Technology, Tradeoffs, and Freedom as Depicted in Postmodern Fiction

Robert M Pallitto

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Abstract

In today’s world, technology often makes it possible to design the conditions of one’s existence with detail and precision. This article uses three literary novels written between 1984 and 2009 to explore the tradeoffs involved when individuals engage in the process of lifestyle design, and it uses Theodor Adorno’s earlier critique of the “culture industry” to shed further light on the themes taken up in those novels. Consumerist behavior and choices can be defended as aspects of freedom on the one hand, but at the same time their effects on the larger society and the physical environment can be disastrous even if those effects do not figure in the process of design. Individuals transact for pleasure, making social bargains that generate unintended consequences. The literary texts explored here, paired with Adorno’s critique, illustrate the pitfalls of consumption-focused behavior by portraying it as a series of bargains that fail ultimately to deliver what is promised.

Technology, Tradeoffs and Freedom as Depicted in Postmodern Fiction

“Californians invented the concept of lifestyle. This alone warrants their doom.”

■ Character in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*

“It’s a perfect world, isn’t it? It’s a perfect system, because as long as you’ve got your six-foot-wide plasma TV, and the electricity to run it, you don’t have to think about any of the ugly consequences. You can watch *Survivor: Indonesia* until there’s no more Indonesia!”

■ Character in Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*

“[W]hatever remains unsatisfied in them through the order which takes from them without giving in exchange what it promises, only burned with impatience for their gaoler to remember them, and at last offer them stones in his left hand for the hunger from which he withholds bread in his right.”

■ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

Introduction

In today’s world, technological artifacts make it increasingly possible to design one’s lifestyle with detail and precision. Mode of transportation, type of residence, entertainment
experiences and even physical appearance can be purchased through enactment of highly specific consumer preferences. The result is that the world surrounding a person can be composed of things and appearances chosen specifically by that person. Moreover, this interconnected set of choices works at two levels simultaneously: on the immediate conditions of one’s life and on the public policies and initiatives that support and facilitate those conditions. Individual agents do not merely choose the design of their existence by engaging with technology in particular ways; they also demand that the government pursue policies that make their chosen lifestyle possible. They make consumer choices such as the decision to drive a large vehicle (a Humvee, for example) in daily travels. In order for this choice to be available, there must be plentiful and affordable fuel and a social infrastructure designed around individual motorists rather than around mass transit. Of course, subjects can engage in multifaceted negotiations at once, at multiple levels; this can be a reflection of a fragmented experience of self or simply multiple efforts toward the same goal. This negotiation can be overwhelming, for “[j]ust as customers of mass society have to be on the scene at once, they cannot leave anything out” (Adorno 118). In fact, “[t]he abundance of commodities indiscriminately consumed is becoming calamitous.” Ibid.

Consumers choose — they make bargains -- when they buy goods. Signing a retail sales agreement to buy, say, a Humvee is the clearest and most obvious form of bargain implicated in the transactional fabric of 21st century American society. But it is worth thinking about the other bargains emanating from — or producing — that one. Resource extraction around the world occurs because people demand access to the resources (such as fuel). These demands are encouraged and constructed by the sellers, to be sure, but consumers are choosing
nonetheless to purchase goods that come at the price of violence. The sum of individual bargains does not always produce an optimal state for society, as is often supposed.

