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**BODY LANGUAGE IN DAVID FOSTER
WALLACE'S *BRIEF INTERVIEWS WITH
HIDEOUS MEN***

TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tarkastelen pro gradu –tutkielmassani ruumiinkielen ja nonverbaalisen viestinnän roolia David Foster Wallacen novellikokoelmassa *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). Novellikokoelmaa on pidetty erittäin hyvin Wallacen teemoja ja tyyliä ilmentävänä teoksena, mutta sitä ei ole toistaiseksi tutkittu yhtä paljoa kuin Wallacen romaaneja. Aihepiireiltään nämä kokeelliset novellit käsittelevät miesten ja naisten välisiä suhteita, kieltä, seksuaalisuutta ja kommunikointia.

David Foster Wallacen kirjallista tuotantoa on usein tutkittu suhteessa postmodernistisen kirjallisuuden perintöön ja hänen pyrkimyksiensä päästä siitä irti. Tämän näkökulman avaamiseksi käyn tutkielman aluksi läpi sekä postmodernin että post-postmodernin kirjallisuuden pääpiirteitä. Erityisesti nostan esiin post-postmodernin kirjallisuuden pyrkimyksen paeta postmodernista diskurssikeskeisyydestä jonnekin todellisempaan. Tämän jälkeen esittelen kehotutkimuksen kautta mahdollisuuden nähdä keho tällaisena paikkana jonne teksti voi paeta. Yleisen kehoteoreettisen keskustelun lisäksi esittelen ruumiinkielen analysoimisen erityispiirteitä kirjallisuudentutkimuksessa.

Analysoin tutkielmassani ruumiinkieltä *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* –novellikokoelmassa neljästä näkökulmasta. Ensimmäiseksi tarkastelen novelleja, joissa ruumiinkieltä käytetään itsetietoisesti valehteluun tai manipulointiin. Tämän jälkeen keskityn tapauksiin, joissa ruumiinkieli on epäselvää tai monitulkintaista. Kolmantena näkökulmana käsittelen ruumiinkieltä totuutena, pääasiassa tahattomien ilmeiden ja eleiden kautta. Lopuksi analysoin ruumiinkieltä vilpittömän kommunikoinnin mahdollistajana.

Tutkielmani osoittaa, että David Foster Wallace käyttää ruumiinkieltä monipuolisesti novelleissaan. Toisaalta se myötäilee hänen postmodernismikritiikkiään ja ilmentää ironiaa ja vilpittömyyttä. Samaan aikaan sen hallitsemattomuus pystyy järkyttämään sosiaalista järjestystä ja haastaa itsetietoisien subjektien pyrkimykset hallita kommunikaatiotaan. Lopuksi nähdään, että ihmisiä yhdistävä ruumiillisuus mahdollistaa myös vilpittömän ja empaattisen kommunikoinnin.

Avainsanat: David Foster Wallace, postmoderni kirjallisuus, post-postmodernismi, ruumiinkieli, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

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ABSTRACT

NIEMINEN, JANI: Body Language in David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*
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In my Master's Thesis, I am exploring the role of body language and nonverbal communication in David Foster Wallace's short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). The collection has been seen as a very typical work for Wallace, showcasing his usual themes and techniques, but so far it has not been studied as much as his novels. The subjects of the stories in this collection mostly revolve around relationships between men and women, language, sexuality and communication.

David Foster Wallace's works have often been analyzed in relation to the tradition of postmodern literature and his struggle to break free from this tradition. To help understand this discussion, I begin this study by discussing features of postmodern and post-postmodern literature. Of special interest is post-postmodern literature's tendency to want to escape from the postmodern focus on discourse to something real. After the literary context, I discuss body studies and the possibility of seeing body as something real that text could escape to. In addition to discussing general body theory, I present central issues in discussing nonverbal communication in literature.

I analyze body language in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* from four different viewpoints. First, I discuss short stories where it is used in a self-conscious way to lie or manipulate. After this, I concentrate on cases where body language is ambiguous or hard to decode. As my third viewpoint, I analyze stories where body language is seen as a more truthful mode of communication than verbal communication, mainly focusing on involuntary gestures and facial expressions, also known as nonverbal leakage. Finally, I discuss body language as an enabler of sincere communication.

My study shows that David Foster Wallace uses body language in his stories in a variety of ways. On the one hand, it is aligned with his criticism of postmodernism when it is used insincerely. At the same time, to some extent it cannot be controlled, and it can disrupt social order and challenge the will of self-conscious subjects. Most importantly, the embodied existence that unites people can also enable sincere and empathetic communication via body language.

Keywords: David Foster Wallace, postmodern literature, New Sincerity, body language, Brief Interviews with Hideous Men

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Postmodernism, David Foster Wallace and Post-postmodernism.....	4
2.1. Postmodernism and Postmodernist Literature	4
2.2. David Foster Wallace, Post-postmodernism and New Sincerity.....	10
3. The Human Body and Body Language in Literature	19
3.1. The Human Body in Literature.....	20
3.2 Body Language in Literature	26
4. Body Language in <i>Brief Interviews with Hideous Men</i>	33
4.1. Self-Conscious Body Language and Manipulation	34
4.2. Body Language and Ambiguity.....	43
4.3. Body Language as the Truth.....	54
4.4. Body Language as an Effective Means of Sincere Communication	67
5. Conclusion.....	73
Works Cited.....	75

1. Introduction

David Foster Wallace was a major writer of late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Born in 1962 to a family of academics, he grew up with an interest in tennis and later studied math and philosophy, before settling in on a career as an author of experimental and challenging fiction (Boswell 2003, 3–4). Though he continued to publish work his whole life, his most famous book remained *Infinite Jest* (1996), a massive 1079-page experimental book that was at once difficult and hugely popular, selling over a million copies to date (Infinite Winter, 2016). Academic interest in Wallace started to gather momentum in the early 2000s, as shown for example by the publication of Marshall Boswell's monograph *Understanding David Foster Wallace* in 2003. Since Wallace's untimely death in 2008, interest in his work has only increased in academia and elsewhere. For example, in a few years following his death, the Wallace "industry" produced two biographical works, one film adaptation, many college courses, an online reading event, several academic conferences and numerous articles (Kelly 2010a).

In his essays and interviews Wallace famously talked about his objections towards postmodern literature and popular culture's overreliance on irony. Until recent years, the overwhelming majority of Wallace criticism proceeded from this framework and discussed his work in relation to postmodern literature. In part, this thesis will continue this tradition and examine Wallace's literary mission, but at the same time combine it with a perspective that has so far received little attention in Wallace studies: body language. By looking at different aspects of body language in Wallace's short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), I will show how body language is connected to Wallace's central themes such as empathy, communication, interpersonal relations and sincerity.

The theoretical section of this thesis starts with an overview of postmodernism and postmodernist literature. In order to understand Wallace's criticism of late postmodernist literature and popular culture, it is important to understand how postmodernism started and was discussed. I

will focus on the concept of irony, since Wallace saw its pervasiveness in culture as a seriously harmful condition. I will also discuss Wallace in relation to a literary movement that emerged as a reaction towards postmodernist literature and which has been labeled for example as post-postmodernism or New Sincerity. For this thesis, of special interest will be the tendency in works representing post-postmodernism to reject postmodern obsession with discourse in order to represent something more real (McLaughlin 2015, 218). In my thesis, I want to suggest that Wallace uses body language to represent a real, tangible connection between humans, that is able to overcome the solipsistic tendencies of his characters.

After examining Wallace in his literary historical context, I will move on to the issue of studying the human body in literature. Wallace's work is often very explicitly concerned with questions related to living in a body, but so far, analyses of his work have not tended to concentrate on these issues. My discussion of Wallace's views on the human body will be based on Peter Sloane's recent monography *David Foster Wallace and the Body* (2019). For this thesis, one of the most useful aspects of Sloane's work concerns Wallace's way to present the body as a three-part system, where the conscious will of the subject is often challenged by the limitations of the mechanistic body or innate drives of the organistic body. I will use this idea when discussing body language, something that so far has not explicitly been discussed in relation to Wallace's writing. One of the reasons why body language, or nonverbal communication, is an interesting topic to study in relation to Wallace's stories, is that for a large part it is unconscious or uncontrollable. This means that it can be a highly disrupting phenomenon for Wallace's characters, who are usually extremely self-conscious and want to be in control of how they communicate.

The short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* has not been discussed in Wallace studies nearly as much as his novels like *Infinite Jest* and the posthumous *The Pale King* (2011). However, it is a good subject for a study of nonverbal communication in Wallace's writing for at least two reasons. As Boswell has argued, the book can be seen as the most "characteristic" work by

Wallace (Boswell 2003, 181–82), so we can think of it as a distillation of his typical style and themes. Secondly, the subject matter of the stories means that questions of communication and bodily matters are very often explicitly discussed. In Wallace's own words, the collection is about sex and male-female relationship (Kelly 2018, 83) and, in addition, the stories deal for example with puberty, ageing and birth defects, with a heavy emphasis on reading other people's bodies.

In the analysis section of this thesis, I will discuss body language in the short stories from four points of view. First, I will discuss self-conscious body language, used to deceive or manipulate. Linguistic manipulation is a central theme in the collection and relates to Wallace's views on self-consciousness and irony, so this chapter shows how body language is a part of these larger themes in Wallace's work. This discussion will also give a very good general idea of the types of characters typical to the stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Secondly, I will discuss instances where body language is ambiguous or hard to decode. My aim here is to show how disruptive it can be for these self-conscious characters when they are confronted with things they are unable to process in their default manner. I will also argue, that this disruptive power also leads to the possibility of a more authentic and empathetic connection between characters. In the third part, I discuss body language's potential to act as a more truthful mode of communication than verbal communication. In some of the stories, there are characters who understand that unconscious gestures and facial expressions, also known as nonverbal leakage, can reveal true feelings of people around them better than words. Some of the characters are better than others at reading nonverbal leakage, but what is interesting, is to look at the similarities in their reactions to the disrupting power of truthful communication. In the final part of the analysis section, I will discuss body language as a means for sincere communication. I will argue that one story in the collection provides an example of a person who is able to use nonverbal communication to establish a sincere, empathetic connection with other characters.

2. Postmodernism, David Foster Wallace and Post-postmodernism

David Foster Wallace's work is very often discussed in relation to postmodernism and postmodernist literature. This is due to the many obviously postmodernist stylistic features in his writing, but also because Wallace explicitly discussed his uneasy feelings regarding postmodernism in several essays, interviews and even in his fiction. Even though the Wallace-postmodernism connection has perhaps been discussed to the point of it being a cliché in Wallace studies, for this thesis and for a general understanding of his works, it is important to know about the history of postmodernism and postmodernist literature in the U.S.

In the first section of this chapter, I will be discussing the many definitions of postmodernism, the history and typical features of postmodernist literature and writers who most clearly influenced Wallace. Since postmodernism is such a multi-faceted phenomenon, the viewpoint will be limited to the topics relevant to the current thesis and to Wallace's writing. The second section of this chapter will then focus on Wallace's writing in the context of postmodernist literature, his desire to move beyond postmodernism and the recent literary developments that have been variously labeled for example as post-postmodernism or New Sincerity.

2.1. Postmodernism and Postmodernist Literature

Discussions of postmodernism have for a very long time tended to start with complaints about how nothing on this topic is "certain, resolved or uncontentious" (McHale 2015, 141). Due to this indeterminacy that seems to define postmodernism, it is then useful to start this overview from the beginning, by looking at the history of the term and early, influential definitions for it.

Postmodernism, as the term itself suggests, can be said to follow modernism chronologically. Although opinions differ on the differences and the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, it can be said that modernism dominated the beginning of the twentieth century and

postmodernism the latter half. However, as is often pointed out, the earliest known usage of the term postmodernism comes from the English painter John Watkins Chapman in the 1870s, when he was discussing art styles that would come after impressionism and the term would appear infrequently in the following decades in the contexts of literature and theology for example (Sim 2011, viii). Despite these early examples, postmodernism, as it is now understood, is thought to have begun much later. Suggestions for the starting point of postmodernism have included the late-thirties, 1945 and mid-sixties and 15 July 1972 at 3:32 pm (McHale 2015, 141; 2007)

One of the most influential early theorists of postmodernism was Jean-François Lyotard. In his landmark 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, he famously defines the postmodern condition as loss of faith in metanarratives, or “grand unifying systems of belief”, such as enlightenment or Marxism, that “promised happy endings in the form of less human misery, greater equality and fewer wars” (Lucy 2015b). Instead, “we are left merely with ‘little’ or regional narratives at odds with one another” and, referring to Wittgenstein, a “chaotic mix of different language games” (Gratton 2018). In the absence of unifying metanarratives, this necessarily leads to a more fragmented world. Later we will see how this is visible in the writings of Wallace, who was also heavily influenced by Wittgenstein and the idea of language games, on issues such as communication, loneliness and solipsism.

Fredric Jameson, another influential theorist, well known for example for his critical 1984 article “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (expanded into a book in 1991), defined postmodernism from his point of view as a Marxist critic. Jameson sees culture as a reflection of an economic base and for postmodernist culture the base is the third stage of capitalism (from World War II onwards), which is highly alienating for citizens, since in his view each stage of capitalism is increasingly so (Lucy 2015a). Features of postmodernism Jameson recognizes include: weakening of historicity, depthlessness of culture, loss of emotional content, past being only recoverable as pastiche and modernist alienation turning into schizophrenia, all of which lead to a

condition where the individual is lost in “the perpetual present” with “recycled images” without a chance to find “and explanation of the social and cultural totality (Brooker 1992, 22). In a nutshell, Jameson saw postmodernism as “an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (Jameson 1991, 2). Even from this short description, it is easy to see how his thinking represents a critique of postmodernism.

There are of course many other important theories of postmodernism or related to postmodernism, including for example those of the poststructuralists Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, and even though postmodernism has been declared dead many times, it is still being redefined and discussed in new ways¹. At this point however, I would like to shift our focus to postmodernist literature specifically and critics who have mainly concentrated on exploring postmodernism through the effect it has had on literature, such as Ihab Hassan, the previously mentioned Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon and Wallace’s literary forebear John Barth.

Defining what is and what is not postmodernist literature is not of course a straightforward matter, but we can begin with a rough timeline. Even though some earlier novels like *Tristram Shandy* (1759) have been discussed in the context of postmodernism, what we usually think of as postmodernist literature emerges around 1960s, with McHale and Platt suggesting that the 1966 release of Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* signaled the shift from modernism to postmodernism (2016, 7). Geographically, postmodernist literature is an international phenomenon, represented by authors such as Günter Grass, Georges Perec, Italo Calvino, Stanislaw Lem, Milan Kundera and Gabriel García Márquez. However, it has been especially strongly associated with the U.S. and writers such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon etc. (Lewis 2011, 170). Stylistically and thematically postmodernist writing is very heterogenous, but there are some important recurrent features, such as:

¹ For an example, see Matthew Mullins’s 2016 book *Postmodernism in Pieces*, which discusses postmodernism from the viewpoint of “neomaterialism . . . including posthumanism, thing theory, Actor- Network- Theory, object-oriented philosophy” (Mullins 2016)

Temporal disorder; the erosion of the sense of time; a pervasive and pointless use of pastiche; a foregrounding of words as fragmenting material signs; the loose association of ideas; paranoia; and vicious circles, or a loss of distinction between logically separate levels of discourse. (Lewis 2011, 171)

With this general idea of postmodernist of literature, we can now take a closer look at some famous definitions of the movement.

One method of defining and analyzing postmodernist literature is to compare it with its predecessor, modernism. Many critics have listed differences between modernist and postmodernist literature, with the most well-known of these lists of differences being the one formulated by Ihab Hassan, printed for example in the postface titled “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism” in the second edition of his book *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1982).

The table includes for example the following differences (Hassan 1982, 267-268):

Modernism	Postmodernism
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Mastery/ Logos	Exhaustion/Silence
Presence	Absence
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Signified	Signifier
Narrative/Grande Histoire	Anti-narrative/Petite Histoire
Paranoia	Schizophrenia
Metaphysics	Irony

As Hassan himself notes, the dichotomies are not clear cut, but rather “insecure, equivocal” and exceptions are found easily in modernist and postmodernist literature, since they are not separated by “an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall” (ibid. 264, 269). We can see some already familiar terms in the table, like *Grande Histoire* (Lyotard’s metanarrative) or schizophrenia (Jameson). Some others, like irony and exhaustion, we will discuss later, but first let us look at a famous dichotomy concerning modernism and postmodernism that is not included in Hassan’s table.

