addition, it is aimed to illustrate how this story criticizes contemporary American culture focusing on over-televised game shows to stimulate the reader’s awareness regarding these programs which shape individual’s understanding of the world and makes them ‘expressionless animals’.

This study attempts to demonstrate the irony and paradox reflecting inner and outer of self, using faces as metaphors with concave – convex expression throughout the story. The author was inspired by John Ashbery’s poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” which was based on the portrait painted in 1523 by Parmigianino. Expression of faces in this story is compared with the works of Parmigianino and Ashbery which reflects a sense of otherness discussing the multi dimensions of self. Using faces as metaphors, the author emphasizes heavy television watching and hollowness of American entertainment industry which alienates individuals from real life creating dull faces.

The tube with its over-televised quiz shows and late night comedians becomes an indispensable material for Wallace’s fictions. In his generation, the tube has become such a natural part of life as Tichi states "the succeeding generation, their children, never knew life without the small screen and have experienced television as integral and natural"(8). Wallace pointed out that "the American generation born after, say, 1955 is the first for whom television is something to be lived with, not just looked at . . . we, unlike any elders, have no memory of a world without such electronic definition"(*Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young* 38,39). The community has become more and more addictive to the television which becomes the part of the lifestyle. Television industry not only produces repetitive TV shows to prevent the audiences thinking clearly about their lives and the society but also exerts a negative effect on individuals making them less inclined to the real world and their self-construction.

Saul Bellow argues in 1963 of how "the public nonsense of television ... threatens to turn our brains to farina within our heads" (29), and, Wallace

indicates that the six hours of "TV-training" undertaken daily by the average American "influences the whole psychology of one's relation to himself, his mirror, his loved ones, and a world of real people and real gazes" (*E Unibus Pluram* 174). Thus, Wallace intends to show the harsh effects of extensive TV watching on the consciousness of people and its psychological implications.

Wallace believes that irony used both in commercials and shows becomes the main mode of representation on TV and serves a destructive function in perception of the world and the values which deeply affects people who spends an average of 6 hours per day in front of the TV. Irony used by producers is aimed to keep TV audiences both estranged from and integrated in the tube as Wallace states: "television was practically made for irony...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."(*E Unibus Pluram* 161)

Television and its medium irony have a widespread influence on the human judgment and behavior and extensive watching makes the audience's perception of the fact and fiction quite blurry. The television programs - whether they are "fiction," such as TV series, or "fact" such as news, talk shows or quiz shows actually present a systematic distortion of reality. The world as it is portrayed on television is disillusioned and differs in important sense from how the real world is constituted. Individuals may have lost themselves in this artificial world and cannot develop a self. *Little Expressionless Animals*, which criticizes this artificiality created world by TV shows, takes place behind the scenes of *Jeopardy!*, one of the most popular American quiz shows. This well-known show which has aired for decades involves trivia questions having a unique answer-and-question format. Its host, Alex Trebek and its producer Merv Griffin are among the characters of the story.

The defamiliarization and complication of game shows, late night shows and commercials like this quiz-show are important for Wallace. Non-linearly presented story seems to become a collage of different narratives resembling the collage achieved by the zapping of TV Channel's.

He puts fictional events into a chronological order although they do not seem to follow an inner logical connection. He gives dates of the several passages in the beginning of the story to attract the attention of the reader of the importance of chronology. The occurrences in these passages connected to each

other in the end of the story. Thus, he makes the reader to work with the story in order to put the pieces together. In a way, Wallace wants to create awareness on the reader which is the main concern of "serious art". Wallace, in his interview with McCaffery, distinguishes between the "low" and "serious" art, indicating that popular film and TV produces "low" art for profit purposes. He states:

[“low” art] is lucrative precisely because it recognizes that audiences prefer 100 percent pleasure to the reality that tends to be 49 percent pleasure and 51 percent pain. Whereas "serious" art, which is not primarily about getting money out of you, is more apt to make you uncomfortable, or to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort. (127)

Wallace also uses news headlines and articles such as “‘Jeopardy!’ Queen Dethroned After Three-Year Reign,” (*Little Expressionless Animals* 8), “what next for Smith?” (*Little Expressionless Animals* 29) to add suspense and weight to the narrative.