One step removed from the transaction described above (car buyer bargains with seller) is the transaction that the consumer as voter makes with the government. The consumer/voter’s support is predicated on the production of laws and policies that enable free choice in general and choice of desired goods in particular. “Drill, baby, drill” -- Sarah Palin’s rallying cry for her ticket in the 2008 election -- represents this bargain rather clearly. The social contract supporting a modern constitutional democracy is another representation of this bargain: Individuals agree to be bound by laws, to be governed by the majority vote of citizens or their representatives, in exchange for a degree of safety and security. This security may be purchased at the cost of the safety and security of outsiders, but citizens sign on to the contract nonetheless. Simultaneously, then, they act as voter and consumer.¹

The influential Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) had much to say about the consumer behavior and consumer society that arose in the postwar period. Moreover, he sometimes utilized the lexicon of bargaining to articulate the plight of individuals in the face of the “culture industry.” For example, he suggests that when they feel unsatisfied by “the order which takes from them without giving in exchange what it promises,” they long for their “gaoler” to offer “stones in his left hand for the hunger from which he withholds bread in his right” (Adorno, 148). Bargains take place within the context of the culture industry, which has extended the alienating processes of material production into the cultural realm. Through dialectical exposition, Adorno explores in Minima Moralia the ways in which the emerging consumer culture that is now taken for granted had its roots in the Enlightenment that ushered
in the modern age, and also in industrial capitalism. To some extent, he continues the critique advanced in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where he and Max Horkheimer first suggested that the origins of modern alienation lay in forms of instrumental thought galvanized by the Enlightenment. In the material sphere, goods are reproduced, but social relations are also reproduced. “Mechanical processes of reproduction have developed independently of what they reproduce, and have become autonomous,” Adorno says (118). “They are considered progressive, and anything that has no part in them, reactionary and quaint.” Thus, advances in technological capabilities are seen as inherently progressive, and they are self-justifying as well. “The new [is] sought for its own sake” and yet never really experienced as new, perhaps because it is continually being replaced. People read traumatizing headlines because the shock of newness is “the only stimulus sufficient to incite a momentary glow in the weakened sensorium of the masses.” The shock is experienced as re-lived trauma, but its allure remains (Adorno, 236-7).

**Literary Representations**

The intricacies of navigating a consumption-focused society have, unsurprisingly, drawn the attention of literary novelists of the late 20th/early 21st century. And yet, ironically, attempts to authentically describe those experiences in literary form immediately become suspect to Adorno because he questions the very possibility that people could have (much less retell to others) authentic experience outside of what organized culture, the culture industry, preforms and packages for them. All else is suspect (108). So on this view, there is a certain audacity to the decision to attempt literary expression under conditions such as these.
Nonetheless, three novels in particular engage with themes of technology, consumerism and freedom in ways that often suggest forms of bargaining and tradeoffs. Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1984), *Infinite Jest* (1996) by David Foster Wallace, and *Freedom* (2010) by Jonathan Franzen compose a chronological sequence of important works addressing these themes. These three novels make up a particularly compelling sequence for the present discussion. All three novelists work in late 20th/early 21st setting and depict a world very much like our own. Their characters practice some form of bargaining as they pursue freedom and consume products in a technology-dominated world. The three authors were aware of – and influenced by – each other. Finally, readers can observe the development of consumerist trends across the three novels and the consecutive decades in which they were written.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo depicts a society where consumer choices benumb people to the safety threats and loss of private space that shape their existence. Anxiety about death, and need for connectedness, are left unassuaged by a consumption-saturated existence, and yet the characters do not alter their daily choices in any way despite the deep dissatisfaction they feel. In Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, characters situated a decade later are even more fully immersed in a world of products, and by this time, products are capable of titillating even more deeply, but they can also destroy the self. Franzen, in *Freedom*, portrays a post-9/11 world where people make bargains with public and private actors, and these bargains promise forms of freedom that come at a cost.

Taken together, the three literary works provide a rich store of images, stories and trade-offs that resonate with the everyday experience of navigating a life-world where technology permeates so much of what people do, and where subjects are continually faced
with dilemmas where they risk losing privacy or freedom -- or at least rethinking what “privacy” and “freedom” could mean. Technologies change and new ones develop from the 1980s to 2009, but each of the novels features engagement with technologies that are central to the experience of living, whether those technologies provide comfort, titillation or efficient resource extraction.