The dichotomy in question can be found in Brian McHale’s influential 1987 book *Postmodernist Fiction*. However, it is important to note that, in McHale’s view, he is not describing yet another feature of postmodernist literature, but rather something that underlies all the differences depicted in lists such as Hassan’s (McHale 1996, 7). In order to do this, he borrows from Jurij

Tynjanov via Roman Jakobson the formalist concept of *dominant*, defined by Jakobson as “the focusing component of a work of art”, which “rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components” (McHale 1996, 6). Using this concept, McHale lays out the central thesis of the book: the dominant of modernist literature is epistemological, whereas postmodernist literature’s dominant is ontological (McHale 1996, 9-10) In other words:

Postmodernist fiction does not take the world for granted as a mere backdrop against which the adventure of consciousness can be played, but rather foregrounds the world itself as an object of reflection and contestation through the use of a range of devices and strategies. (McHale 2015, 146)

One important word in the quote is *foreground*, since McHale is careful to remind that epistemological dominant does not mean the absence of ontological questions or vice versa, instead the dominant is in the foregrounded, while other issues are backgrounded (McHale 1996, 11).

One of the popular postmodern devices especially well-suited to foregrounding the world, i.e. to make the text’s dominant ontological, is metafiction, defined by Patricia Waugh in her book *Metafiction* as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (1984, 2). By calling attention to the novel’s status as a work of fiction, postmodernist authors make it clear that they are not making a representation of “the world” as we know it, but rather constructing a world, like Oedipa Maas, the protagonist of Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, who cannot decide between two interpretations for a sequence of events and cries out “Shall I project a world?”² This projecting of possible worlds becomes very explicit in postmodernist works which take as their subject matter events of history, but present them in new ways, “producing ontological dislocation and groundlessness” (Berry 2015, 137). Such works have been labeled by Linda Hutcheon as *historiographic metafiction*, referring to works whose “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs . . . is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking on the forms and contents of the past” (Hutcheon 1988)(1988, 5).

² An example given for example by McHale (1996, 23)

Our last important definition of postmodernist literature comes from the writer John Barth, who influenced the discussions surrounding postmodernist literature greatly with his essays “Literature of Exhaustion” and “Literature of Replenishment” (originally published in 1967 and 1979, respectively). In “Literature of Exhaustion” Barth does not yet use the term postmodernism, instead discussing the “used-upness of certain forms”, with the “certain forms” in this case being the modernist mode of writing (1984a, 64). To counter this state of exhaustion, Barth argues, we need “technically up-to-date artist[s]”³, i.e. writers “whose artistic thinking is as *au courant* as any French New Novelist’s, but who manage nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our human hearts and conditions” (ibid., 66-67). As an example of a “technically up-to-date artist”, Barth gives Jorge Luis Borges, who Barth sees as someone who “confronts a dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work” (ibid., 69-70), a description that must have caught the eye of David Foster Wallace when he was formulating his vision for the future of fiction, which will be discussed later. By the time Barth wrote “The Literature of Replenishment” in 1979, partly as a response to what he felt were misreadings of his original essay, the term postmodernism was in wide use and he was able to comment on it explicitly. In the essay, he argues that neither writers who preceded modernism, premodernists, nor modernists were looking at “the whole story”, so there is no reason to reject either of them:

A worthy program for postmodernist fiction, I believe, is the synthesis or transcension of these antitheses, which may be summed up as premodernist and modernist modes of writing. My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates or merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back. (Barth 1984b, 203)

This time he gives Italo Calvino as an example of such writer, noting how Calvino’s work has “one foot in . . . the Italian narrative past” and “one foot in . . . the Parisian structuralist present”, which makes his fiction “both delicious and high in protein” (ibid., 204).

³ As opposed to “technically old-fashioned artist[s]”, i.e. those who write as if modernist literature had not happened or “technically up-to-date non-artists[s]”, i.e. those who write like postmodernists but lack virtuosity to make meaningful art. (Barth 1984a, 66-67)

John Barth ends his later essay by saying that he wishes postmodernist literature might later be viewed as “literature of replenishment” and it certainly cannot be denied that the period of high postmodernism produced a body of innovative and extremely heterogeneous works. However, the shock of the new postmodernist writing could not last forever and in the next section we will move on to the 1990s and beyond, where postmodernism will start to feel less radical and perhaps even exhausted.

2.2. David Foster Wallace, Post-postmodernism and New Sincerity

As became clear in the previous section, periodization in literature is not a straightforward matter and in the case of postmodernism, the problems are heightened, due to the indeterminate nature of the movement. In the end, most critics would agree that postmodernism, whatever the precise definition, is something that happened or is still happening. This means that at some point it would cease from being the dominant literary paradigm, due to the nature of literary movements, and sure enough, talk of the death of postmodernism started surprisingly early. As McHale points out, whereas modernism as a movement was only defined decades after its peak, postmodernism periodized itself from the start and writers could identify with the movement as they were writing, at the same time knowing that because they were coming after modernism, somebody would succeed them (2007). Therefore, the questions regarding the possible end of postmodernist movement were being asked almost as soon as the term itself had been accepted.

So, when did postmodernism start to end? Unsurprisingly, there are many different views and not everyone even agrees that it ended. As Burn notes, there are some early examples, like Alan Wilde arguing in 1976 that postmodernist writer Donald Barthelme’s writing was moving in a new direction beyond postmodernism (2016, 450). Then there are of course suggestions as ridiculously precise as Charles Jenck’s famous starting point for postmodernism (15 July 1972 at 3:32 pm). For example, Minsoo Kang has suggested that postmodernism ended on 18 June 1993, when the movie *Last Action*

Hero, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, premiered (Hoberek 2007). In his view, the movie showed how popular culture had appropriated the once-radical postmodernist strategies like overt irony and self-referentiality (ibid.). It can certainly be argued that by the beginning of 1990s, postmodernism had become the “dominant paradigm for the culture”, affecting discourse in academia and media to the point that its “explanatory force” started to wane (Lewis 2011, 169).

For postmodernist literature, things were not looking very good by the 90s either. The fact that postmodernism was starting to encompass all aspects of culture, made it look less radical, less avant-garde. As McHale points out, if everything from Disneyland and MTV to David Letterman was postmodern, how experimental (i.e. avant-garde) could postmodernism be (2015, 141)? Indeed, many people were feeling by 1990 that the Literature of Exhaustion envisioned by John Barth had itself become exhausted (Lewis 2011, 169) and the term postmodernism was becoming “debased coinage, applied so indiscriminately that serious cultural producers no longer wanted to be associated with it” (McHale and Platt 2016, 403). The scene was set for a new generation of writers, who had grown up with postmodernism and postmodernist writers, a group who would later be classified for example as second wave postmodernists (Lewis 2011, 170), third wave of modernism (Boswell 2003, 1) or post-postmodernists (McLaughlin 2015). These emerging movements and postmodernism beyond the 1990s will be further discussed later, but first, it would be useful to discuss the author who arguably best illustrated the 1990s dissatisfaction with postmodernism: David Foster Wallace.

Since at least Marshall Boswell’s 2003 *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, one of the earliest book-length studies of Wallace’s fiction, it has been commonplace to discuss Wallace in relation to the tradition of modernist and especially postmodernist fiction. As Boswell succinctly puts it in the opening paragraph of his book

[Wallace] confidently situates himself as the direct heir to a tradition of aesthetic development that began with the modernist overturning of nineteenth-century bourgeois realism and continued with the postwar critique of modernist aesthetics. Yet Wallace proceeds from the assumption that *both* modernism and postmodernism are essentially “done.” Rather, his work moves resolutely forward while hoisting the baggage of modernism and postmodernism heavily, but respectfully, on its back. (2003, 1)

This is the starting point for a great deal of Wallace criticism and it is easy to see why, if we look at the two most important and often-quoted pieces where he formulates his views on literature and its purpose: the essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” and Wallace’s interview with Larry McCaffery, both of which appeared for the first time in a 1993 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*.

In the lengthy essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”, which has been seen as a response to Barth’s “Literature of Exhaustion” (Boswell 2003, 9), Wallace discusses, as the title suggests, the effect television is having on viewers, the failures of television criticism and the state of literary fiction in the U.S. Like many others, Wallace argues that the postmodern aesthetic is being exhausted at the time of the essay’s writing, but for him, the main reason is television:

The fact is that for at least ten years now, television has been ingeniously absorbing, homogenizing, and re-presenting the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of Low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative. (2007, 52)

From this viewpoint, Wallace analyses dangers that are facing early 1990s fiction writers and consumers of popular culture.

At the heart of Wallace’s analysis is irony, a concept we already saw in the previous section in Hassan’s table, where modernist literature’s metaphysics had been replaced by irony in postmodernist literature (Hassan 1982, 268). As a figure of speech irony is a simple matter of meaning something other than the words you are using, but for postmodernism, “ironic, detached self-consciousness” is the thing that is most “characteristic of the . . . postmodern ‘mood’” (Spencer 2011, 266). Umberto Eco also sees irony as central to the postmodernist attitude, which, according to him, requires “revisiting” the past, but with irony and using quotes to signal your familiarity with “the already said”:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, ‘I love you madly’, because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland . . . He can say ‘As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.’ (1992, 227)

According to Eco, in the given situation, the man has succeeded in avoiding “false innocence”, but still managed to speak about love, as he wanted (ibid.). It is worth noting that Eco’s view of irony is very positive, not accounting for example for instances of irony where it is used to divide people into those who understand the irony and those who do not, that is, the targets of ridicule (Spencer 2011, 266).

Wallace saw television as the perfect medium for irony, due to the way it combines pictures with sound (2007b, 35), and one way it uses this power, is to induce a feeling of superiority and individuality in viewers, by making them feel like they are the ones who understand the irony and are not fooled by “pretentiousness and hypocrisy of outdated values” (ibid., 63) The real danger of irony as a cultural dominant and as something that people consume for six hours a day via television, Wallace argues, lies in the fact that irony is destructive, i.e. good at debunking hypocrisies for example, but “singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace” what it has destroyed (ibid. 67). This leads Wallace to famously speculate that:

The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of *anti*-rebels, born oglers, who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. (ibid., 81.)

Although, as Boswell points out, it would be wrong to think that this is a straightforward description of Wallace’s own method (2003, 15), we will encounter traces of this attitude when we start analyzing Wallace’s fiction.

The interview with Larry McCaffery that preceded “E Unibus Pluram” in the issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* further clarifies Wallace’s vision concerning the purpose of fiction. In answering the last question of the interview, Wallace talks about his and his contemporaries’ relationship with their postmodernist, avant-gardist forebears, by describing the literary scene as teenagers who have thrown a party that got out of hand and are now secretly wishing the parents would come home and restore order:

And of course we're uneasy about the fact that we wish they'd come back – I mean, what's wrong with us? . . . Is there something about authority and limits we actually *need*? And then the uneasiest feeling of all, as we start gradually to realize that parents in fact aren't ever coming back – which means we're going to have to be the parents. (McCaffery 2012, 52)

In a much-quoted part of the interview Wallace gives a very clear formulation of what he would like to see in the fiction of the new “parents”. First, he criticizes Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* as an example of a book that only wants to be a mimetic representation of a depthless and “stupid” contemporary condition, after which he argues that:

Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking *human being*. If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be. (McCaffery 2012, 26)

In this context, at least one of the ways to understand what Wallace means, is to think of the expression of humanity as the opposite of cynical, self-conscious metafictional writing, that is more concerned with textual play than humanist issues.

As many people have pointed out, after reading the essay and the interview, it would not be unreasonable to expect Wallace to produce relatively straightforward texts that would be at once distinguishable from those of his postmodern predecessors. Instead, he produces metafictional, deeply ironic works that are full of stylistic experimentation. In his influential formulation Boswell argues that this is due to Wallace's method, by which he:

uses irony to disclose what irony has been hiding. He does not merely join cynicism and naïveté: rather, he employs cynicism – here figured as sophisticated self-reflexive irony – to recover a learned form of heartfelt naïveté, his work's ultimate mode and what the work “really means,” a mode that Wallace equates with the “really human”. (2003, 17)

In this sense, he works like Barth's description of Borges as someone who “confronts a dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work” (1984a, 70). The dead end for him and his generation is self-conscious, ironic, metafiction and Wallace decides to employ it against Barth himself. He states his reason for this clearly in the interview, where he tells that Barth is one of his “real enemies” and a “patriarch for [his] patricide” (McCaffery 2012, 48), an act which Wallace tried to commit with his early story “Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way”. The story, which is

obviously a response to Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse", but which Wallace himself considered a failure, was supposed to "get [metafiction] over with, and then out of the rubble reaffirm the idea of art being a living transaction between humans" (McCaffery 2012, 41). In the end, even Wallace himself was not done with metafiction, instead it would remain an integral part of Wallace's fiction all the way up to his final, posthumous novel *Pale King* (Winningham 2015, 468).

In his comments on fiction, Wallace often stressed generational divides with references to parents, orphans and other groups (Burn 2016, 452) and it is certainly true that he felt himself part of a generation and not singular figure, identifying himself with such writers as Jonathan Franzen, William T. Vollmann and Richard Powers. Although no label has yet been permanently attached to this group of authors, there is a consensus that they "represent a break with, or at least a revision of the practice of the postmodern patriarchy" and Wallace has often been seen as the leading figure of this group of writers (Andersen 2014, 10).

One of the suggested labels for Wallace and his contemporaries, is *post-postmodernism*. Robert L. McLaughlin defines post-postmodernism as a literary movement starting in the 80s in the U.S. in response to "both a perceived exhaustion of American postmodernism and the growing dominance of television in American popular culture" (2015, 212), a definition that is clearly rooted in Wallace's literary manifesto. McLaughlin connects the rise of the movement to the general conservative turn in U.S. in the 1980s, including critics' growing impatience with postmodernist fiction, culminating in Jonathan Franzen's essay "Mr. Difficult" on difficult books and postmodernist writer William Gaddis's novels (ibid., 212-213). According to McLaughlin, the fiction of these post-postmodernist writers displays three features that "draw a fine but distinct line between postmodernism and post-postmodernism": killing the postmodern father, escaping discourse and living with the limits of knowledge (ibid., 216-220).

The first point we already saw in Wallace's patricidal story "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way", which is also one of the examples McLaughlin uses. Escaping discourse, the second feature, is defined as:

the recognition that the world as we perceive it is constructed by a complex interweaving of representations and the need to write and live one's way out of representation and in to something more real. (McLaughlin 2015, 218)

He argues that in consequence, post-postmodernist fiction is often more media savvy and better prepared to "engage a world of images and discourse" (which certainly Wallace is) and less self-referential (which Wallace definitely is not) (*ibid.*, 218). In the context of Wallace's writing, his insistence that literature should be about what it is to be a human being, I would argue, is roughly equal to the idea of getting beyond discourse. The third feature McLaughlin lists, living with the limits of knowledge, is not a radical shift from postmodernism, but rather a "change of focus":

Where postmodernism exposed the uncertainty within totalizing systems' claims to truth, post-postmodernism takes the uncertainty of epistemological systems for granted and explores instead what to do with it, how to live in the world with incomplete systems of knowledge, how various systems of knowledge can be linked together or embedded within one another to create a contingent but useful structure. (2015, 221)

For an example of this in Wallace's writing we could turn to his famous 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College, where he proposes that there is no such thing as "not worshipping", which is why we should choose to worship something that will not "eat you alive" (Wallace 2005). Wallace lists several belief systems, i.e. epistemological systems, that will not "eat you alive", but the specific system or the fact that several possibilities exist is not the point, what is important, is their usefulness in the day-to-day adult life (*ibid.*).

Adam Kelly also groups Wallace with Richard Powers and also with writers such as Michael Chabon, Jennifer Egan and Dave Eggers, but, unlike McLaughlin, he chooses a label that does not immediately refer to the tradition of modernism: New Sincerity. The term has been also used in relation to movies, poetry, visual art and music. In popular usage "the contemporary turn to sincerity tends to be regarded as a sturdy affirmation of nonironic values", like the "single-entendre principles"

Wallace talked about in his essay (Kelly 2016, 198)⁴. However, Kelly's definition of the movement, which is heavily influenced by Wallace's manifesto, is more complex and nuanced.