Throughout the story, there are several representations of humanizing the television by the characters. For instance, in the following two different paragraphs in *Little Expressionless Animals*, one of the characters, Dee Goddard is having a conversation with TV which gives it personalized features: “Let's all be there,' says the television.” “Where else would I be” asks Dee Goddard. (Wallace 8). “Does your husband still look at you the way he used to?’, asks the television.” (Wallace 9).

In this instance, the conversation between television and the character indicates the perception of television as a real person. There is a contrast in the above mentioned scene where Dee is having conversation with the tube. While visual images treated like real human beings, real persons are seen like visual objects. In the same scene, Dee herself becomes a visual object when she is talking with the tube as Julie and Faye are watching her through the remote viewer in Faye’s office. Julie says “It’s mean to watch her like this” (*Little Expressionless Animals* 9), since Dee is treated like a visual image which can be viewed through the remote viewer.

In another scene in Dee’s office:

“It’s the ‘All New Newlywed Game’!” says the television.

“Weak show,” says Dee. “All they do on this Show is humiliating newlyweds” (Wallace 9).

Dee's statement not only indicates that TV shows make fun of people to entertain watchers but also proves that TV shows use irony to attract the attention of masses. Dee's conversation with the tube several times makes the reader to realize the audiences' inability to distinguish between the real life and the artificial images on TV.

Further on the same scene, Faye tells Julie about how Trebek cracked a joke on Sajak. While Sajak hosting his show "The Wheel", Trebek intentionally pressed the applause sign so that the audience was mistakenly applauding when the contestants lost. With this scene, Wallace attempts to show the artificial and arbitrary aspects of TV. The audience in the studio automatically responded applause sound proves that the audience allow themselves to be passively manipulated and exploited by the television industry.

The frequent exposure to the television programs and its distorted images reinforce the false perception of reality. The author attempt to show that heavy television viewing may lead the personalization of visual images, loss of the self in an artificial world, confusing the self and the image, greater interpersonal mistrust, and greater anxiety.

Below passage between Dee Goddard and Muffy De Mott supports the idea of the confusion of real self with visual image and real world with the arbitrary environment. Muffy says that:

[The audience] had only the TV all their lives, [...] and as they get older the TV comes to be their whole emotional world, it's all they have, and it becomes in a way their whole way of defining themselves as existents, with a distinct identity, that they're outside the set, and everything else is inside the set. [...] And then you hear about how every once in a while one of them gets on TV somehow. [...] and all of a sudden they look and they're inside the set. [...] And sometimes you hear about how it drives them mad, sometimes. (Wallace 31).

The confusion of existential reality and visual, arbitrary environment which is associated with the destructive effects of TV can be observed with the above statement of the character. Those people that Muffy mentions unable to distinguish the image 'signifier' and the real thing 'signified'. Saussure divides a sign, which can be a word, a sound, or a visual image, into two components--the *signifier* (the sound, image, or word) and the *signified*, which is the concept the signifier represents, or the meaning. The *sign* is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified (67). However, those people

living in a delusional world created by the tube mixing signifier (TV images) and signified (real life occurrences, events or objects).

Wallace also uses television commercials in his narrative to show how the use of semiotics strategically creates irony to target more consumers. Agencies regularly design campaigns that exploit sexuality forming or reinforcing attitudes and constructing perceptions in an attempt to entice the audience with an image to sell a product. However, the images in the commercials can also serve to reinforce blurring the image and the reality.

For instance, in the title story, *Girl with Curious Hair*, the protagonist is deeply influenced by an advertisement which benefits from the use of semiotics. The protagonist speaks like a TV commercial says that:

I wear English Leather Cologne which keeps me smelling very attractive at all times. English Leather is the men's cologne with the television commercial in which a very beautiful and sexy woman who can play billiards better than a professional makes the assertion that all her men wear English Leather or they wear nothing at all. I find this woman very alluring and sexually exciting. I have the English Leather Cologne commercial taped on my new Toshiba VCR and I enjoy [...] masturbating while the commercial plays repeatedly on my VCR”(Wallace, *Girl with Curious Hair* 55).