What these works share is a sense that freedom and privacy entail choices – difficult and complex decisions to engage with a particular form of technology or to decline such engagement. Shopping in the face of environmental catastrophe, viewing an entertainment cartridge that promises perfect pleasure, or selling off ancestral lands in exchange for entry into the middle class, all involve some form of privacy that can be bargained away. To be sure, a conception of privacy related to freedom is needed in order to probe these intertextual connections, and it is best to choose a broad one. Privacy as control over one’s life-choices and the development of one’s personhood is a fruitful starting-point for the exposition that this article proposes to do. This conception of privacy is connected to freedom, as it concerns itself with agency and control, and connecting privacy to freedom is productive. Privacy theorists (see, for example, Kuhn 2005) have emphasized the “control” dimension by referring to control over information and control over space.

Characters in the three novels inhabit social settings where the “soft compulsion of constant consumer training,” to use Habermas’ phrase (192), is ever-present. Though consumption presents itself as a choice, its ubiquity threatens to flatten people’s distinctive identities, making both consumer and product fungible. Identity, in its individual and collective
dimensions, can get buried beneath an ever-more-efficient deployment of product options. And so the promise of greater consumer options can come at the cost of human diversity.

Exploring these relationships raises many interesting questions. For example, how do individuals and groups respond to the specific choices presented and to the fact that so many choices are presented? How concerned are the novels’ characters with the immediate costs and the larger social implications of the bargains they make each time they utilize products or submit to technologies of control? These and related questions can be explored most productively through the wealth of material contributed by DeLillo, Wallace and Franzen.

Shopping in the face of disaster in DeLillo’s *White Noise*

Even for readers who were already alive back then, 1984 seems long ago, and those who are younger may not have a reference point for it at all. In that year, many people still used a typewriter and did not own a computer. Terms like “internet,” “website” and “digital footprint” were not in use. Given the gap between the state of technology then and now, one might ask why include DeLillo’s book in this study of literary representations of privacy, freedom and bargaining. The answer is quite straightforward. First, an emphasis on consumption as an act and a phenomenon central to social life runs through *White Noise* and into Wallace and Franzen later. Second, certain manifestations of consumerism that DeLillo captured so deftly in 1984 can be seen more fully formed, ten and twenty years later, in the other two works. The looming sense of environmental catastrophe in *White Noise* that will be explored below, for example, seems somehow deferred but not extinguished at the end of the
book, but it reappears, more ubiquitous and inescapable, in *Infinite Jest*, and it also becomes the abiding obsession of Walter Berglund, one of the main characters in *Freedom*.

*White Noise* is the story of an academic and his family who navigate crises internal and external while living in a Midwestern college town in the 1970s-80s. The family copes with existential anxiety, child-raising challenges and a chemical spill. The main character, Jack Gladney, is a prominent academic who secured his place in the world of scholarship by creating the sub-discipline of “Hitler Studies” – a branch of study concerned with such things as the use of propaganda, totalitarian movements, and the enlistment of a nation and its institutions in a project of genocide. There are conferences, a department, and a newly-formed network of scholars composing this discipline, and Gladney is enviably positioned within his discipline and the larger profession. Gladney’s work in Hitler Studies brings Adorno to mind, as *Minima Moralia* contains multiple references to Hitler and the Nazis. Adorno is fundamentally concerned with showing how totalitarianism and genocide are linked to industrial capitalism and the rising consumer society. In fact, he would take issue with Gladney’s project to the extent that Gladney wants to study the phenomenon of Hitler as an aberration. “He who registers the death-camps as a technical mishap in civilization’s triumphal procession,” Adorno cautions, “reverses the meaning of his own politics: to keep calamity in check. Not only in the development of forces of production but also in the increasing pressure of domination does quantity change into quality” (234). Mass murder became more efficient and better-planned than it was during the large-scale military conflicts of antiquity. The names of weapons manufacturers have now become important: “the mechanism for reproducing life, and for dominating and for destroying it, is exactly the same, and accordingly industry, state and
advertising are amalgamated” (53). Late 20th century subjects are conditioned to shout, “[H]ow super!” at the movie theater just as they hunger for news of spectacular human catastrophe and consume the traumatizing news that alone can rouse them (201).