Kelly takes as his starting point Lionel Trilling's definitions for the terms *authenticity* and *sincerity*, where authenticity is about expressing your true self and sincerity emphasizes "intersubjective truth and communication with others" (2010b, 132). Kelly argues that whereas Trilling saw the modernist period emphasizing authenticity, Wallace and his contemporaries are turning back towards sincerity, but, as Wallace points out, this turn cannot be a naïve return to pre-modern attitudes but must be informed by study of postmodernist fiction (ibid., 132-134). The postmodernist tradition is apparent in Kelly's view that, due to for example the possibility of manipulation, "the guarantee of the writer's own sincerity cannot finally lie in representation", which is why many New Sincerity writers address the actual reader of their stories directly, meaning that:

In New Sincerity writing, the author and reader really do exist, which is to say they are not simply *implied*, not primarily to be understood as rhetorical constructions or immortalized placeholders. The text's existence depends not only on a writer but also on a particular reader at a particular place and time . . . [T]hese texts are ultimately defined by their undecidability and the affective response they invite and provoke in their reader, with questions of sincerity embedded, on a number of levels, into the reader's contingent experience of the text. (2016, 205-6)

This has naturally lots of implications for narrative theory, but the finer points of theory are not the focus of this study. Instead, the most important issue here is that Wallace was one of the founders of a literary movement that tries to actively communicate with the reader and that one of the aims of such writing for Wallace at least would be "to make the reader and writer feel less lonely" (Ibid., 200).

Other people have also seen post-postmodernist writing as exhibiting gradual return of faith in things that might have been regarded with more suspicion in the heyday of postmodernism. For example Burn, who labels Wallace and his contemporaries as second-generation postmoderns, argues

⁴ For an example of a "sturdy affirmation", see radio host Jesse Thorn's "A Manifesto for The New Sincerity" from 2006, which defines the term as "irony and sincerity combined" and ends with the proclamation "Our greeting: a double thumbs-up. Our credo: 'Be More Awesome.' Our lifestyle: 'Maximum Fun.' Throw caution to the wind, friend, and live The New Sincerity." (Thorn 2006)

that these writers show preference for story cycles, which are characterized by “continued belief in the relevance of interconnection . . . to our contemporary networked existences, and a comparatively greater belief in the value of narrative coherence at smaller scales” (2016, 459). Even more optimistically, Holland argues that literature of the twenty-first century feels “profoundly different” than postmodernist fiction, due to “a new faith in language and certainty about the novel’s ability to engage in humanist pursuits” (2013b, 1). She goes on to describe this new literature as an attempt to:

salvage much-missed portions of humanism, such as affect, meaning, and investment in the real world and in relationships between people, while holding on to postmodern and poststructural ideas about how language and representation function and characterize our human experiences of this world. (ibid., 8)

This description certainly fits Wallace’s writing, which was stylistically postmodern and informed by postmodernist thought, but at the same time tried to be human and reach out to other people, so that we would not be alone in our “tiny skull-sized kingdoms” (Wallace 2005).

In this chapter we have discussed the legacy of postmodernism and writers who have wanted to move away from it. We have seen post-postmodernist writing as a reaction to the self-reflective irony of postmodernism and as an attempt to regain faith in language and the world beyond discourses. In the next section we will look at one of the places this might take us, when we discuss what it means to be a human body and see how Wallace uses the human body as something that grounds everyone into a reality that we cannot control and that is beyond discourses.

3. The Human Body and Body Language in Literature

The previous chapter explored postmodernism, postmodernist literature and literature after postmodernism, and how these relate to the writings of David Foster Wallace. As was discussed, Wallace's critique of late postmodern aesthetics and popular culture's overreliance on irony culminated in his insistence that, even though it is hard to be "a real human being" in such a culture, fiction should still be about what it is to be a human (McCaffery 2012, 26). Then, in the discussion on post-postmodernism, we saw how this is connected to McLaughlin's idea of post-postmodernist fiction displaying a desire to escape discourse and representations into something more real. In this context, the human body could be seen as an ideal place to which writing could escape: something tactile and very human. As Ihab Hassan, one of the influential theorists of postmodernist literature, said in an interview in 1999, postmodern relativism may feel liberating "till [you] wake up with cancer one day" (Cioffi 1999, 361).

In this chapter, I will discuss bodies and body language in literature in general and in Wallace's writing. In the first section, I will first provide a short overview of central issues in the interdisciplinary field called body studies and then I will discuss how we can study bodies in literature, even though they are absent in a very concrete way in literary presentation. The latter part of this section will cover the human body's role in Wallace's writing, with a discussion on several important themes related to it that we will encounter when analyzing the stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, such as ageing, sex and disabled bodies. In this part, my approach will be heavily influenced by Peter Sloane's recent monography *David Foster Wallace and the Body* (2019). In the second section of this chapter I will then focus on an aspect of the body that has not so far been explicitly discussed in relation to Wallace: body language, or non-verbal communication. I will discuss how it can be studied in literature and its relevance to Wallace's literary ambition of moving beyond postmodernism.

3.1. The Human Body in Literature

Hillman and Maude open their introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to the Human Body in Literature* by saying that “[t]he body has always been a contested site” (2015, 1). Although body studies as such has not existed before the twentieth century, one of the central questions in the field, the relationship between mind and body, was already discussed by Plato, who saw the body “as little more than a spiritual impediment, prone as it is to the pursuit of sensory gratification and stimulation” (Sloane 2019, Introduction). This view that the easily corruptible body is just a vehicle for the soul, i.e. mind, has since been an often-recurring theme in the Christian and humanist traditions (Hillman and Maude 2015, 1). For a very long time, in addition to the body-mind dualism, the body was usually only discussed in relation to anatomy, until the 20th century and the rise of phenomenology (Sloane 2019, Introduction). Especially influential were the writings of phenomenologists Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who “privileged first-person experience and foregrounded the body’s sensuous capacity” (Hillman and Maude 2015, 2). In the humanities and sociology, the body as a topic of research started to become more prominent in the 80s and 90s, although there are plenty of earlier important studies for example in social anthropology (Turner 2012, 1–2).

One of the important concepts relating to the body that emerged in sociology in the 1980s was *corporeality*. The concept, which is roughly equal to *materiality* and *somatic*, is used to refer to the body, and “material basis of human subjectivity”, while at the same time resisting biological reductionism (Blackman 2008, 19–20). However, biology itself was no longer seen as an adversary to sociology, but instead body theory wanted to explore “the intersection of biological, social and cultural processes in subject formation” (ibid., 21.). When discussing the body in this context, we very easily arrive at a famous dichotomy and need to consider whether the body is natural or cultural. In the Christian and Cartesian traditions, the body was certainly the natural and weaker part of the pairing, but in the twentieth century, for example the poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault

presents the body as “a discursively organized product of institutionalized knowledge and control” (Hillman and Maude 2015, 2). Thus, Foucault is a perfect example for social constructionist views of the human body. In these views the corporeal body is there, but it becomes a passive mass and mere “raw material for cultural processes to take hold” (Blackman 2008, 27). The problem with these views in general, is that as a response to the essentialism of the naturalistic body, they have the fatal flaw of representing just another type of essentialism: social determinism (ibid., 29). Therefore, modern sociology and body studies have tried to establish a view of the body which rejects the rigid nature versus culture duality and instead sees the two concepts in “a complex *relationality* that is contingent and mutable” (ibid., 34). In addition to these questions concerning materiality of the body and the body’s relation to culture, the field of body studies has been interested in issues like gender, sexuality, race, biomedical technology, body modification etc.

The rising interest in the human body has also been evident in the field of literary studies. One of the important influences for the study of literary representations of the body has been the aforementioned Michel Foucault, whose views on the influence of discourses on the human body affected for example feminist readings of gender (Hillman and Maude 2015, 2). Equally popular have been analyses of representation of sexuality, ethnicity and class, stemming from identity politics (ibid.). Even though the period of postmodernism’s widest cultural impact coincides with the rise of body studies, the human body was not one of the central themes in theories of the postmodern. In Waugh’s view, the postmodern turn can be characterized as “flesh eating”, because it “effectively transformed all material ‘lumps’ into textual inscription” (2009, 133). For example, Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard discussed culture’s impact on the body, but their focus was on the “image of body, rather than the body itself” (Hillman and Maude 2015, 2). More recent literary studies on the body have usually not been as overtly theoretical, instead they have internalized the twentieth century approaches and display them implicitly, but overall are often more “historico-materialist in their approach” (ibid., 2-3).

As has been already mentioned, Wallace's writing has been studied mainly in the context of philosophy, language, postmodernism, solipsism, communication etc. The many aspects of the body and what it means to inhabit a body, however, had received relatively little attention until recently, even though they are constantly present in his texts. As Sloane points out, both the first and the last published paragraphs of Wallace's writing (in the novels *Broom of the System* and *The Pale King* respectively) explicitly raise issues concerning the body (Sloane 2019, Introduction). His interest in the body is also evident in his nonfiction, whether he is listing the apparent skin diseases of his fellow tourists on a cruise ship (Wallace 2007a, 258) or discussing the beauty of tennis player Roger Federer's playing as "reconciliation with the fact of having a body" (Wallace 2012b, 8). Although he worked in many genres of writing and the topics he wrote on were varied, there are some themes relating to the human body that emerge repeatedly.

In the example from his essay "Roger Federer Both Flesh and Not", Wallace, who was a promising junior tennis player himself, talks about "reconciliation" in reference to bodily existence. Should the reader find this concept puzzling, he helpfully provides a footnote, where he argues:

There's a great deal that's bad about having a body. If this is not so obviously true that no one needs examples, we can just quickly mention pain, sores, odors, nausea, aging, gravity, sepsis, clumsiness, illness, limits – every last schism between our physical wills and our actual capacities. Can anyone doubt we need help being reconciled? Crave it? It's your body that dies, after all. (2012b, 8)

This passage perfectly illustrates one of the key features of Wallace's views on the human body: it is always in the process of falling apart. From this fact that the body is constantly deteriorating and, in the end, will cease to function, two important, recurring themes for Wallace emerge: all bodies are anomalous and there is a constant tension between the agendas of the human body and the will of the conscious self (Sloane 2019, Conclusion).

When discussing bodies that are atypical or anomalous, we move into the field of disability studies. Disability studies is an interdisciplinary subject which has gained momentum in the previous decades, and which has shifted the discussion of disability from biomedical viewpoints to a social

view of disability (Faircloth 2012, 256). The social model sees disability as caused, not by a failing body, but by society and “basic institutional discrimination and other barriers, which serve as enablers to disability” (ibid. 257). The social model of disability is not unproblematic, and it has been criticized for example for its disavowal of individual impairments, resistance to the idea of rehabilitation and for being based on a utopia of a barrierless society (ibid., 258), but for understanding Wallace’s use of disabled bodies in his fiction, it is useful to be aware of it.

Representing disabled bodies in literary texts is a sensitive issue, but it is not something Wallace shies away from, as evidenced by the many atypical bodies in his fiction, from Johnny One-Arm in *Brief Interviews* to the wheelchair assassins in *Infinite Jest*. Reasons for the sensitivity are obvious, especially if we consider the fact that for a long time, in literature disability and disfigurement were used “to indicate, to incorporate, a character flaw”, to the point that the specific body was just a symbol for something else (Sloane 2019, chap. 4). Early literary disability studies concentrated on such representations of disabled characters, with later studies expanding into discussions on feelings associated with disabilities and stereotyping via positive perceptions (Hsy 2015, 25). More recent studies have moved into broader considerations of embodiment and normativity and they invite “readers to consider how every human body is enmeshed in – and transforms with – the physical and social conditions of a particular environment”. (ibid., 27). This challenging of normativity is certainly something Wallace engages with, since, as Sloane argues, he seems to view corporeal bodies as “inherently physically and metaphysically disabled and disabling” (Sloane 2019, chap. 4). In using disability in his writing this way, Wallace could be accused of ableism and insensitivity, but in a more sympathetic reading, he uses disability as a:

literary device in order to facilitate a more empathetically rewarding connection not simply between disabled character and (dis)able reader, but between communities of readers figured as forming a universal in-group whose uniting shared characteristic is an embodiment that is by definition disabling. (Sloane 2019, chap. 4)

The idea of embodiment as always disabling might not be immediately obvious, so it is worth looking at how Wallace ends up in this position and what kind of implications it has for his views on the self and free will.

As was already mentioned, one of the central questions in body studies is, do we *have* bodies or *are* we bodies, i.e. where is the self located. This is a question that Wallace engages with, and in his fiction, he seems to have a clear position on the issue. Sloane argues that, in terms of the traditional Cartesian mind-body dualism, for Wallace, the body is “the senior partner” in the equation (Sloane 2019, chap. 1). Wallace thus aligns himself with phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty, who sees the mind as something that emerges from the body that is interacting with its environment (Crossley 2012, 136). However, Wallace complicates this two-part system in his writing by presenting people as having three parts with agency: the conscious will of the subject, the mechanical body and the body as a physiological organism (Sloane 2019, chap. 1). For Wallace, the conscious mind’s agency is resisted by the mechanical body with its limited capabilities and the body as a physiological organism, which is hard-wired with drives like sexuality (ibid.). Conscious will might have an idea of the self, but its project of identity formation is forever challenged by the body and its failures, leading Wallace in one story to refer to embodiment as “corporeal punishment” (ibid.).

A good example of the human body as always disabling, is the process of aging. It is an undeniable fact that every single person is constantly growing older and if they reach a certain age, their bodies will lose their vitality until one day they cease to function at all. In this sense ageing makes everyone completely equal, but there are of course differences in how ageing is viewed socially. For example, historically, what is considered old age has changed and nowadays the ageing bodies of men and women are viewed very differently, which is reflected by, for example, the terms we use for old people and images in advertising (Richardson and Locks 2014, 40–41). Even though everyone experiences old age differently, it could be argued that in the present we usually only look at old age via “the objective body under the medical gaze” (Barry 2015, 132–33). Literary depictions

of the issue can be divided into two categories: “fearful gaze on the ageing body as other” and subjective stories that may try to challenge the dominant views (ibid., 135). However, even the subjective stories often involve discussing the ageing body as other, when the subject is shocked by their own ageing body (ibid., 136). Wallace engages with this idea, for example, in his short story “Forever Overhead”, where a boy who is entering pubescence is puzzled by the new “animal hair” he is growing and incomprehensible sexual feelings that come from “inside deeper than [he] knew [he] had” (Wallace 2008, 4). Elsewhere in Wallace’s writing, there are also numerous examples of male characters who are “traumatized” by the onset of puberty, of their own body changing into something unfamiliar and other (Sloane 2019, chap. 5). What unites all the characters in relation to embodiment is that:

For Wallace, ageing is simply the example *par excellence* of the reality of embodiment, because at its centre is the forceful imposition of the organismic nature of the body and the lived experience of the body as something ‘external to and other from’ the (problematic) true self (Sloane 2019, chap. 5)

It is easy to see how this “imposition” calls into question the idea of a truly free will of the conscious self.

Another theme related to the body where gender is an important aspect and which is central in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, is sex. The short story collection is seen as Wallace’s most explicit attempt to address issues such as relationships between men and women and sex (Kelly 2018, 83), so it is useful to see how Wallace’s writing presents sex as an embodied experience. As a subject of study, sexuality is a multi-faceted one, because it is at the same time private and social, driven by the physiological body and at the same time symbolic, something that we know automatically and something we learn about (Bauer 2015, 102). In addition, in the post-industrial society, sexual desire is “a culturally, socially, discursively, more pertinently commercially marketed and (com)modified variety of a once-procreative drive”(Sloane 2019, chap. 3). In Wallace’s writing sex is always complicated by power relations and narcissism, so that “[s]ex is never really about sex” (ibid.). Wallace’s view of sex in his writing is mostly pessimistic and we will see many examples of this

when we start analyzing the short stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, but for him, there is also redemptive potential in sex, because for him “real sexuality is about our struggles to connect with one another, to erect bridges across the chasms that separate selves” (Wallace 2012a, 172). The type of sex that connects people is almost entirely absent from *Brief Interviews*, which is why the stories and characters can be studied in relation to this absence.

As has already been noted, Wallace’s writing was very self-reflexive and therefore it is not perhaps surprising that there is a connection between his interest in the body and his views on writing. Sloane, in a survey on Wallace’s “anatomical poetics”, argues that:

Wallace’s most detailed and focused explorations of the human body are simultaneously allegories of writing, rendered in an anatomical poetics that manipulates the coequality of books and bodies and their metaphorical reciprocity. (2019, chap. 2)

We have already noted that Wallace was very aware of his literary predecessors (or “parents”) and their influence and also his feeling that he and his contemporaries would have to be the “parents” of the new literary movement. Sloane suggests that in addition to seeing all bodies as disabling, for Wallace “[w]riting is always a failed act that births a malformed infant”, so that in his writing he is questioning “why bodies and texts are assumed to ‘standard’ forms” (ibid.). So, in Wallace’s world, we are all in the same in-group of having a body that is always disabling and we have always deformed texts that we can try to use to sincerely express our humanity and reach other people. In the next section, in order to further discuss reaching other people, we will shift our attention from individual bodies to bodies in contact with other bodies. We will discuss body language, how it is represented in literary works, how it can be analyzed and its role in Wallace’s writing.