Commercials like this lead people to think that if they buy the cologne, they can have intercourse with the woman in the commercial or a sexy woman like her. The sexy woman playing billiard (the signifier) plus the cologne (the signified) creates an illusion of having an intercourse with a sexy woman (the sign). The commercial is trying to convince its viewers by playing with the meaning. Moreover, the protagonist loses his sense of self in the artificial world created by the commercial and associates himself with the male image using that cologne. The image in the commercial becomes his reality and his values, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions become consistent with the delusional world as it is portrayed on television. His psychological balance between real world and artificial world of television has been violated.

Television industry not only manipulates consumers allowing them to believe delusional images but also shapes people's thoughts and attitudes. Moreover, television industry produces standardized, predictable narratives and makes people less inclined to question their situation, notice difficulties in their life and think creatively to find solutions. These predictable, easy to create and requiring no thought to understand scenarios serve as a distraction and prevent

people to think and make their looks expressionless. In *Little Expressionless Animals*, the protagonist Julie Smith is frustrated with these expressionless faces, since it reminds her dramatic childhood experience with cows.

Julie Smith, was a young woman whose mother was indifferent to her children, Julie and her autistic brother. The two kids often got locked in a room with only the encyclopedia for entertainment. One day their mother chose a man over her children and left them on the side of the road to watch cows chew grass which have expressionless faces. Consequently, when they grew up, their experiences with encyclopedias made both children ideal Jeopardy! contestants. First, Julie became a Jeopardy! contestant and met with Faye, another protagonist, who was a behind the scene stuff and the two had an intimate same sex relationship.

Approaching to the final scenes of the story these two lesbian couple attempt to explain why they end up lesbians to an imaginary audience creating impressive scenarios of traumatic events. Interesting thing regarding these stories that

[They have] narratives with beginning, middle, and end and that they pinpoint such a complex "thing" as lesbianism to a single reason or occurrence. The central position which these narratives inhabit in the story leads to the assumption that they are also deeply connected with the main theme, i.e. TV.[...] These stories mimic the way in which TV represents complex realities: put it into a nice little narrative and offer only one explanation so that people do not get too confused. (*Television and Literature*)

Julie creates different scenarios however, Faye refuses saying "I didn't want abstractions about this stuff" (35). Faye, in a way, wants to create an explanation everyone can easily understand like simple stories created for the TV audiences.

While the two are making up stories about being lesbians Julie suggests: "say lesbianism is simply one kind of response to Otherness. Say the whole point of love is to get your fingers through the holes in the lover's mask. To get some kind of hold on the mask, and who cares how you do it" (*Little Expressionless Animals* 32). Everyone wears a mask to hide in an illusional world or escape the hardships from life which could be either consciously or unconsciously. While making assumptions why she choose being a lesbian, Julie's identity becomes like a question in the Jeopardy game or a Show in the TV set which must have a simple explanation for everyone to understand.

For Julie men have no expression and nothing to hold on. After being abandoned on the side of the road with her brother, she encounters a cow having an expressionless face and then she develops face-related disgust for both animals and men:

“Tell them that, even now, you cannot stand animals, because animals' faces have no expression. Not even the possibility of it. . . . Tell them to stand perfectly still, for time, and to look into the face of a man. A man's face has nothing on it. Look closely. . . They are like antennae. But all the faces do is move through different configurations of blankness.” (Wallace, *Little Expressionless Animals* 41).

Faces are important metaphors in Wallace's narrative. Throughout the story, *Little Expressionless Animals*, Wallace focuses on faces without expression: "Blank, silent men" (3) with vague relationships to Julie's mother came and went throughout her childhood. The woman with the "loose face" (3) described in the beginning of the story was Julie's mother; there are people in the movie theater “the cartoon's reflected light makes faces in the audience flicker”(4); Alex Trebek has two dreams, one about a chef flipping pancakes that looks like faces (19), and the other about a field full of little bunny rabbits all looking at his direction (36); Trebek also mentions to his psychiatrist about Julie who has “moisture inducing look” (21); there was a “loose-faced” woman behind the cash register (36); Julie's mother “with love for a blank silent man” left them (40).