Nonetheless, Gladney is faced with personal challenges that unsettle him as he himself, as well as his wife and children, struggle to make sense of their time and place in the world and the riddle of existence. Much of the characters’ behavior in the face of these challenges can be characterized as avoidant, as they seek solace in some of the illusions their society has to offer.

DeLillo’s characters are ever poised for consumption -- this despite the reader’s suspicion that a prominent scholar such as Gladney might see himself as being above such concerns. Gladney and his family spend a lot of time in the supermarket and the shopping mall, and even when they are elsewhere there is much talk of products. The atmosphere of consumption is just as important as the act of buying or consuming is. The first-person narrator shares the feeling of comfort he experiences as he leads his family out to shop in the evenings. In fact, the orderliness and cheerful abundance one finds in the clean supermarket aisles is a guarantee of sorts against external threat: as long as the shelves are stocked with brightly colored products, things will be OK (170).

There is also a sense of the numbing effect felt when one confronts the array of choices offered in the marketplace. One product even promises the ultimate gift: to assuage one’s fear of death. This is a brilliant and fascinating device utilized by DeLillo. He imagines this most precious consumer good, which would allow the buyer to transcend the greatest fear in human experience, and yet we cannot imagine how the medication would work. Fear of death and
death itself are central aspects of the human condition and so a drug that would allow one to escape the fear would facilitate avoidance of the most basic fact about our human condition. Gladney consults a scientist who gives him a rather poetic explanation – invoking the image of an aggressive grizzly bear -- of how fear of death actually gives shape and meaning to one’s life (229). One thinks here, also, of giving sedatives to a death row prisoner. This takes the edge off the terror of facing execution but cannot change the facts of the prisoner’s existence. What could DeLillo’s “fear-of-death-pill” possibly do? Would anyone really want the medicine if it could deliver them from their fear? It is a truly haunting problem.

Meanwhile, the community experiences an “Airborne Toxic Event” when a dark cloud emerges from a capsized railway car and stalks the landscape. After mass evacuation followed by an “all-clear” announcement, life goes on as before. The cloud itself is a distinct mass that moves to cover one area after another. The reader is not told specifically what this “event” was, nor what the effects on community members will be – and of course, no one really knows. As the characters move on to other concerns, they create a false sense that the danger has passed, though everyone knows somehow that it is still a threat. The lack of details available about the event somehow serves to underscore the fact that it will reoccur.

It is clear that Jack Gladney and his family love one another and share a deep affection all the way through the large and complex family group (there are older and younger siblings, and some of the children are from prior marriages). Gladney and his wife, Babette, engage the children in adult-sounding discussions, treat them with tenderness and generally lavish attention on them. There are many family activities. As a couple, Jack and Babette are also quite affectionate with each other, and they worry terribly about one of them dying. It is not
that their habits of consumption displace human connectdeness, but rather that all of the
familiar aspects of family life that they display are taking place in a world where consumer
choices are ever-present. Going to the supermarket is a social event. People reading the novel
today should recognize this even more clearly now, as it is commonplace to take vacations to
go shopping.