3.2 Body Language in Literature

Body language, or nonverbal communication, is a subject that has been studied extensively in psychology and social sciences, but not that much in literary studies. This difference in interest is understandable, since body language plays a much more central role in daily face-to-face

communication than it does in literature. In the real-world non-verbal communication happens constantly and even sub-consciously, but in literary texts it is presented consciously and selectively by the author. As Barbara Korte notes in her book *Body Language in Literature*, this means that concepts used in other fields of study cannot be applied uncritically to the study of literature, but “must be subordinated to the demands of literary analysis and used within a framework of literary theory” (1997, 7). Therefore, in this section we will focus on the issues of analyzing non-verbal communication in literary texts and seeing how this relates to Wallace’s writing and his ideas on communication and interpersonal relationships.

Body language is a common term in popular culture, but researchers prefer to speak of nonverbal communication, which is seen as a broader term (Matsumoto, Frank, and Hwang 2012, 4). Some definitions of nonverbal communication are indeed very broad, and it can be said to include “the transfer and exchange of messages in any and all modalities that do not involve words”, from your tone of voice and facial expressions to the way you decorate your home (ibid.). However, since the present study concerns people communicating with their bodies in literature, it will be more useful to discuss “body language as non-verbal behavior . . . which is ‘meaningful’ in both natural and fictional communication” (Korte 1997, 3-4). Since even the narrower definitions encompass so many types of behavior, nonverbal communication is divided into categories, for example by *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, which lists the following categories: paralanguage (“content-free vocalizations and pauses associated with speech”), facial expressions, kinesics (body language), visual behavior (including gazing) and proxemics (spatial behavior) (Druckman 2008, 530).

All the categories and concepts already mentioned can be used when analyzing literary texts, but since the literary context differs dramatically from everyday face-to-face communication, it is important to be careful. For a start, a significant part of nonverbal communication in real word scenarios is unintentional and uncontrollable (Matsumoto, Frank & Hwang 2013, 8). Indeed, in real life you cannot stop communicating nonverbally, but in the arts and especially literature, nonverbal

communication can be left out or represented in fundamentally different ways, which is why, as was already noted, the concepts developed in other fields of research must be used in a way that suits the context of literary analysis.

To further illustrate the difference between nonverbal communication in real life versus fiction, we only need to think about two central concepts in the study of nonverbal communication: encoding and decoding. Every “channel” of nonverbal communication can be analyzed from the perspective of sending a message (encoding) and receiving the message (decoding) (Druckman 2008, 530). If you smile at a friend and your friend smiles back at you, you have successfully encoded a nonverbal message and, based on the fact that your friend is smiling back at you, your friend has successfully decoded your message. If your friend was looking in another direction and did not notice your smile, you would not have communicated successfully. In contrast, in a literary text even an unnoticed smile is communicative, since it can, for example, give the reader information about the state of mind or the personality of a character. In fact, any instance of body language in a literary text is communicative “whether or not it is conscious or intentional, or whether it is decoded or not decoded within the fictional situation itself” (Korte 1997, 30).

Of course, there are numerous aspects to encoding and decoding nonverbal messages that can be considered and analyzed. In her book Korte presents a systematic framework for analyzing nonverbal communication in literary works. At first, she presents a series of “frame conditions” for analysis of nonverbal communication, two of which were illustrated by the previous example: is the nonverbal behavior interactive (manifested in the presence of a another character) and is the behavior decoded or not (1997, 36). Another important aspect of nonverbal communication in her framework is how it is related to speech, which raises several questions: is the nonverbal communication accompanied by speech, is it related to what is being said or independent and does it contradict or comply with speech (ibid.). Of these issues, perhaps the most immediately interesting for this thesis is contradictions between nonverbal communication and speech. In the previous chapter, it was noted

that Wallace saw television as a perfect medium for irony, because it combines pictures and sound, which can present contradicting messages simultaneously. As we will see in the analysis section, the stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* are filled with characters whose speech is self-conscious and ironic. In this context, nonverbal communication can then function as another method of self-conscious communication or it can contradict the characters' ironic speech and as Wallace wanted, "disclose what irony has been hiding" (Boswell 2003, 17).

When discussing nonverbal communication which contradicts the speech it accompanies, we need to also consider another central question in Korte's framework: is the nonverbal behavior conscious or unconscious (1997, 36). One of the features that differentiates nonverbal from verbal communication is the much greater amount of unconscious communication, which also means that nonverbal communication is much less controllable (Matsumoto, Frank, and Hwang 2012, 8–9). This unconscious part of nonverbal communication is significant, because it can be much more important than the conscious part in real life and in literary texts (Korte 1997, 28). For my analysis of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* this idea will be very useful, because many of the stories in the collection are about deception and manipulation. We will see that in the stories, body language is often used consciously to aide in deception, but sometimes unconscious or uncontrollable body language works against the deceptive intentions. This kind of unconscious nonverbal behavior that contradicts speech is often referred to as *leakage*, a term coined by Ekman and Friesen and defined as "specific types of body movements and facial expressions which escape efforts to deceive" (1969, 88). In real-life scenarios, nonverbal leakage can come from several expressive channels (face, voice, body) and it can be related to outright lying or for example concealing an emotion (Matsumoto and Hwang 2012b, 38; Frank and Svetieva 2012, 125). For the present study, what is important is the idea that beyond the highly self-conscious verbal communication of the characters, there might be something truer that they will not or cannot express but is being expressed by the body. In Wallace's terms, the organismic or mechanical body can override the communicative agency of the conscious

self, which is something we will see repeatedly when we analyze the stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

In addition to the frame conditions already discussed, Korte's model for classifying body language in literature employs modes and functions of nonverbal communication, all derived from studies on nonverbal communication in other fields. It is not necessary to go through all the concepts in the classification system, but some examples will now be provided to illustrate the system. The most important functional classes of nonverbal behavior for literature, according to Korte, are *emotional displays* and *externalizers* (1997, 42). In Korte's classification, externalizers are forms of nonverbal communication which signal "relatively stable mental conditions" like personality, values, opinions etc., whereas emotional displays, on the other hand, are used with "*momentary* psychological states such as affects and moods" (ibid., 40-41). It is not hard to see why these two classes are especially suitable for presenting certain aspects of a character in fiction and we will see numerous examples of these in Wallace's short stories. They will be especially relevant in connection to facial behavior, which is seen as the most important channel of nonverbal communication and thus has been studied the most (Kappas, Krumhuber, and Küster 2013, 131).

The final feature in Korte's classification of nonverbal communication relevant to literature is the mode of communication. The three modes are: kinesics, haptics and proxemics. Kinesics is about moving parts of the body and types of kinesics include the aforementioned facial behavior, gaze, body movements and automatic reactions (Korte 1997, 56-65). Haptics covers touching behavior and physical contact, things which are significantly related to cultural norms (ibid., 65-66). Proxemics, i.e. spatial behavior between characters, was relatively rare in earlier literature, but has grown in significance (ibid., 73). Spatial behavior can function for example as an externalizer of a relationship between two characters or of social status (ibid., 74-75). Mary K. Holland has argued that spatial distance between characters is important in Wallace's fiction, where greater distance can function as a mechanism which enables "successful communication, or love" (2013b, 71-72). Of course, there

are other modes of nonverbal communication that could be considered important for literature. For example, Portch has a classification in his book *Literature's Silent Language : Nonverbal Communication*, which includes similar modes, but also others, such as vocal tone, time, space and artifacts (for example the way a character dresses) (1985, 13–22). In this study, however, we will concentrate on the modes listed by Korte, which are more directly connected to the body.

There are of course many ways to present nonverbal communication in literature and there are huge differences in the amount of attention given to nonverbal communication between authors, works and periods. The short stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* are stylistically very heterogenous and the amount of body language varies, as does the way nonverbal communication is presented. For example, in the story “Forever Overhead” body language is presented via second person narration with a teenage boy as the focalizer and in the eponymous interviews, the interviewees give verbal descriptions of their and other people’s body language. In literary presentation body language is always “translated” into writing, a completely different semiotic system, which functions differently, like in the latter example, where the body language and its representation are happening at completely different times (Korte 1997, 92). Therefore, we must carefully consider the context and how or by whom body language is being represented when we start analyzing Wallace’s short stories.

What we also need to remember in the context of Wallace’s writing, is his view of the body as three-part system, comprising of the conscious self, mechanical body and the organismic body. When we discuss for example questions related to nonverbal leakage, we need to consider which part of a person is communicating. As has been proved by numerous studies, facial expressions of biological emotion are universal (Matsumoto and Hwang 2012b, 25), which means that our bodies can communicate involuntarily in a universal language. Of course, culture and learned behavior influences nonverbal communication in fundamental ways (Matsumoto and Hwang 2012a, 97), but

for this study, it is important to note that nonverbal communication might function as a way to communicate with and reach other people outside discourses.

In his interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace spoke of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as "the single most comprehensive and beautiful argument against solipsism that's ever been made", because of how it argues that "for language even to be possible, it must always be a function of relationships between persons" (McCaffery 2012, 44). However, in Wallace's fiction, the highly self-conscious characters constantly use language to construct their own solipsistic cages. In these cases, body language, with its ability to "by-pass thought routes" (Portch 1985, 4), still has the potential to connect people via a shared, universal language, something completely human. And maybe depictions of such a nonverbal connection between humans is something an artist could use, as Wallace himself says, to "appl[y] CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" (McCaffery 2012, 26).

By now, it is hopefully clear that studying Wallace's short stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* in the context of nonverbal communication can yield interesting results. As was discussed in the first section of this chapter, the human body holds a very important place in Wallace's writing. At the same time, he was interested in issues of language, communication and reaching other people as an escape from the dangers of solipsism. In addition, it can be argued that because short stories are a genre where "the seemingly minor" can be of great importance, the expressive potential of nonverbal communication is heightened (Portch 1985, 39). In the next section of this thesis, we will see just how important the instances of nonverbal communication in Wallace's writing can be, when we analyze the short stories in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

4. Body Language in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

So far, we have looked at the history of postmodernism and postmodernist literature, David Foster Wallace's literary project of moving beyond postmodernist literature and issues related to the human body and nonverbal communication in literature. In this section of the thesis, the ideas presented in the previous chapters will be applied in an analysis of Wallace's short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, originally published in 1999. The book has usually been seen as a relatively minor work in Wallace's oeuvre, always obscured by his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* that preceded it. For example, Boswell argues that it was the first work where Wallace did not do anything new, instead revisiting themes already present in his work, which is why it is possibly the most "characteristic" work of his (2003, 181–82) and as such well suited for the present study.

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men consists of longer and shorter pieces, with some of them, like the eponymous interviews, appearing under identical titles throughout the book. Due in part to this atypical structure, the book has been called a *story cycle* (ibid., 182). As was previously noted, Stephen J. Burn has argued that the story cycle is a key feature of second-generation postmodernist (i.e. post-postmodernist) literature, although he places more emphasis on the "loosening" of contemporary novels (such as Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and *Pale King*) than short story collections becoming more like story cycles (2016, 462). Nevertheless, *Brief Interviews* resembles a story cycle in many ways, for example in its use of "recurrent development", where thematically linked stories are placed next to each other, creating dialectical patterns (Burn 2016, 458–59; Boswell 2003, 182). However, the structure of the book is anything but neat. For example, the interviews are out of numerical order and the central story "Octet" consists of only four or five pieces, depending on how you count, instead of the promised eight. This messiness leads Holland to note that "[a]t every turn, the collection escapes or disappoints its own plans for itself, leaving the reader to make sense of the incommensurate mess in her hands" (2013a, 110).

Thematically *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, as Wallace himself said and as was already noted, is about sex and male-female relationships (Kelly 2018, 83). More specifically, the stories concentrate mostly on the “warped”, linguistic “workings of relationships” (Holland 2013a, 107). As was discussed in the previous section, Wallace’s views on sex, at least in this book, are fairly negative. For the characters in the stories, sex has become just “another means by which they can descend deeper and deeper into their self-made cages of self-consciousness and solipsistic dread” (Boswell 2003, 183). In this chapter, we will encounter the idea of being imprisoned by self-consciousness and the horror of solipsism many times.

This chapter consists of four sections. In the first section, the focus will be on short stories and instances where body language is used similarly to how most of the characters use verbal communication: self-consciously and manipulatively. After that, we will look at examples where nonverbal communication is ambivalent, or where characters are unable to decode it, and see how this disrupts the narratives. The third section will focus on nonverbal leakage, i.e. cases where the narration or characters assume nonverbal communication to be more truthful than what is being said in cases where the two modes of communication contradict each other. In the final section, we will discuss the last interview in the story cycle and see what ideal verbal and nonverbal communication could look like in Wallace’s world.

4.1. Self-Conscious Body Language and Manipulation

The prototypical protagonist in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is a heterosexual, intellectual man, who is well-versed in a variety of discourses and is extremely self-aware of how anything he does or says can be read by other people. This kind of person’s world view is perfectly encapsulated in interview #28, where two men are discussing feminism and women and the other says:

today’s postfeminist era is also today’s postmodern era, in which supposedly everybody now knows everything about what’s really going on underneath all the semiotic codes and cultural conventions, and everybody supposedly knows what paradigms everybody is operating out of,

and so we're all as individuals held to be far more responsible for our sexuality, since everything we do is now unprecedentedly conscious and informed. (Wallace 2008, 195)

This is like a turbo-charged version of the kind of person Umberto Eco envisioned, when he discussed how to use irony to acknowledge what has been said before when talking about love (1992, 227). These characters are not only aware of what has been said before, but also what has been said about what has been said before. Of course, in Wallace's stories this self-consciousness does not lead to successful communication in the way that Eco suggested. Instead what happens, as has already been mentioned, is that these characters end up being trapped in their own vicious cycles of self-consciousness and narcissism.

In this section I want to look at the stories and instances in *Brief Interviews* where body language is employed or seen by characters as just another semiotic code that can be used to manipulate and present a pose. Later in the thesis we will discuss cases where nonverbal communication contradicts the accompanying verbal communication, but for now, we are concentrating on the similarities, in order see how the characters can use and view the human body and body language in the same self-consciously postmodernist way they treat verbal language. All the examples will be of characters presenting themselves to other characters or commenting on nonverbal behavior of others, so that the nonverbal communication is interactive and decoded by a character (Korte 1997, 36). Furthermore, the examples of nonverbal communication will mostly be examples of externalizers, defined by Korte as:

those forms of NVC which convey information about a character apart from his or her temporary emotions: relatively stable mental conditions (such as psychopathological states, attitudes, opinions, values, personality traits), but also mental and intellectual activities and conditions (1997, 41)

Of course, it is not easy to infer another person's values or opinions from their body language, which is why the act of interpreting and what it reveals about the observing character can be more interesting in this context than the actual "meaning" of the nonverbal behavior.

The first story we will discuss, "Think", is one of the shortest pieces in *Brief Interviews* (less than two pages), but it is so full of nonverbal communication, that it works well as a starting point for

discussing self-conscious body language and manipulation. The story is a snapshot of a moment, where a man is about to have an affair with “the younger sister of his wife’s college roommate” (Wallace 2008, 61). We enter the scene as they are alone in a room in their underwear. The woman tries to act seductively, but the man starts to hesitate and, in the end, instead of proceeding with the sexual encounter, he gets on his knees and starts to pray. The story consists of very little action, but what little there is, is almost exclusively about interpreting the other person’s body language.

A great deal of attention in the story is given to the facial expressions of the woman. As has already been mentioned, the face is the most prominent and complex channel of nonverbal behavior (Matsumoto and Hwang 2012b, 15) and facial expressions are also prominent in literary texts (Korte 1997, 56–57). In “Think”, facial expressions are loaded with meaning, from the first time the woman’s face is mentioned: “a level gaze and a slight smile, slight and smoky, media-taught” (Wallace 2008, 61). Already the word *taught* tells us that this is an example of self-conscious body language. The brief mention is followed soon by a longer description in the same vein:

Her expression is from Page 18 of the Victoria’s Secret catalogue. She is, he thinks, the sort of woman who’d keep her heels on if he asked her to. Even if she’d never kept her heels on before she’d give him a knowing, smoky smile, page 18. (Wallace 2008, 61)

In this story the man is the focalizer, so it can be assumed that he is the one who assigns the label for the woman’s expression, although it is also possible that she is self-consciously encoding a rehearsed expression. In any case, what is clear, is that in this moment, nonverbal communication has been hijacked by commodified sexual imagery from advertisements. The man is aware of the conventions of this imagery, but this knowledge is in no way beneficial in the situation. Typically for the characters in *Brief Interviews*, the man is most interested in matching the woman with a type, as opposed to truly interacting on an individual level.