Julie finds faces beautiful only when they are truly expressive and not blank. She thinks that men wear thoughtless, expressionless masks on their faces. Further she expresses to Faye:

“Remember the ocean? Our dawn ocean, that we loved? We loved it because it was like us, Faye. That ocean was *obvious*....” “Oceans are only oceans when they move,” Julie whispers. “Waves are what keep oceans from just being very big puddles...It was obvious and a poem because it was us. See things like that, Faye. Your own face, moving into expression. A wave, breaking on a rock, giving up its shape in a gesture that *expresses* that shape. See?” (Wallace, *Little Expressionless Animals* 41 42)

Julie's face described by Faye as having “the texture of something truly alive, an elastic softness, like a ripe sheath, or a pod. It is vulnerable and has depth” and “Everything about her is sort of permeable” (Wallace, *Little Expressionless Animals* 13). For Faye, Julie's face illustrates her feelings

openly without mask. On the other hand, when Julie stares herself in a make up mirror “her face loose and expressionless” (Wallace, *Little Expressionless Animals* 17). A face Julie dislikes when seeing it in other people. But later on, Wallace expresses that:

[S]omething happens to Julie Smith when the red lights light. Just a something. The girl who gets a three-score and who stares with no expression is gone. Every concavity in that person now looks to have convex. The camera linters on her. It seems to ogle. Often Julie appears on-screen while Trebek of still reading a clue. Her face, on-screen, gives off an odd lambent UHF flicker; her expression, brightly serene reflects with the board’s data. (*Little Expressionless Animals* 17)

There is a concave – convex opposition about Julie’s face. Without cameras or Faye, Julies face has concavity which can be interpreted like expressionless and emotionless feature of her face like when wearing a mask. She prefers to receive what others express and comfort them with her “permeability”. In contrast, on screen, “her expression, brightly serene radiates a sort of oneness with the board’s data” (17). Her face becomes convex while the lenses are recording her. She is expressing herself and her ideas when she appears on TV. The convexity in this sense, is a turning outward, an extroversion, which is concerned primarily with things outside the self, with the external environment rather than with one's own thoughts and feelings.

Wallace, in this story makes use of John Ashbery’s poem “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” which is based on the portrait painted in 1523 by Parmigianino an Italian master and founder of the Mannerist School. The portrait experiments with what became the signature of Mannerist painting – elongated features of the human body. The portrait is featuring the painter’s image slightly bloated and twisted in a convex mirror. Wallace, as well as Ashbery likes to demonstrate irony and paradox reflecting inner and outer of self.

For Ashbery “the portrait / Is the reflection once removed,” the image becomes distorted and reversed and “The surface / Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases / Significantly” (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*).

Ashbery’s poem is full of confusion and ambiguity as he remarks:

[Y]ou could be fooled for a moment / Before you realize the reflection / Isn’t yours. You feel then like one of those / Hoffmann characters who have been deprived / Of a reflection, except that the whole of me / Is seen to be

supplanted by the strict / Otherness of the painter in his / Other room. We have surprised him / At work, but no, he has surprised us / As he works (*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*).

Like the distorted image of self reflected by the mirror may fool individuals expressed in Ashbery's poem, TV images also destroys reality penetrating individuals and making them less inclined their self-perception. In the story, Julie's face becomes convex with cameras recording her which represent a sense of otherness as the way the painter and the poet experience otherness in Ashbery's poem.

The painter's reflection in the mirror and its depiction in the portrait represent a sense of otherness as the poem created by the poet implies an otherness from self and deficiency of a reflection. The persona in the poem resembles the artist's mirror reflection, though it looks distorted, distant or even reversed.