At one point, Gladney is sifting through the trash to find – as it happens – the last of the
fear-of-death-allying pills, and he sees the mess of garbage strewn on the floor as perhaps the
“dark underside of consumer consciousness” (259). This is what products look like when they
have been shorn of their adornments and packaging, when they are not deployed to attract but
simply appear as they are. Of course, one seldom sees this “underside.” Its components
disappear down the compactor, into the can, and off to the landfill where no one but the trash
haulers will see it. Landfills are generally off-limits to the public, and so people see consumer
products mostly pre-consumption.ii In the same way, DeLillo points out, we do not see the
everyday poisoning of air, water, and food that is constantly occurring alongside the occasional
spectacular catastrophe such as the “airborne toxic event” that forces evacuation of the
Gladney’s neighborhood (174). Both are disasters, both are life-threatening, but the toxic cloud
is more vivid. Gladney tells the children that disasters happen to other people, that the
authorities are handling the health threats, that everything will be OK, and readers are left
wondering whether he is talking only to them when he says such things or reassuring himself as
well, embracing the subject position of benumbed consumer caught in the rhythms of appetite-
satisfaction (Adorno 114). Perhaps Gladney himself does not know.

_Infinite Jest_ and life in subsidized time
It is a strange world envisioned by David Foster Wallace in his brilliant, sprawling, intricately detailed novel, *Infinite Jest*. The United States has appropriated Canada and renamed the new aggregate entity O.N.A.N., The Organization of North American Nations. Canadian separatists engage in shocking, lethal violence against targets along the Eastern seaboard. Meanwhile, the population has become addicted to watching entertainment cartridges promising levels of pleasure that are, literally, to die for. O.N.A.N. President Johnny Gentle, cheesy-lounge-singer-turned-politician and avatar of selfishness, unapologetically urges voters to put America first and embrace hedonistic consumerism. Garbage (the underside of consumer consciousness, as Delillo says) is disposed of through a system that launches waste-laden capsules into Canada. Time in the 21st century is marked by subsidized years, such as the Year of the Whopper and the Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar.

Despite the strangeness of the phenomena composing Wallace’s imagined life-world in 21st century O.N.A.N., no reader could fail to see the resemblance of that world to the present. The tennis academy and the halfway house where much of the narrative unfolds are quite familiar, as Wallace meticulously details and deftly captures the fanaticism of youth sports culture and the tough pragmatism of the recovery movement. The scenes of AA/NA meetings provide the reader a complex psychological study of the assortment of characters who show up, from the soon-to-relapse addict to the long-term sober contingent who know that their lives depend on continuing, vigilant and faithful obedience to the program. Readers see the interior struggle of the reluctant joiners, and even those who have not been through addiction and recovery can follow and identify with the trajectory of thought from skepticism to eventual acceptance of the recovery program. It seems at first that the faith that addicts invest in the
recovery process is excessive or naïve. The reader might be inclined to cynicism in the face of the leap of faith required of all new entrants to the Ennett House program. This cynicism is fueled by the jaded and world-weary characters who come to the Ennett House doorstep, such as burglar Don Gately and film actor/radio host Joelle VanDyne (whose radio name is “Madame Psychosis”). Cliches about “one day at a time” and owning up to one’s past would seem to require more sincerity than Gately or VanDyne could muster, but survival dictates that they embrace the program. Even if they choose an ironic detachment, recognition of the program’s effectiveness compels them to participate in the rituals: giving testimony about their own personal trip to rock bottom, traveling to as many AA/NA meetings around town as possible each week. “Leave it all behind and commit completely if you want to save your life,” is the offer. These are harsh terms, but many still sign onto the bargain. This bargain for sobriety is, in fact, one of the starkest ones in Wallace’s novel.