Since the face has so much communicative potential, it also follows that the face has the most potential to be misread by an incompetent or malicious person or having something projected onto it. Indeed, it is mentioned in the story that the man has missed the woman’s many subtle, suggestive

messages, both verbal and non-verbal (Wallace 2008, 61). Interestingly, he comments on the messages he has missed by saying that: “[w]e see these things a dozen times a day in entertainment but imagine we ourselves, our own imaginations, are mad” (ibid.). So, not only does the man impose an image from a lingerie advertisement upon the real situation when looking at the woman’s expression, but he also does the opposite by not believing something to be real because it reminds him of something he has seen in popular entertainment. What connects these two things is the fact that his imagination has been overtaken by mediated images, which make it more difficult for him to decode verbal and non-verbal communication of another person. As Kelly argues, “[i]n the age of advertising, it becomes impossible to separate . . . those communications genuinely directed toward the benefit of the receiver from those that serve primarily to draw attention to the sender” (2010b, 137).

Another interesting comment on the woman’s expression comes when it is noted that it is the kind of expression that “looks devastating in a photograph but becomes awkward when it’s maintained over real time” (Wallace 2008, 62). This idea of the body in real life versus depictions in mass media is echoed in another story in *Brief Interviews*, the awkwardly titled “Tri-Stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko”. The story is about Sisse Nar, a woman who has gone through “Surgical Enhancement” and has become “far, far lovelier than the stony vicissitudes of Nature would have provided solo” (Wallace 2008, 201). She is cast in a television production, where her only job is to lie still, to be “poetry in stasis” and “gloriously devoid of all function” (Wallace 2008, 208–9). In the end she is killed by a stalker who crashes into her house and is shocked to find her doing aerobics: “not only upright & awake but in what looked like for all the world vigorous purposive motion” (Wallace 2008, 214). Here the woman is not trying to uphold her media-generated image in real life and it shocks the man who is so used to these images, that he finds it impossible to process her as a real person.

Korte has discussed the difference between spontaneous and controlled facial expressions, using an example from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where there is only one officially accepted facial expression, noting that in the novel, the "unnatural degree of facial control underlines the restrictiveness of the political system" (1997, 57). In "Think", the woman is also keeping up an expression for an unnaturally long time, but here nobody is forcing her. Instead, she is controlled by something more abstract: her self-consciousness, what she presumes the man wants or societal views on how a woman should look and act, which are expressed in a more literal way in "Tri-Stan", where the woman is told to lie still and only be looked at. This shows us that, just like the male protagonist in "Think", the woman is also self-conscious and trying to control how she is being read. So perhaps the artificiality of her body language is not only projected by the man, which is suggested when she turns to close the door of the bedroom, the man thinks her movements and gestures are "tumid with some kind of significance" and he "realizes she's replaying a scene from some movie she loves" (Wallace 2008, 61).

In contrast to the woman in "Think" who was using her body language to merely appear seductive, there are many examples in *Brief Interviews* of self-conscious men using nonverbal and verbal communication to explicitly manipulate others. Most of the more explicit examples can be found in the eponymous interviews. Normally interviews include two people, but in these interviews the interviewer is only represented by the letter Q and her questions have been omitted, making her "the absent centre of the narrative" (Hayes-Brady 2017, 15). These interviews express only one voice in "what could, needs to be, or is, a larger conversation" (Holland 2013a, 109) and as such they are perfectly suited for examining solipsistic and narcissistic characters.

An example par excellence of someone manipulating with body language, is the interviewee in interview #40. He is a man who has a disfigured arm and who starts his story by recounting two acts of naming, when he tells that he was the one who gave him the nickname Johnny One-Arm and that he has named his disfigured arm "the Asset" (Wallace 2008, 69). In Wallace's fiction names and the

act of naming are “central to the development of identity, and to the appropriation and exercise of power” (Hayes-Brady 2017, 1) and in this story, we see a character forming his identity by directly referring to something many people would try to hide. However, in the course of the story this act of naming starts to feel less empowering, when he describes how he uses the arm to invoke sympathy and manipulate women into having sex with him. A key part of his system is to get the women to say out loud that he must be making his disfigurement sound worse than it can be and that he shouldn’t feel so sad about it, which is a polite way to react to a disability. After verbally manipulating the women by pretending to be shy about showing his arm to them, he takes it out and then uses a practiced facial expression to elicit more sympathy. He describes how he can make a face that is “totally shy and scared and trusting” and how he can also make his “lip even tremble a little” (Wallace 2008, 72). In the end, the interviewee summarizes his success with his manipulative method with the phrase “[m]ore pussy than a toilet seat, man” (ibid.). Here we have then a perfect example of the kind of hideous men the collection is about. He is self-aware of his disability and how it is perceived by able-bodied people, which allows him to use his verbal and nonverbal abilities to exploit empathy and manipulate women into having sex with him.

We meet a similarly calculative and manipulative protagonist in interview #48, where the interviewee tells about his complex method for manipulating women into allowing him to tie them up. The interviewee begins his interview by talking about things that cannot be communicated verbally, by using as an example workers who can identify the sex of a newly hatched chick, but cannot express verbally how they are able to do it. He then suggests that his own method for recognizing the most suitable women works as mysteriously. Already we are in the realm of nonverbal communication, which can, and often does, work unconsciously, or as the interviewee thinks, through “[s]ome mysterious sixth sense, perhaps” (Wallace 2008, 86).

What is also clear from the start, is that the interviewee is a person who is extremely self-conscious of how he expresses himself verbally and nonverbally. In contrast to Johnny One-Arm, this

man is clearly academically gifted, to the point that he is “a learned poststructuralist, so skilled in deconstructionist practice he puts his own spoken language through the meat grinder of Derridean analysis” (Boswell 2003, 191). For example, when he is discussing how he knows which women are suitable for his plans, he says:

I can sense that they will go along. Perhaps *go along* [flexion of upraised fingers to signify tone quotes] is not a fortuitous phrase for it. I mean, perhaps, [flexion of upraised fingers to signify tone quotes] *play*. Meaning to join me in the contract and subsequent activity. (Wallace 2008, 85)

The shift in tone indicated by the italicized words and the use of the “tone quotes” perfectly illustrates the interviewee’s communicative habits and shows a perfect match between verbal and nonverbal communication by combining linguistic self-awareness and sense of irony with a physical gesture. Here the gesture works as an emblem, which in nonverbal communication means acts that have an unambiguous meaning, like giving a thumbs-up (Korte 1997, 49). By using these gestures, he makes it clear that he knows the limitations of language and pre-empts criticism for his choice of words, for example, when he compares trying to figure out which women will agree with his suggestion to separating *hens* from *cocks*, terms which certainly have connotations when talking about finding a suitable partner.

The fact that the interviewee employs emblems in his nonverbal communication is very fitting. As was pointed out, emblems have a specific meaning and in addition, in this case, the emblems, i.e. the tone quotes, are used to control the way his words should be interpreted. This complements his communicative strategy, which is based on absolute control. This is further exemplified by his detailed account of his method for asking the crucial question on the third date, where we learn he is trying to control every aspect of communication with the other person. He is aware of the cultural norms affecting proxemics, or spatial behavior, and does not invade the woman’s personal space which could be interpreted as threatening, instead making sure they are seated at opposite ends of a “four-and-a-half foot ottoman” (Wallace 2008, 88; Korte 1997, 74). He also tries to control his kinesic communication, by making sure that he and the woman “are not in a posture of particular

intimacy” (Wallace 2008, 86). Even the music he chooses is supposed to underline the overall neutrality of the situation, by being “abstract nearly to the point of atonality” (Wallace 2008, 89). All of this is in concordance with his verbal communication, as he asks, without context and, according to him, “without any attempt at charm or assuasion”, the question “[h]ow would you feel about my tying you up” (Wallace 2008, 86–87). Of, course all of this has been preceded by “a great deal of complex body language” on their previous dates, so that the sincerity and the seeming avoidance of manipulation is, in the end, just another pose, “honesty as ploy” (Boswell 2003, 186).

It is notable how the interviewee wants to give the impression that he is in command of his body language and communicating with it clearly, whereas, in his view, the women he brings to his home are less aware of what they are communicating nonverbally and in the case of misunderstandings, it is they who are misreading the man. As has been mentioned, women have traditionally been equated with their bodies, so it would then make sense that this hideous man would see the women as being more controlled by their organismic or mechanical body, whereas he thinks that he, as a man, is able to assert conscious control over his body. When talking about the silence following his pivotal question, the man explains how he thinks that “during this interval any gesture or affect on the subject’s part will reveal a great deal more about her than any amount of banal conversation or even clinical experimentation ever would” (Wallace 2008, 91). The idea of body language being more truthful than verbal communication comes up in detail in a later section, but in this context, we need to only note how this is in stark contrast to the way the man talks about his own body language. The woman’s body language gives away her true self, whereas the man boasts of his ability to control himself, for example noting how, when he asks the question, he does not “appear in any way eager or hesitant or conflicted” nor “aggressive or threatening” (Wallace 2008, 92). If he appears threatening, the fault is in the observer:

Some subjects have professed to see it as . . . *menacing*, but I can assure you no menace is intended . . . I radiate an expertise that may, I admit, to someone of a particular psychological makeup, appear menacing. (Wallace 2008, 95)

His belief in his mastery of nonverbal communication is such, that it in his view, it can be only disrupted by bodily malfunctions. In a humorous instance, he describes how he once brought a woman home and his scalp was twitching in a way that made him move his eyebrow up and down “in a rapid and lascivious way” (Wallace 2008, 93), which he feels makes it impossible for him to succeed in his mission. This exemplifies perfectly how in Wallace’s fiction the mechanical body challenges the conscious will of the person and disrupts other forms of communication.

At the end of the interview, the protagonist describes how he ties up those who agree to his suggestion and how the most important moment for him comes when he asks the tied-up woman “Are you frightened?” and he waits for an answer:

What is required is a twin acknowledgement. She is to acknowledge that she is wholly in my power at this moment. And she must also say she trusts me. She must acknowledge that she is not afraid I will betray or abuse the power I’ve been ceded. (Wallace 2008, 96–97)

After this he starts to weep and tells the women “the psychological origins of the game and the needs it serves” (Wallace 2008, 97), which are both made comically obvious by having him previously talk about his mother. The mother of the protagonist, we learn, was “a psychiatric case-worker” who would punish the protagonist as a child by telling him to stay in his room, until his “[f.f.] *time-out* was completed” (Wallace 2008, 95). The protagonist seems traumatized by what he sees as a betrayal of trust by the mother, who could be very loving but also restrict his movement by keeping him in his room. Therefore, he wants to become an authority figure like her mother, put the women in his childhood self’s shoes and then not betray their trust like his mother had.

It is easy to see how much the protagonist, this “hideous man”, is another example of someone looking for a human connection as he weeps and reveals his “innermost psyche” and “beg[s] compassion” (Wallace 2008, 97) from the women he has seduced, manipulated psychologically and then tied up in his bed. The man may very well be aware of his psychological state and he may be a masterful communicator both verbally and nonverbally, but it would hard to see him benefitting from this self-awareness. On the contrary, he has ended up in a situation where he must go through an

extremely complicated ritual of words and gestures in order to satisfy his psychological needs. He notes that most women are moved by his predicament and they comfort him “as best as they can, restricted as they are by the bonds [he’s] made” (Wallace 2008, 97). The expression “as best as they can” suggests that he is not still being wholly comforted, and he acknowledges that he is the one who has created the restrictions that stop him from getting physical or emotional connection. This takes us very neatly back to Wallace’s vision of an unhappily self-conscious postmodernist person, lost in a narcissistic loop and trying to find some kind of human connection.

The interview #48 ends with the interviewee answering a question on whether the scenario he has described ends in “actual intercourse”. He answers by saying: “It’s unpredictable. There’s simply no way to tell” and “Sometimes one just has to go with the mood.” (Wallace 2008, 97) These comments stand in humorous contrast to the clinically accurate description of his methods that has preceded them, but at the same time they suggest another side to the man. Until this point in the story, the man has shown how self-conscious and analytical he is, aware of the connotations of words, discourses and gestures, but clearly suffering. Like so many characters of Wallace, he is aware of his prison but this awareness does not make him free. The idea that he can “go with the mood” with another person suggests he is capable of genuine human connection, while at the same time obsessed with the self-reflection that is making him unhappy. It is also interesting, how he believes that it is “unpredictable” and impossible to tell when this connection is happening. In the next section we will look at other such moments in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, where nonverbal communication and bodies send signals that are unexpected, ambiguous or otherwise hard to decode.

4.2. Body Language and Ambiguity

In the previous section we concentrated on instances in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* where nonverbal communication is used successfully, albeit often maliciously, and in concordance with verbal communication. Of course, nonverbal communication is not always successful and there can

be problems in encoding or decoding a message. Also, unlike emblems, which we discussed in the previous section, most nonverbal communication cannot be translated into an unambiguous verbal expression and when unclear nonverbal communication is not accompanied by speech, misunderstandings are likely to happen. Because of these features, nonverbal communication can sometimes be a disruptive element in Wallace's world, where the self-conscious characters would like to be in total control of the way they communicate. In this section we will focus on those short stories in the collection, where nonverbal communication is unsuccessfully encoded or decoded and see how it affects the characters and narratives.

We can start by looking back at the story "Think", which we already discussed in the previous section. It was noted how the man in the story tends to read body language through a postmodern gaze of a person who is very self-conscious. In the instances already discussed, he confidently read the woman's body language and detected echoes of images in popular culture in it. But there are also other kinds of reactions to body language in the story. In these cases, as we shall see, nonverbal communication is not controlled or easily analyzed, which creates tensions and eventually results in the open-ended climax of the story.

In addition to analyzing the woman's body language very carefully, the male protagonist of "Think" is depicted as being highly self-conscious of his own body language. Right at the beginning, we are told that he "thinks to kneel", but at the same time "he knows what she might think if he kneels" (Wallace 2008, 61). He is clearly trying to control his body language, but right away he starts to fail. The first instance of unintentional nonverbal communication comes at the start of the story when his forehead "snaps clear" and then the woman "sees his color heighten and forehead go smooth in a kind of revelation" (ibid.). Indeed, a bit later this feeling makes him go down on his knees suddenly and involuntarily: "It's not even that he decides to kneel – he simply finds he feels weight against his knees" (ibid.). Here we have a very concrete example of an instance where the body takes

over and overrides the conscious will of the subject by externalizing something that the man wouldn't necessarily want to express.

It is not clear why the man is kneeling, and we are told that "[h]is position might make her think he wants her underwear off" (ibid.). The position is still possible to be read in the familiar, "media-taught" sexual way and at this point the woman is still moving towards him. However, he soon "clasps his hands in front of his chest" which makes it clear that "he is kneeling to pray" (Wallace 2008, 62). Suddenly the man's posture is not a sign of sexual desire, but of something spiritual and this makes the woman stop. We are specifically told that "[h]er breasts stop their slight tremble and sway when she stops" (ibid.), signifying the abrupt ending of erotic tension.

As the man is praying, his "supplicatory" gaze is directed at the ceiling, his "lips are soundlessly moving" and at the same time the woman "stands confused" (Wallace 2008, 62). Eye contact is an important part in maintaining contact between two people (Korte 1997, 59), so here the man has broken the connection by pointing his gaze away from the woman. Korte points out that avoiding another person's gaze can be a sign of subordination and an acknowledgement of the other's person power (1997, 60), but here there is no obvious dynamic of power between the two people. What power the woman has, is that she could disturb the revelation the man is having, which would explain why the man turns his gaze from the woman to the heavens, from the profane to the sacred.

In addition to averting his gaze, the man is talking to himself soundlessly, presumably praying, so his verbal communication is also directed away from the woman. As the situation has changed dramatically, the woman is understandably confused and forced to read the situation again. She becomes self-aware of her nudity and then "[s]he's not sure how to stand or look while he's gazing so intently upward" (Wallace 2008, 62). Very quickly the situation has changed from a sexual encounter to something that she is unable to understand and she has no idea which kind of body language to use. Just a moment ago she has been in control and keeping up a facial expression for a

long time, but now she does not know how to act, so she crosses her arms in a sign of rejecting the situation.

Her self-awareness becomes even more heightened as she becomes “aware of just how she’s standing, how silly it might look through a window” (Wallace 2008, 62). Her earlier facial expressions and movements were a conscious choice, nonverbal behavior that she knew was appropriate in the movie-like scenario she wanted to enact. They were expressions that were supposed to be easy to decode, aimed at the man, but now that the situation has become unfamiliar, she is no longer sure how to act. Nonverbal communication requires the ability to use it in context, what Nowicki and Duke call utilitarian accuracy (2013, 445), but here the context has changed too dramatically for the woman. In the moment, the worst thing she can think of is that somebody might see them through the window, like somebody watching a television, and the scene and her appearance wouldn’t make sense. Wallace talked about how there are aspects of the American society that “make it distinctively hard to be a real human being” (McCaffery 2012, 26) and here we see an example of person who finds it difficult to act in a scenario that does not conform to stereotypes of televisual narratives.