The illusionistic techniques of painting, the fictive strategies of narrative, the compact wholeness of a poem, the attraction of art as an "exotic / Refuge within an exhausted world" (*Self Portrait* 82) are designed to hide the loss and incompleteness associated with temporal existence. [...] (A)rt is unable to create either a single image that could be called perfect or a single truth that could be considered final. (Stamelman 612)

There is no single truth, or single image that shapes the existence of things. Ashbery deconstructs the painting of Parmigianino and transforms into a poem that critic the motionless disillusioned image of self it portrays. Otherness of the self reflected in the mirror offers the critical representation of copied images.

The self can not be reflected and the image can not be grasped wholly since everything is subjected to change. Self is not possibly constructed coherently; it is neither limited nor unified. Wallace's understanding of self reflection and concave – convex distinction associated with uncovering the illusions of wholeness. Concave faces or reflections hide, disguise or suppress the realities of loss. When Julie sees her face in a make up mirror "her face loose and expressionless" (Wallace, *Little Expressionless Animals* 17) and her reflection is concave which means her perceptions, thoughts, feelings were left out.

Julie describes her autistic brother as "totally inside himself"(Wallace, *Little Expressionless Animals* 11). Autism creates a disconnection between the

self and one's own emotions, so the autistic person struggles to find a way to bridge that divide. They can not make sense the world and awareness of others. Julie, most probably, fears the expressionless face of her brother because it is an indicator of the inability to connect to others and outside one's self. She also fears and avoids the expressionless face of animals which resulted in losing *Jeopardy!* in the end against his brother. She cannot answer any of the questions about animals since she is escaping and hiding from them through her life, while her autistic brother knows and loves everything about animals. Her irrational disgust towards animals can be explained by her fear of expressionless faces and her experience with cows when she left by her mother.

Every reflection of reality is subjected to disruption. Julie develops a defense mechanism to deal with the distress and abandonment by disrupting the reality. Julie defends her mother though being locked up rooms and abandoned by her. "It was *him* they were locking up. I was just there to watch him". (Wallace, *Little Expressionless Animals* 11). She further states that her mother loved that man who made her leave her children. "He made her leave *him*. I think she left me to look out for him" (11). Julie denies that her mother left her with her brother. She falsifies reality making up excuses of her mother's attitude. Wallace expresses Julie's feelings about her mother to connect with the character and to create empathy. As Harris observes, "Wallace's fiction often charts the territory of the troubled, the addicted, and the depressed. Yet he never surveys that territory as a tourist. These are inside narratives. Wallace never presents his distressed characters as grotesques, but always with understanding and empathy-with (can we say it without risking the appearance of easy sentimentality?) love" (170).

Conclusion

Lacking of her mother's love and attention; and "blanked face men" in her mother's life, which made her abandoned by her mother, leads Julie to fear expressionless faces and ultimately may cause her to become a lesbian. Wallace attempted to show us that cause of lesbianism can not be reduced to a simple explanation like TV programs often does with the stories they use. Real life events are multi dimensional and prismatic, not dimensionless or single sided like one's expression of face. Therefore, Wallace creates a conflict between convex and concave aspects of a self, a face. Serene, obvious, expressive faces without masks reflect convexity and blanked, expressionless faces with masks

cause concavity of faces. Concave face represents no perception of others outside one's self and fails to have awareness of chaotic life.

Julie's face becomes convex when cameras recording her which represent a sense of otherness as the way the painter and the poet experience otherness in Ashbery's poem. However, her face is different from the face in Parmigianino's painting or in Ashbery's poem. When her face becomes convex, it is full of life and impression whereas the painting has motionless, lifeless image which imprisons the reflection of the self only distorted by the convex surface. Nonetheless, both Wallace and Ashbery attempted to criticize that the self cannot be limited to a stable reflection or one dimension.

Wallace critiques heavy television watching and emptiness of American entertainment industry which serves to distract individuals from the real world and create blankness in their inner world and conveys a loss of self.

The more the individuals integrated with the tube and visual images, the more their lives become meaningless and they become expressionless animals who alienated from the real world living in the world of tube.

This study may contribute future studies regarding how television programs and visual images threaten our generation leading loss of self and false perception of reality.

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