And yet there are other bargains. Wallace blurs the line between people addicted to substances and the rest of society. *Everyone*, it appears, is dependent on the pleasure delivered through the TP cartridge system. The cartridges provide entertainment that can range from instructional to relaxing to so intensely pleasurable that the viewer will die or at least be reduced to drooling imbecility by watching. The entire society is addicted to the cartridges, whether they are also addicted to chemical substances or not. This state of things is anticipated in Adorno’s claim that “[s]ociety has, as it were, assumed the sickness of all individuals” (59). Even the healthy are sick, as their movements “resemble the reflex-movements of beings whose hearts have stopped beating.” Ibid. Wallace conveys this equivalence effectively by linking the addicts, whom everyone knows as such, with the rest of the (putatively) healthy
members of society who are in fact susceptible to the pleasure cartridge addiction because they are already addicted to a lifestyle of selfish pleasure-seeking. The healthy are sick (60). Hal, for example, is a tennis prodigy who goes to absurd lengths to get high every day undetected, deep in the bowels of the tennis practice facility. The pleasure cartridge is at once the premier product offered by the culture industry and the predictable end-point of a process that manages and titillates sensation for profit. Forever seeking after what is new, people focus on newness rather than specific products, much like “desensitized morphine addicts finally grab indiscriminately at any drug” (238). Thus the distinction between the halfway house and the larger society breaks down – or perhaps the halfway house becomes a sort of laboratory in which the phenomena present in ONAN’s dysfunctional society can be observed more closely.

This is an atomized world in which people’s myopic focus on their own survival and pleasure disconnects them from others. And as Adorno points out, people are not only atomized among themselves but within themselves as well: work is segregated from leisure and loses its capacity for fulfillment as it attains a “functional modesty” (130). Work and leisure are both unfulfilling and they remain in separate domains of experience that never intersect. The self is compartmentalized. Selfishness in the extreme begets a world of calculating pleasure-seekers. The reader sees at times a longing for connectedness (between tennis star Hal and his profoundly disabled brother Mario, between Don and Joelle), but it seems aberrant, against the odds. All around those lonely characters who sense that something is really wrong with the way they live, the larger society urges everyone to transact for pleasure. Cartridges are ubiquitous, urged on children like a pacifier. The O.N.A.N. president (who happens to be an ex-entertainer) licenses the populace to focus on satisfying their own needs, to the exclusion of larger political
or environmental problems. A question arises here: if addiction is a widespread phenomenon extending beyond drugs to video-images, food, and pleasure generally, then how can subjects be freely bargaining for these things that they cannot resist?

In one scene, a Canadian terrorist and an O.N.A.N. security operative meet covertly to share information (as a result of a complex series of bargains they have made with their handlers and with each other), and during their meeting they outline their differing views on what one could call a subject’s freedom to choose goods. Both of them – Agent Steeply and Remy Marathe – anticipate that Americans/O.N.A.N.ites will be unable to resist the most stimulating of the TP cartridges in circulation, even though the cartridge is known to destroy the mind of anyone who watches it. Of course, complete psychic breakdown occurs only after an overwhelmingly pleasurable sensation is produced by watching it. Marathe insists that people do not know what is best for them, that they need to be guided to make the right choice and eschew pleasure for something else (Duty? Love of nation? Revolutionary cause? Maturity?). Marathe and his compatriots are searching for the pleasure-cartridge so they can use it as an instrument of terrorism. Marathe explains to Steeply that this planned terror campaign designed around finding and disseminating the pleasure-cartridge is possible because of the decadent state of American society: the consumption-obsessed populace has sown the seeds of its own destruction. In his somehow endearing idiosyncratic English, Marathe explains:

Now [sic] is what has happened when a people chooses nothing over themselves to love, each one. A U.S.A. that would die – and let its children die, each one – for the so-called perfect Entertainment, this film. Who would die for this chance to be fed this death of pleasure with spoons, in their warm homes, alone,
unmoving… Forget for the moment the Entertainment, and think instead about a U.S.A. where such a thing could be possible enough for your Office to fear: can such a U.S.A. hope to survive for a much longer time? (318)

Steeply comes down on the side of freedom, pointing out that freedom of choice is an inherent right and that it is the right to choose – even to choose badly – that must be defended. “There are no choices without personal freedom, Buckeroo,” Steeply replies (320). “These things you find so weak and contemptible in us – these are just the hazards of being free.” Ibid. To that, Marathe invokes the image of a “loving-filled father to guide, inform, teach the person to choose. How is there freedom to choose if one does not learn how to choose?” Ibid.