In the end, the woman finally communicates verbally with the man, asking a “three word question”, which at least Zadie Smith presumes to be “What the fuck?” (2009, 271) The man replies with the enigmatic answer: “[i]t’s not what you think I’m afraid of” (Wallace 2008, 62). It is not immediately clear to the woman what the man means, but the story seems to suggest that she might understand if she tried “putting herself in his place” (Wallace 2008, 62). The final line of the story makes the suggestion more explicitly physical: “And what if she joined him on the floor, just like this, clasped in supplication: just this way” (Wallace 2008, 62), suggesting that mirroring each other’s physical posture could lead to a more empathetic connection between them.

We are not told what the man thinks or if the woman “puts herself in his place”, instead, this job is left to us, the readers (Smith 2009, 273). This method of demanding that the reader get to the

level of the character and then complete the story by empathizing with him, fits perfectly with Kelly's ideas of New Sincerity writing depending on a "particular reader" and texts being defined by their "undecidability and the affective response they invite and provoke in their reader" (2016, 205–6).

Smith does her part as a reader and gives us her response to the text by saying:

So here goes: the girl thinks he's afraid of the sin, of the marital betrayal, because that's the kind of thing it usually is on TV. He thinks she thinks this—and he's right. But the man himself is afraid of something else; of this "media-taught" situation, of the falsity, of living a cliché, and he has a sudden urge to feel like a human being, which is to say, humbled, and really connected, both to the person standing naked before him and to the world . . . Solipsism is here countered with humility; the "self alone" prays for a relation.(2009, 272)

We do not get to witness the connection between the two people in the story, but what the text suggests, is that by disrupting the clichéd sexual encounter with his body language that signified a yearning "for a relation", the man has presented a possibility of escaping self-aware, ironic detachment and reaching another person.

The next short story we will discuss, "Signifying Nothing", immediately follows "Think" in the collection. Plot-wise, it is the story of a young man who suddenly remembers an incident from his past involving his father and then tries to understand and come to terms with that encounter. Compared to "Think", the overall feeling of the story is very different, with the first sentence setting the tone for the informal first-person narration: "Here is a weird one for you" (Wallace 2008, 63). What connects the two stories are the fascination with reading facial expressions and the exploration of inappropriate and indecipherable body language's ability to disrupt social situations.

The incident at the heart of "Signifying Nothing", is described by the narrator right at the beginning of the story, where he tells how he "couple of years ago" suddenly remembered how, when he was a child, his father exposed himself to him (Wallace 2008, 63). He describes the scene in the following way:

My father came down and came into the rec room, and was standing in front of me, like between me and the TV, not saying anything, and I didn't say anything. And, without saying anything, he took his dick out, and started kind of waggling it in my face. (ibid.)

It is a disturbing premise for a story, but, strangely, nothing else happens in the incident and the story is not that concerned about it as an act of sexual abuse of a child. Instead, the narrator is fixated on the strangeness of the whole thing. Even from the short passage we can see that the narrator notes twice that his father was not saying anything and also points out that he himself also remained silent. Soon the narrator repeats that “the whole time, he did not say anything (I would have remembered if he had said anything)” (Wallace 2008, 63). Because the narrator is unable to decode the message in the physical gesture, he is reaching for a memory of words, because their meaning should be much clearer. It is therefore understandable that he is from the beginning frustrated with the memory. Because he does not understand the incident, he tries to analyze the gestures his father made. The narrator thinks that “there was something threatening and a little bully-seeming about the way he did it” and that the “little hole-thing at the end looked slitty and pissed off” (Wallace 2008, 63–64), but these observations do not provide any explanation for what happened.

Because the narrator is unable to truly find meaning in the physical act that the father performed and in the absence of verbal communication, he concentrates on trying to remember the expression on his father’s face. Despite his efforts he is unable to remember “if there had been any kind of look or emotion, during it, on his face” (Wallace 2008, 65). In the previous story we discussed, “Think”, we saw how the human face was able to communicate very clearly and send many kinds of messages. Here the narrator is reaching for the memory of a facial expression because, due to the human face’s great communicative potential, it would be the next best thing in the absence of verbal communication. But again, he cannot remember any particular expression. For the narrator, the memory of the incident is certainly full of sound and fury, but since it is the only time something like it happened and since he can find no motive for the action, it seems to signify nothing, which adds another disturbing layer to the incident.

When the narrator confronts his father about the incident, the father once again does not say anything. Instead, he initially ignores the question, but when the narrator repeats the question, the

father turns to his son silently: “He does not say one thing, however, this *look* he gives me says it all” (Wallace 2008, 65). Again, the narrator becomes fixated on his father’s facial expression, but this time he reads the message on his face very clearly. He sees his father’s face express disgust, disbelief and embarrassment “for himself for even being related to [the narrator]” (Wallace 2008, 65). This enrages the narrator, who becomes estranged from the family and starts to fantasize daily about killing his father:

Almost every day, I imagined that, as I went home and was kicking his ass, my father would keep asking me why I was doing it, and what it meant, but I would not say anything, nor would my face have any look or emotion on it as I beat the shit out of him. (Wallace 2008, 66)

The narrator is full of patricidal rage, but what is most interesting about his fantasy is how he wants to deny his father any sense of his motivation by controlling his nonverbal communication, just like he himself has been denied a reason for the incident with his father.

The previously discussed story “Think” ended with the question: what would happen if the woman placed herself in the man’s position? In that story, we got no answer to the question, but here the narrator eventually starts to think about the situation from the father’s point of view and he wonders if it is possible that he does not remember what happened:

It is not like I totally believed my father had no memory of it, but more like I was admitting, little by little, it was possible he blocked it out. Little by little, it seemed like the moral of a memory of any incident that weird is, anything is possible. (Wallace 2008, 67)

This shift in perspective is something the characters in Wallace’s stories are often unable to do, lost as they are in their own solipsistic worlds. As Smith points out, the characters in these stories often tunnel inward when they keep going over their thoughts, but here the narrator suddenly turns outwards “to the infinite unknowability of other people” (2009, 279).

After this epiphany, the narrator decides to forgive his father and reconnect with his family, by meeting them in a restaurant for his little sister’s birthday. At first his father’s face has “zero expression either way” (Wallace 2008, 68), which makes the scene seem tense. However, the narrator soon tells a joke, which releases the tension and we get a description of the father smiling, the mother laughing hard and finally the narrator tells how he “pretended to look down and make a face and we

all laughed” (Wallace 2008, 68). In the end the facial expressions of all the people are easy to read and decoded correctly by other people. The story starts from an act non-verbal communication that is aggressive, invades another person’s personal space and is impossible to understand. This disruption is overcome only after the narrator uses empathy to acknowledge the other person’s view of the events. In the end people are connecting with each other and their nonverbal communication is friendly and fits the context. In a way that fits a post-postmodern narrative; the most important thing is not that there are multiple possible versions of the event, but how the narrator is able to do something useful with this knowledge by reaching out to other people.

The two stories we have so far discussed in this section, “Think” and “Signifying Nothing”, both focus on situations where two people are communicating with each other and there is some form of a communication breakdown. In contrast, the next story we will analyze, “Forever Overhead”, focuses much more on a person’s relationship with their own body. This story will be briefly contrasted with “Death Is Not the End”, the story that precedes it. The stories follow the short opening piece of the collection, and this closeness to each other is the first of many signs that the two stories are related. More explicitly, they are related by being both set at a pool and by both of them dealing with issues relating to ageing and the human body.

Whereas the two previously discussed stories invited implicitly or explicitly the reader to enter the story, “Forever Overhead” seems to come straight at the reader. The narrative voice is in second person present tense imperative, “a fashionable conceit of the 90s” (Smith 2009, 260), leaving the reader feeling that they are being addressed directly. The story is also surprisingly realist as opposed to metafictional, making it a “*bildungs-roman* heart” of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, a “narratively and structurally antirealist collection” (Holland 2013a, 112). In addition, on an emotional level, in the middle of all the other stories, “Forever Overhead” surprises with its tenderness.

The story opens with the acknowledgement that “important things are happening” to the boy and especially his body (Wallace 2008, 1). He is starting to grow “[c]runchy, animal hair” in new

places, and his voice is changing in way that makes it at moments uncontrollable (Wallace 2008, 4). Already we see how, for the boy, pubescence means the organismic and mechanical body taking over more, by imposing changes and awakening sexual feelings that come “from an inside deeper than you knew you had” (4). The fact that these changes are just “happening” regardless of will and the feeling that the new features are more animalistic, exemplify Wallace’s general tendency of treating puberty as a period that is associated with moving on to “a free-floating anxiety about the otherness of one’s uncanny body” (Sloane 2019, chap. 1). Indeed, in a sense, the boy, having “grown into a new fragility” (Wallace 2008, 4), “is becoming an object other than the boy” (Sloane 2019, chap. 1).

With his strange new body and his family with him, the boy is spending his thirteenth birthday at a public swimming pool. We are told that his father is there “on his big stomach, back like the hint of a hump of a whale, shoulders curling with animal spirals” (Wallace 2008, 8), showing what the boy’s body is becoming. At the same time, the boy’s little sister is playing with other “thin” and “shrill” girls (Wallace 2008, 5). She has not yet experienced the transformation, and she is playing a game where she is “being blind” (ibid.), unable to yet see what the boy is starting to see.

What the boy is seeing, is presented in crystal clear detail, giving us what feels like an “unmediated sensory overload” (Smith 2009, 260). In the “deep red tired light” and surrounded by the pool’s “too-clean smell”, he observes other people in the crowd and notices boys like him and old people “on stick legs”, but he is of course most interested in “girl-women”:

Curved like instruments or fruit, skin burnished brown-bright, suit tops held by delicate knots of fragile colored string against the pull of mysterious weights, suit bottoms riding low over the gentle juts of hip totally unlike your own . . . You almost understand (Wallace 2008, 6)

So not only is the boy seeing his own body as the other and unable to understand it, the women’s bodies are to him even more “mysterious” and “totally unlike” his. When these fascinating, but strange bodies are set in motion, their movement is, to the boy, like “a gentle uncrackable code” (Wallace 2008, 8). Here the inability to read bodies and body language is related to the protagonist’s age. For him, sexual maturity is still mysterious and unknown, full of possibilities. A bit more familiar

is the sight of an older woman in a bathing suit, who resembles his mother. However, at the same time he is noticing her varicose veins, which, to him, look like “curled Arabic lines of cold broken blue” (Wallace 2008, 9), signs of processes he cannot yet fully understand.

The boy wants to jump to the pool from a tower and joins a line of people, moving in unison, in a “rhythm that excludes thinking” (Wallace 2008, 10). He keeps moving with the other “sentient beings encased in flesh envelopes” (Smith 2009, 262), more bodies than conscious persons. The narrator tells the boy to “[l]ook bored” (Wallace 2008, 8), but he is not yet ready for the unconscious existence, “hip fatigue” (Wallace 2007b, 81) and ironic, bored detachment, so he starts to hesitate. The boy wants to stay on top of the tower “forever overhead”, because there he does not have to decide whether to enter “water/time”, there he can stay “between stasis and movement, consciousness and self-consciousness” (Boswell 2003, 203). Soon the narrator tells him to jump and “[s]tep into the skin and disappear” (Wallace 2008, 13). As Sloane points out, in this story, “[p]uberty then is paradoxically a period during which the body becomes other, but at the same time is occupied by, stepped into, assumed by, the subject.” (2019, chap. 1). Most of the other stories in the collection are about men who have already stepped into their sexually mature skin and are living with all the complications that arise from it. But here we have somebody only entering it and in this story’s companion piece, “Death Is Not the End”, we have someone who has entered into maturity a long time ago.

Whereas “Forever Overhead” seemed sensuously overflowing and full of movement and mysteries, “Death Is Not the End” is characterized by stasis, silence and absence of complexities. The piece describes a scene by a pool, where a “fifty-six-year-old American poet, a Nobel Laureate” is laying almost motionless, like the parents of the boy in “Forever Overhead” (Wallace 2008, 1). The poet is alone, reading a magazine and only occasionally clears his throat, but he has nothing to say. We learn of the several accolades he has received and of one that he never did, which seems to bother him greatly. What we are left with, is a portrait of a successful individual whose period of creativity

is perhaps behind him and he is only concentrated on awards and old grudges. We are also told that inside his swimsuit his penis is “curled tightly on itself”, which fits among Wallace’s bodily metaphors for solipsistic self-centeredness⁵. His “moderately overweight” body tells of a sedentary lifestyle and we also learn that his hairline is receding. In the magazine he spots reviews of *Hot Zone* and *The Coming Plague*, both of which are nonfiction books about fatal diseases. So the short piece gives us a snapshot where everything is “still and composed and enclosed” (Wallace 2008, 3) and the ageing human body is discussed only as “the objective body under the medical gaze” (Barry 2015, 133). There are no mysteries or ambiguities and nothing to communicate, even though he clears his throat constantly.

What these two stories show, is that in Wallace’s writing, the adult world prefers bodies to move and act in certain, acceptable ways. They need to move in unconscious unison with other people, in what he referred to as our “natural default setting” in his famous college commencement speech (Wallace 2005). When you do this, you are surrounded by people, but in another way, you are alone, “curled tightly” around yourself. In this world, bodies of other people are preferably unambiguous and conform to the familiar, mediated images of popular culture. In the previous section we discussed the story “Tri-Stan: I Sold Sisse Nar to Ecko”, which featured a woman who was surgically enhanced and thus better suited for television, but who got murdered when a stalker confronted her face to face and saw her as a more complicated being. In contrast, the two first stories we discussed in this section, “Think” and “Signifying Nothing” showed us, that, in Wallace’s world, ambiguous and disrupting body language can also be something that wakes people up from the “default setting” and has the potential to lead to acts of empathy, to putting themselves in other people’s place. Similarly, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, as a malformed, structurally anomalous literary work, can wake up readers who have become too accustomed to standard texts and encourage a more involved act of reading.

⁵ For another example, see the young boy in Wallace’s *The Pale King*, who wants to kiss every part of his own body, an example discussed extensively by Sloane 2019.

So far, we have discussed nonverbal communication as a part of deception and as an ambiguous or disrupting phenomenon. In the next section we take yet another viewpoint and discuss nonverbal communication as something that can express feelings more truthfully than verbal communication.

4.3. Body Language as the Truth

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men opens with an extremely short piece, grandiosely titled “A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life”. The piece is not even 100 words in length, but it contains many clues to what to expect from the rest of the collection. Its importance is emphasized by the fact it can be said to act as a framing story, a technique that has been considered outmoded, but which is fairly common in post-postmodernist story cycles (Burn 2016, 459). What these stories do, is that they act as “storehouses for a book’s themes, providing a symphonic condensation of the melodies traced by later sections” (ibid.), which is certainly the case with the condensed opening piece of *Brief Interviews*.

In “Radically Condensed . . .” we are presented with a quick sketch of a man and a woman who are introduced to each other by a man who does not like them, but “acted as if he did”, in order to “preserve good relations at all times (Wallace 2008, 0). The man and the woman act in the appropriate way, “hoping to be liked”, but then drive separately home “staring straight ahead, with the very same twist to their faces” (ibid.). All the characters are shown to behave as expected in social situations, but their motivations, which are stated plainly, stem from self-interest. Beneath the acceptable social pose, they are anxious, and their faces are twisted.

We have already discussed how facial expressions can work as externalizers or emotional displays. Here the ambiguous twist could be an emotional display, signaling momentary disgust with themselves, with the person they were introduced to or with the whole situation in general. However, considering the title of the story and its status as an opening piece of a story cycle, it is more probable that it is an externalizer, communicating something more permanent, like an attitude or a

psychological state of the characters (Korte 1997, 41). What the opening piece wants to announce is, that in U.S. at the turn of millennium, interpersonal relations are in a crisis. The discordance between the facial expressions and the behavior in the social situation speaks of a culture that is lacking in sincere human connection.

Even though the twisted faces and the social interaction happen separately, they are contrasted in the piece in a way that makes it possible to consider the facial expressions as an example of nonverbal leakage, which was previously discussed briefly. Nonverbal leakage is thought to reveal “the true feelings or thoughts of a person, in contrast to what the person asserts verbally” (Korte 1997, 35) and in this section of the thesis we will take a closer look on instances of nonverbal leakage in Wallace’s stories and see how they are related to the idea of truthfulness. Which are the true feelings of a person, i.e. which is the most authentic version, is of course a complicated question and in some cases it is important to consider if it is sensible to think of a person having an “authentic self” which is separate from the person in social context and which is revealed when social influence is removed (Blackman 2008, 44).

In relation to the body, the idea of the authentic, true self is connected to the concept of the naturalistic body (Blackman 2008, 44). The naturalistic body is very explicitly explored by Wallace in interview #42, where the interviewee talks about his relationship with his father, who worked as a toilet attendant at an upscale hotel. The interviewee is ashamed of his father’s job and disgusted by what it entails, trying to perhaps distance himself from it by “utiliz[ing] dozens of fancy words for excretions” (Smith 2009, 272). His description is full of contrasts between the toilet built of finest materials and defecation, an act with which Wallace had a “career-long fixation” (Sloane 2019, chap. 2). The men who visit the toilet are successful people, millionaires and businessmen, but while they are in the toilet, they make uncontrollable sounds, release smells and often act horribly. They are, as the interviewee puts it, “men of substance at their most elemental” (Wallace 2008, 76). But it is this, as the interviewee sees it, shameful and disgusting corporeal act, which unites the men with “the

sameness in all men's odors" (ibid, 75). We learn how the father works in this environment for decades, appearing almost invisible and helping the men whose bodies are failing. The speaker however, is not able to face this idea, because, like some other characters in Wallace's fiction, he does not want to be reminded of the animalistic nature of the human body (Sloane 2019, chap. 2), at one point noting that toilet stalls seem to be modeled after stalls for animals. So here we see two attitudes towards the naturalistic, mechanical body, which are typical for Wallace's writing: its messiness is something that unites people and it can express things that disrupt the identity formation by the conscious will of the subject.

Another story where the human body is seen as expressing inner truths and appears disgusting at the same time, is "On His Deathbed, Holding Your Hand, The Acclaimed New Young Off-Broadway Playwright's Father Begs a Boon". The story is yet again an almost completely single-sided conversation, where a dying man is making a confession on his deathbed. The main point in his confession is that he has always hated his son, a thought he keeps going over again and again in familiar, recursive sentences.

In the story, a source of great disappointment and disgust for the father is the fact that his son was born with several medical conditions from skin conditions and asthma to a protruding eye. The father is instantly repulsed by his son's body and the infantile need for constant attention, which his wife naturally gives. Like the hideous men we encountered in the first section of this chapter, the father in this story is very skilled in hiding his feelings, something he is proud of:

. . .she listening but looking past me, at him, not noting how perfectly my expression's concern matched her own. I modeled my face on hers; she taught me to pretend. It never even occurred to her. (Wallace 2008, 229)

Once again, it is the face that is the most important element in nonverbal communication and we learn how skillful the father, at least in his own opinion, is in controlling it.

During the story, we learn about all the son's medical conditions in excruciating detail, with the father describing how his son "oozed, exuded, flaked, suppured, dribbled from every quadrant"

(Wallace 2008, 221). In the end, however, it is not these grotesque details themselves that most upset the father. From early on, he believes the physical defects are externalizers for hideous flaws in his human nature. Describing the protruding eye, he thinks the “forward thrust” of the eye says “[a]ll was to be his . . . a triumph in it, a glazed exultation” (Wallace 2008, 220). He tells that pediatricians told them the problem with the eye is harmless and easily fixed, but the father disagreed, saying it was “not correctable, not an accidental sign” (ibid.) As has already been pointed out, in earlier literature disfigured bodies often expressed character flaws (Sloane 2019, chap. 4) and in this story, the father believes his son’s body is doing exactly that.

What is most repulsive to the man, is the idea that behind the infantile needs of the child, is a malevolent consciousness. According to him, the child had “bruised circles of restless appetite beneath his eyes”, a sign of his neediness: “[h]e knew it all belonged to him. He never doubted. As if it were due him. As if he deserved it. Insanity. Solipsism.” (Wallace 2008, 221) The irony in the story is of course that the father who is disgusted by his son’s “bottomless narcissistic fascination with his own body” (ibid.), simultaneously expresses his own infantile need and solipsism (Holland 2013a, 115). One interesting aspect of the father’s solipsism is his belief that he could read the truth from his son’s body, even though nobody else could, even his wife, who, he thinks, “did not truly *see* him” (Wallace 2008, 231). Of course, he would prefer not to see the child, which is why he used to hide behind a newspaper to block him out of his view. As has been discussed, humans communicate nonverbally automatically and constantly, so that we cannot help communicating. Because the child’s body communicates something the man is repulsed by, he shields his eyes to avoid seeing it. This wish to block other person’s nonverbal communication so that you do not have to engage with them as a human being is something that is also evident in the two-part story “Adult World”.

“Adult World”⁶ is the story of a young couple’s marital problems and an excellent example for an exploration of nonverbal leakage in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Once again, a central

⁶ I will refer to both parts of the story together as “Adult World” and only make a distinction between the two when necessary.

problem in the story is self-consciousness, which is made clear from the first line of the story: “For the first three years, the young wife worried that their lovemaking together was somehow hard on his thingie” (Wallace 2008, 137), the awkward word choice signaling the woman’s emotional immaturity and naïveté. The woman worries that he is hurting the man during sex because “she had selfishly forgotten about” him and therefore she tries to remain self-conscious the whole time (ibid.). By now, it should be clear that, in Wallace’s world, this is not a method that works in bringing people together or facilitating better communication. Indeed, it is exactly her initial capacity for unselfconscious pleasure with another person that separates her from most of the other characters in the collection.

Unlike the woman, the man in “Adult World”, like many other hideous men in the story cycle, seems to be constantly self-conscious of himself and his body. We learn that he keeps his personal spaces locked, that he can only sleep on one side and while the woman likes to sleep naked, he always puts on clean underwear to go to bed. In addition, we learn that sometimes during intimate moments, his wife “thought she could detect a slight rigidity in the muscles of his abdomen and legs and worried that he was tense or distracted” (Wallace 2008, 140). In a similar way, the wife thinks that “the husband’s face sometimes wore what sometimes seemed to her less an expression of pleasure than of intense concentration, as if he were about to sneeze and trying not to” when they are in bed together (Wallace 2008, 146). Locked doors, tense muscles and an expression of “intense concentration” all suggest a person who is trying to exert control over himself and his environment completely, which makes even his attentive behavior towards his wife seem rehearsed and like a pose. Like the people in “Radically Condensed”, he is keeping up a façade in order to function successfully in a social situation. The real him seems to be hidden somewhere and the woman is afraid of who that might be, as is suggested by her nightmare, where the man sneezes “over and over again” (Wallace 2008, 145). In an environment where the woman senses that something is wrong but is unable to talk about it, and where the man is tense and trying to control his behavior at all times, the woman’s nightmare is that

the man is no longer able to keep up his façade and his body starts acting in a way that would disrupt their marriage, like the examples of body language in the previous section of this thesis.

The fascination with faces, which, as we have seen, is something that connects many of the stories in *Brief Interviews*, continues in “Adult World”. In this story, faces and facial expressions are seen as a source of more truthful communication when verbal communication fails or is deceptive. From the beginning of the story, the woman is self-conscious, insecure and unable to trust her husband’s words. Even though the husband always compliments her and their sex life, we learn that she “worried that the husband was too considerate and unselfish to risk hurting her feelings by talking about whatever was wrong” (Wallace 2008, 138). The woman encounters the limits of verbal communication also when she starts to think about discussing her problems. In addition to believing that her husband is protecting her feelings by not mentioning her inadequacies, she feels that it is impossible to rationally handle her problem and that “there was no way to talk about it with him” as she cannot think of how to start such a conversation (Wallace 2008, 141). In the absence of trustworthy verbal communication and unable to communicate herself, the woman instead tries to read the man’s body language in order to find the truth.

We are told that the man likes to sleep facing away from his wife and that she sometimes watches him sleep, which is certainly symbolic, but not that strange. However, later the woman gets up from bed, walks up to the man when he is sleeping, kneels next to him and tries to

..study his sleeping face, as if hoping to discover there some unspoken thing that would help her stop worrying and feel more sure that their sexlife together pleased him as much as it pleased her. (Wallace 2008, 142)

Previously in the story we have learnt that the woman has also studied the man’s face during sex, in order to find proof that he is not enjoying himself, thus validating her anxieties. Since she believes a horrible thing exists but cannot be spoken of, she starts to look for the truth in the man’s body language, believing that the man cannot lie with his nonverbal communication, especially when he is asleep. However, like the boy in “Forever Overhead” trying read the mystical writing in the veins of

older women, the woman in “Adult World” is unable to find meaning in the husband’s body. The man remains a mystery and, echoing the solipsistic bodily metaphor from “Death is Not the End”, she thinks that the sleeping man looks like “a child . . . curled all tightly into itself” (Wallace 2008, 143).

In an effort to become a better lover, the woman decides to visit an adult shop, the eponymous Adult World, to buy a sex toy. We learn the store is “all the way out on the other side of town” and when the woman visits it, she cannot recognize anyone out there (Wallace 2008, 143). In addition, she finds that the place “smelled horrid in a way that reminded the wife of absolutely nothing else in her life experience” (Wallace 2008, 142). This alienating effect extends even to the sex toy she buys, which she finds “inhuman and impersonal” (Wallace 2008, 140). Later she also buys a pornographic movie and observes the female performers, noting that their “eyes were empty and hard”, that they had “dyed, bleached and badly damaged hair that didn’t look touchable or strokable at all” and that “you could just tell they weren’t experiencing any intimacy or pleasure and didn’t care if their partners were pleased” (Wallace 2008, 143). From these examples, we can see how the Adult World, an unnatural place of empty signifiers, stands in stark contrast to the woman’s capacity for unselfconscious pleasure and search for real connection with another person.

Later in the story, the woman is spurred to action by a nightmare she has. Earlier, we have been told of another nightmare where the man is “making horrid faces at himself” while masturbating (Wallace 2008, 145). Similarly, the later dream is connected to masturbation and strange facial expressions. In the dream the woman sees “a river” of “sodden Kleenex” while driving behind an ambulance, which she at first thinks is transporting her husband, but in the end his husband is the one driving it, but:

. . .it seems to be both *him* and *not him*, her husband’s familiar and much-loved face distorted and pulsed with red light and wearing a facial expression indescribable as anything other than: Obscene. (Wallace 2008, 153)

In these nightmares, the truth, which has been left unsaid and hidden, surfaces on the face in a grotesque way. Like the couple in the opening piece to *Brief Interviews*, the man has been successful in presenting himself well, but he has been hiding a twisted face.

After the nightmare, the woman decides to phone her former lover and arrange a meeting with him. We have previously learned that during their relationship, the woman became obsessed with the idea that when the man “always closed both his eyes in passionate pleasure”, he was secretly thinking about other women (Wallace 2008, 148). When they meet again, the woman focuses on the man’s face again, noting his “own facial asymmetry”, for example his left eye, which is described as being “surrounded by concentric rings and bags of slack flesh that constantly twitched and throbbed as irreversibly damaged nerves randomly fired” (Wallace 2008, 153). Previously, when considering the female performers in the adult video, the woman noted their “own slight asymmetries” (Wallace 2008, 143). This idea that the people own their atypical features certainly exemplifies how Wallace sees bodies as always being disabling and suggests that such asymmetries are a universal feature of humans.

As the woman meets her former lover, the story enters its second part, “Adult World (II)”. This part is not so much a story, but a metafictional, postmodernist outline of a story’s events and themes, including author’s notes and comments, providing yet another example of indeterminacy in the collection and how it “disappoints its own plans” (Holland 2013a, 110). The second part starts with a description of the meeting, where the woman has an epiphany as she looks out a window and sees her husband’s car outside the Adult World store and realizes he is a “Secret Chronic Masturbator” (Wallace 2008, 156). After this revelation, we learn, that the woman “ceases to search hsbnd’s face drng sex” (sic) and here the author’s note reads “[→metaphor: Theme → eyes closed = ‘eyes open’]” (Wallace 2008, 159). Throughout the story, in her relationships, the woman has never benefitted when she has tried to read other people’s faces. She and her former lover were both able to connect with another person when they closed their eyes, whereas the way the woman tried to intently keep her

eyes open and observe the men only served to distance her from them. Fittingly, the woman's ultimate fantasy ends up being "a faceless, hypertrophic male figure who loves but cannot have [her] spurns all other living women & chooses instead to masturbate daily to fantasies of lvmking w/ [her]" (sic) (Wallace 2008, 160). So even though she sought the truth from nonverbal communication and sometimes found it, this truth served no purpose for her, because she was so trapped in her own anxious thoughts. Usually in Wallace's writing, awareness of a problem does not fix the problem, but in this story, even the awareness of a solution makes no difference either, with the woman instead fantasizing about not having to decode nonverbal communication.

The story ends with descriptions of how the woman starts to masturbate frequently and openly (as opposed to her husband who does it secretly) and purchases many more sex toys from the Adult World store. In the end, the woman, just like the man, embraces the artificial over the natural and they both prefer solipsistic self-pleasure over connection. Their sex is described as "'nice' – less intense but also less scary" (Wallace 2008, 160). As was seen in the previous section, empathizing with another person and being open with body language can disrupt safe social situations, which is why the characters in "Adult World" choose to curl around themselves tighter and live on in the default mode, like all the other people in the adult world.

Another story in *Brief Interviews* where nonverbal leakage is a source of anxiety for the protagonist is "The Depressed Person". It is a story about a woman who is struggling with depression, told in an essentially plotless way, by presenting an exhaustive and exhausting depiction of the depressed woman's situation around her and inside her head, "a purely compulsive and obsessive refrain from which there is no escape" (Frantzen 2018, 263). The tone of the story is clear right from the opening line:

The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror. (Wallace 2008, 31)

We are on familiar territory here, with a protagonist who is unwell and unable to communicate or connect with others and is therefore a sort of prisoner inside herself. When she tries to communicate with others, she, like so many protagonists in Wallace's stories, is painfully aware of the conventions of talking about her situation and eager to avoid clichés. For example, the depressed person apologizes for talking about her difficult childhood, because she is afraid of sounding "like one of those people who are narcissistically obsessed with their 'painful childhoods' and 'painful lives'" (Wallace 2008, 32). The obvious irony of course being that, as becomes apparent during the story, the depressed person is herself "narcissistically obsessed" with her own problems. Indeed, she is so obsessed with herself, that, as Boswell points out (2003, 205), even seeing the therapist becomes a source of anxiety for the depressed person because she realizes that she is paying for:

a kind of fantasy friend who could fulfill her childishly narcissistic fantasies of getting her own emotional needs met by another without having to reciprocally meet or empathize with or even consider the other's emotional needs, an other-directed empathy and consideration which the depressed person tearfully confessed she sometimes despaired of ever having it in her to give. (Wallace 2008, 47)

We have seen many characters who are unable to empathize with others, but here we have someone who is self-conscious of this inability and expresses it. But, as usually happens in Wallace's stories, this self-awareness does not lead to a solution.

In the story, the eponymous depressed person has a small group of friends her therapist refers to as her "Support System", which consists of women she knew in her childhood or during her studies and who are "nurturing and comparatively undamaged" (Wallace 2008, 32), but who are now living in cities far away from the depressed person, which is why all their conversations happen over the telephone. Her therapist feels that the support group should consist of people who "the depressed person felt she could reach out to share with and lean on for unconditional caring and support" (Wallace 2008, 34). As we have already seen, such a connection between people is very rare in Wallace's stories. In this story, the difficulty is emphasized by the physical distance, since the conversations between the depressed person and her support people only happen over the telephone.

When a member of the support group must end their conversation, it is described as her having “finally detached the depressed person’s needy fingers from her pantcuff” and even the expression of “reaching out to others” suggests trying to physically grasp other people (Wallace 2008, 35). It soon becomes clear that the depressed person is unable to overcome the physical distance and other obstacles that prevent empathetic communication and only “exploits [her support system’s] empathy and emotional support” (Frantzen 2018, 261).

In addition to the impossibility of communicating what she is feeling, the depressed person is burdened by the shame of needing the support of others and the feeling that she is bothering them, to the point that it becomes “excruciating” and “toxic” (Wallace 2008, 35). She is so convinced that she is a nuisance to the people in her support group that, like the woman in “Adult World”, she becomes convinced that their true feelings are only communicated nonverbally. We learn that while talking to her friends, she “almost always visualized the friend’s face, on the telephone, assuming a combined expression of boredom and pity and repulsion and abstract guilt” (Wallace 2008, 36). In addition, she imagines the friends gesturing silently to other people who are in the same room with them, with “facial expressions of helpless entrapment” and “these inaudible gestures and expressions becoming more and more extreme and desperate as the depressed person just went on and on and on.” (Wallace 2008, 36). The reason for these imaginings seems to be an incident in her past. When she was in boarding school, her “self-assured, popular and attractive roommate” was once talking to a boy on telephone, when she started making “faces and gestures of repulsion and boredom” and silently asked the protagonist to knock on the door in order to have an excuse to hang up the phone (Wallace 2008, 36). This leads the depressed person to realize she is afraid of being like the boy: someone people want to get rid of so badly that they are willing to lie. She understands that the boy on the telephone has tried to “take an emotional risk and to reach out and try to connect with the confident roommate” (Wallace 2008, 37), which is an enormously difficult and dangerous thing for characters in Wallace’s stories. Leaving oneself willingly exposed and vulnerable and showing the need for genuine

connection is very rare in these stories and here we see an example of it resulting in silent humiliation, which is one reason why the depressed person herself never truly “risks . . . empathy” (Frantzen 2018, 264). In *Brief Interviews*, many of the central characters are very adept users of language and they know how language can be misused, which leads them to distrust words and verbal communication. Trusting in the sincerity of another person always requires faith, but the depressed person is unable to do that. Instead she obsesses over the nonverbal communication she is unable to see, but which she believes would confirm her biggest fears.

During the story we also see how the depressed person is obsessed with body language even when physically confronted with people and not just while talking with them on the telephone. We learn that while her therapist is listening to her, the therapist often forms shapes with her fingers and hands, a habit the depressed person dislikes, because “it drew her attention to the therapist’s fingers and fingernails and caused her to compare them with her own” (Wallace 2008, 36). In a footnote we also learn that the shapes the therapist makes with her hands remind the depressed person of cages, but she does not discuss this with the therapist, because to her “its symbolic significance seemed too overt and simple-minded to waste their time together on” (Wallace 2008, 37). In the end the depressed person is not too bothered by the gestures, noting that as the “the therapeutic relationship deepened” they became nothing more than “a distraction” (Wallace 2008, 44). The fact that the hand shapes are mostly discussed in footnotes underlines how they are something that distracts from the main narrative (Goerlandt 2010, 164), that is, from the always inward-looking narrativization of the depressed person’s feelings. In her narcissistic self-centeredness, the depressed person is bothered by anything that leads her to consider other people and see them as subjects like herself.

The depressed person is disturbed also by something else in the therapist’s nonverbal communication. We learn how she is annoyed by the way therapist checks the time during their sessions, while, as the depressed person believes, trying to hide the fact that she is looking at her watch or the clock on the wall. This, like the thought of someone secretly gesturing at the other end

of the phone, makes her feel “totally demeaned and invalidated” (Wallace 2008, 45). The other problem is the facial expressions of the therapist when she lifts her gaze from the hands in her lap to her patient. According to the depressed person, at that moment the therapists face “would once again assume its customary expression of calm and boundless patience”, which she assumes is meant to convey “unjudging attention and interest and support”, but she feels like it expresses “emotional detachment, like clinical distance, like mere professional interest” (Wallace 2008, 46). This is a problem because, as has been noted, she is obsessed with getting “intensely *personal* interest and empathy and compassion” (Wallace 2008, 46) for herself. What the checking of time and professional facial expression mean for the depressed person, is that she is just another customer for the therapist, which disturbs her solipsistic worldview.

In “The Depressed Person” nonverbal communication is clearly seen by the protagonist as something that can convey truthful messages powerfully, even if she herself makes wrong assumptions or misreads other people. She is anxious when she is on the telephone, because there is the possibility that the other person is communicating nonverbally with others simultaneously. She knows that words can be used to fake empathy, while the unseen face expresses disgust or other negative emotions. She uses her words manipulatively to receive empathy from others, but she knows she is powerless to stop this nonverbal communication. When she is confronted with nonverbal communication in person, she is distracted and irritated by the way it invites her to consider the other person instead of focusing on her depression, the only thing “she understands herself to be” and the only thing “she *does*” (Defossez 2018, 23). This negative attitude towards nonverbal communication’s potential for communicating truthfully is in line with the other stories discussed in this section. In the interview about the toilet attendant, the son wanted to avert his gaze from the human body, just like the father in “On his deathbed . . .”. In contrast, in the “Adult World” stories, we saw someone initially obsessively searching for the truth in another person’s face, but then having found the truth, turning inwards to themselves instead of taking further risks in reaching to other

people in an empathetic manner. For Wallace's characters the body's potential for sincere communication is something they are aware of and something they might think they could use, but in the end, they usually recoil from true, human connection. In the next section, we will finally see what happens when a character is able to use verbal and nonverbal communication sincerely, in an effort to connect with other people.

4.4. Body Language as an Effective Means of Sincere Communication

So far, we have looked at nonverbal communication from the point of view of manipulation, ambiguity and truth via nonverbal leakage. In all of these cases we saw characters either trying to use nonverbal communication in a deceitful way or characters who were searching, sometimes obsessively, for meaning or truth in other characters' body language. In other words, the characters have either been insincere encoders of nonverbal communication, or obsessive decoders of nonverbal communication. What the stories discussed so far have been lacking, are characters who use nonverbal communication effectively with sincere motivations to connect with other characters. In this final section of the analysis chapter, I want to focus on a story which does feature such a character in a prominent part. The story is the final interview, known as B.I. #20, which is one of the most written about stories in the collection.

In the story, the interviewee mostly talks about a story a woman told him during a night they spent together. The structurally complex story has frames within frames, so that it works on "a dizzying number of levels" and at the same times it is an impressive culmination of many of the themes and literary techniques the previous stories have employed (Boswell 2003, 194). One reason the story has been written about a lot, is its subject matter. The interviewee himself is similar to many of the previously discussed hideous men, so his attitude towards women does not come as a surprise at this point. Instead, the more shocking aspect of B.I. #20 is the story the woman tells the man during the night they spend together. The story she tells is about her experience when she was raped and

almost killed while hitchhiking. This subject matter, together with the fact that the story contains relatively hopeful views on connection between humans and discusses love, have produced readings of the story that have been called out by other critics as “dubious, if not offensive” and “irresponsible” (Holland 2017, 75; Himmelheber 2014, 525). In my reading of the story, I will certainly look at the story as a piece of a story cycle and an expression of Wallace’s literary mission, but I will also try to pay attention to the particularities of this specific short story.

The interviewee starts by declaring that he “did not fall in love with her until she had related the story” of her rape (Wallace 2008, 245), which is a somewhat surprising thing to hear from one of these hideous men. However, we quickly learn that he is a quite typical case, as he immediately adds that he is “aware of how it might sound” (Wallace 2008, 245), showing the usual amount of self-awareness. He, like many other men in the story cycle, wants to tell how he seduced a young woman. In this case, the woman in question is described by the man as a “Granola Cruncher, or post-Hippie, New Ager” (ibid.). The interviewee sees the woman at a festival and admits that his motivations in approaching the woman were entirely sexual and even describes his methods openly and exhaustively. After appearing open and sincere about his motives, he then shifts the blame to his organismic body’s drives, saying “she had a body that my body found sexually attractive and wanted to have intercourse with” (Wallace 2008, 249).

Because the story is in the interview format, we only get the hideous man’s description of the woman. At first, the description centers on how he sees her as exemplifying the “typical Cruncher morphology” and her physical qualities. However, soon the description starts to revolve around the way she spoke. Since the hideous men in these stories tend to be very self-aware verbal communicators, it is no wonder that he is eager to analyze, and judge, the way she talks. In a very telling instance, the man notes how she kept

using the, well, the quote L-word itself several times without irony or even any evident awareness that the word had through tactical overdeployment become trite and requires invisible quotes around it now at the very least . . . (Wallace 2008, 250)

Here the woman is presented as an example of a pre-postmodern person, who is not aware of the need for ironic quotes Umberto Eco suggested, in contrast to the postmodern self-consciousness and sense of irony of the interviewee. In addition, the woman's New Age religion means that she is someone who still believes in a metanarrative, something the interviewee mocks by noting how her type never realize that the "impending New age is exactly the same cultural permission-slip that Manifest Destiny was, or the Reich or the dialectic of the proletariat or the Cultural Revolution – all the same" (Wallace 2008, 247).

Although the man is initially dismissive of the woman's vocabulary and figures of speech, he changes his mind quickly about her narration as he listens to her story. Of course, we never get to hear her voice directly, since it is always mediated and commented upon by the interviewee. From his description, we first learn that she uses expressions the man finds clichéd and clearly disapproves of. Soon however, he notes how she "seemed truly poseless in relating [the story], open to attention but not solicitous" (Wallace 2008, 253). Remarkably, her narration grips the man completely and he is able to relate to the story on an emotional level:

I mean this without irony – that she seemed, quote *sincere* in a way that may in fact have been smug naiveté but was nevertheless attractive and very powerful in the context of listening to her encounter with the psychopath, in that I found it helped me focus almost entirely on the anecdote itself and thus helped me imagine in an almost terrifyingly vividly realistic way just what it must have *felt* like for, for anyone . . . (Wallace 2008, 253–54).

Here we get a glimpse of the effect Wallace surely wished his and other people's writing would have in the post-postmodern world. The woman's "naïve" narration is able to penetrate the self-conscious cynicism of the interviewee and she is successful in communicating something real and human, without any kind of pose or manipulation. She is like the literary "*anti-rebels*", who dare to express "single-entendre principles" Wallace envisioned in his literary manifesto (Wallace 2007b, 81). Significantly, we do not get to hear the actual narration, which often happens in Wallace's writing when sincere voices appear, since for him they seem to "resist positive description" (Kelly 2010b, 141). This emphasizes the point that "sincerity cannot finally lie in representation" (Kelly 2016, 205),

it is something that happens between people, whether it is between characters or between the writer and the reader.

The way the woman is able to connect with the interviewee by using verbal communication, is mirrored in the content of the story she tells, but there the main mode of communication is nonverbal. She describes how she got into the car and immediately knew she had made a mistake, “[j]ust from what she called the energy field inside the car” (Wallace 2008, 250). The woman talks about energy in the car, but we could also assume that she is already registering the man’s nonverbal messages. She herself suggests that it might have been something in his eyes that suggested he was going to hurt her. In the desperate situation, she believes that she can use her own gaze to save her from being killed, by empathizing with him:

her objective is to focus very intently on the psychotic mulatto as an ensouled and beautiful albeit tormented person in his own right instead of merely as a threat to her or a force of evil . . . she says she believes that sufficient love and focus can penetrate even psychosis and evil and establish a quote- soul-connection, unquote, and that if the mulatto can be brought to feel even a minim of this alleged soul-connection there is some chance that he’ll be unable to follow through with actually killing her. (Wallace 2008, 256)

First she tries to engage in the “soul-connection” by staring into the man’s eye as he is driving, using “her penetrating focus to attempt to feel and empathize with the sex offender’s psychosis and rage and terror and psychic torment” (Wallace 2008, 258). In the previous sections we have seen many instances of gaze behavior, for example in “Adult world”, where the motivation for looking intently on the faces of other people was to find confirmation for the woman’s own anxieties and fears. In contrast, in this story, although the woman has the motive of wanting to save herself, she uses her gaze to reach another person with empathy, to see him as a full person. As her polar opposite we have the man, whose facial expression during the rape she describes as an “anti-expression, empty of everything” and his as eyes as “holes in the world” (Wallace 2008, 266). At same time, even though the man appears as an absence of humanity, she continues nurturing him by holding him as he cries and stroking his head, while he “tentatively attempted to stroke her head in return” (Wallace 2008, 268). In this extreme situation, the woman embodies Wallace’s vision of the redemptive possibilities

in “mindfully ministering to other’s bodies in nurturing ways” in place of solipsistic self-centeredness (Sloane 2019, chap. 2). In the small attempted gesture of the rapist, we see how he is clearly affected by the woman’s radical act of presupposing “the capacity for love in him” and making him “into a subject capable of love” (Frantzen 2018, 271). In the end, the woman is successful insofar as the rapist leaves her alive after “stabbing the ground dozens of times with desperate savagery” (Wallace 2008, 270).

During the interview, the man points out the connection between himself and the rapist, noting that the rapist’s dehumanizing actions are not “all that substantively different from” the way he himself manipulates and deceives the woman into sleeping with him (Wallace 2008, 259). However, the two men are mirrored in other ways too. When the interviewee gets to the end of the story, he professes his love for the woman, something he had not felt before in his life. This confession and the fact that he was unable to make the woman stay with him evokes an aggressive reaction in him and he starts verbally abusing the female interviewer. Like the rapist stabbing the ground in violent frustration, the man starts a verbal assault as he is confronted with the fact that he was unable to exert power over the woman after she connected with him emotionally. Whereas Wallace’s stories on sex are usually centered around “men’s domination of their female partners via physical or linguistic force” (Holland 2017, 64), in this story, the woman overpowers the men with verbal and nonverbal communication.

Presenting the human capacity for love and empathy via a story about a brutal rape is clearly a shocking literary choice. However, it is a fitting culmination for *Brief Interviews*, with its theme of testing “the boundaries of our willingness to ‘empathize’” (Boswell 2003, 189) by presenting hideous men and horrible situations. So, by putting empathy to such a brutal test and showing that it can pass the test, Wallace is making a powerful point. The story also shows how, for him, “the task of love and empathy is not an easy one; it requires an almost impossible amount of work” (Frantzen 2018, 271). The previously discussed story “Think” ended with the question of what would happen if the

woman kneeled into the same posture as the man. By now it is clear that, in Wallace's world, putting yourself into another person's position and empathizing can have radical consequences. We have seen many examples of how disturbing and disrupting attempted or successful connections with people can be in these stories. Often these stories are not resolved and end in a state of indeterminacy. This means that, as is fitting for stories that represent New Sincerity, it is always ultimately the reader's choice whether to empathize with the characters or not.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis I wanted to explore the role of body language in David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. In my analysis, I wanted to connect body language in Wallace's stories to his larger theme of communication and interpersonal connections. Even though it is nowadays something of a cliché in Wallace-studies, I found it useful to start from his famous literary mission of exhausting the late postmodern aesthetic and focusing on sincerity instead of cynicism and irony. The viewpoints I chose for my analysis, however, were not imposed by the framework of Wallace's literary mission but emerged organically from my classification of instances of body language in the stories. I do not believe my viewpoints have exhausted this topic and further studies could be done on other aspects of body language or on other works by Wallace.

In the first section of the analysis chapter I looked at the short stories where body language is used self-consciously to manipulate others. As was discussed, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is about relationships between men and women, but in Wallace's world this theme is connected to manipulation and deception. We saw how the self-centered characters could use body language as just another sign system that helps them satisfy their physical and sometimes complex psychological needs. What was lacking in these interactions was any sense of connection between two subjects. In the second part of the analysis chapter I discussed how body language could disrupt communication, by looking at stories where body language is ambiguous. I argued that Wallace uses ambiguous body language to explore how bodies are expected to look and act in social situations. When a character acts in an unconventional manner, it would require other characters to enter into a connection with that character and perhaps even empathize with them. Because many of the solipsistic characters in Wallace's stories are not willing or able to enter into such a connection, the instances of ambiguous body language can disrupt the characters and narratives. As was seen in the third part of the analysis chapter, this disrupting power is perhaps even heightened when the characters view body language as a source of more truthful communication than speech. By studying instances of nonverbal leakage

in the stories, I argued that when characters in Wallace's stories are faced with the truth as expressed by the uncontrollable bodies of others, they usually prefer to turn away from the messiness of true interpersonal relationships and empathy. Only in the final interview of the short story collection, did we encounter a character who was able to empathize with others and connect with them on an emotional level. Even in this instance, the connection resulted in strong, violent reactions in the men the woman was able to establish a connection with.

Wallace famously never entirely left postmodernism, keeping at least one foot firmly in the past by employing metafiction and other postmodern techniques in his writing. In this and other ways, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* is a work of fiction that seems to exist on a threshold. It is firmly rooted in the literature of the decades preceding it, but at the same time reaching towards something new. It is also a complete work, that is forever missing parts, like the omitted numbered sections of certain stories or the voices of other characters around the solipsistic protagonists. The characters are almost without exception alone, even when they are amongst other people, but often trying to connect with others. In many of the stories, it is body language that brings characters closer to each other, by expressing something in a way that wakes them up from their default mode. However, often these connections do not happen and sometimes we are left hanging at the moment of choice. Ultimately, as we saw, it is the reader of these stories who must complete the work, resolve the indeterminacies and decide whether to empathize or not. As was discussed, Wallace felt that the function of fiction was to locate "those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" and "appl[y] CPR" to these elements (McCaffery 2012, 26). As the stories and my analysis show, this metaphor is apt, because connecting with other people and applying this CPR in Wallace's world is not easy or possibly even safe: you need to put your whole body into it, and you may end up breaking a couple of ribs.

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