In a subsequent conversation, Steeply explains that a society in which free choice is valued turns out in the end to be the best kind of society.

The American genius, our good fortune, is that someplace along the line back there in American history them [sic] realizing that each American seeking to pursue his maximum good results together in maximizing everyone’s good (424). This outcome is produced by the universal agreement that pursuit of pleasure should be allowed and protected. Pleasure is most important, we each define “pleasure” for ourselves, and we must be allowed to pursue it as long as my pleasure does not limit yours. This agreement yields the best, the most harmonious society.

But Marathe shrewdly deploys the argument that one pleasure can often be contingent on another. That is, sometimes A can only enjoy the thing A wants at B’s expense. Both cannot have it. This may be a result of limited resources. A choice must be made as to whose right will be recognized and enforced. To use an example from the contemporary world rather than
Wallace’s, the experience of living in a pollution-free neighborhood is enjoyed by some children precisely because an incinerator or a smelter is located in someone else’s neighborhood.

Marathe is a clever interlocutor, and he also raises the problem of short-term versus long-term desires and interests, e.g., the desire for candy versus the desire for good teeth. To respond to this, Steeply turns to the American educational system, which will, he says, teach a person “how to balance the short- and long-term pursuit of what he wants” (429). American schools, then, do not “teach what to desire;” they “teach how to be free.” Ibid. It is not clear to what extent Steeply believes what he is saying. After all, he is a covert agent pretending to be a female journalist, so it would be necessary to penetrate those layers of appearance and deceit if one were seeking the authentic self beneath Steeply’s roles and disguises. In any event, the dialogue breaks off at that point as the locus of the narrative shifts from the Arizona desert to the tennis academy. But the question left hanging in the air is how a consumer culture so prevalent could be kept from infiltrating the educational process. In other words, the Entertainment cartridge system had become universally the most popular avenue of pleasure-seeking. It was engineered to displace network television and its ads shaped consumer preferences with complete success. It is inconceivable that the processes of consumer demand-shaping, operating simultaneously at several levels, could fail to infiltrate schools. The core message of consumerism is to satisfy short-term interests, and that message would threaten to drown out any urging to pursue a long-term goal.

This dilemma is somewhat intractable, and readers do not ultimately learn whose view of choice will prevail, but it is clear that as a matter of fact Americans/O.N.A.N.ites expect and
demand to be able to choose consumer goods and lifestyles rather than to have those conditions dictated to them by someone else.

Wallace is certainly onto something here. The current popularity of gated communities reflects the desire to retreat, as a family, to womblike insularity. The gated community is a suburban fortress that keeps out the problems, needs and crises of the outer world. (Monahan 2010) Pundits coined the term “security moms” after 9/11 to describe nurturing parents who might be liberal and tolerant on some social issues but whose fierce protectiveness toward their offspring in a dangerous world led them to hawkish views on foreign policy. A “family first” outlook led them to see the external world as an undifferentiated mass of threats against which strong military responses were needed. Moreover, the threats were not all external: immigrants, people living in urban poverty, and the homeless were equally salient domestic threats as compared to global ones, and in response to both types of threat the family must be fortified. Not only the home became fortress; the car did also. The SUV, sometimes in its most extreme manifestation as Humvee, was the preferred form of transport for many suburban families. This traveling fortress interposed a large and heavy steel frame between the outside world and the occupants. No matter that the SUV was far more likely, as compared to a smaller car, to inflict fatalities on other motorists in the event of a collision; no matter, either, that it consumed vast amount of fossil fuels. It was possible to insulate one’s family while driving, and therefore it was necessary to do so. Some SUV commercials even raised this choice to a duty by asking why a parent would fail to take such a protective step as buying an SUV if one were available.
In the end, Wallace presents a world, like our own, thoroughly permeated by consumerism, and in some ways ruled by it. Characters calculate how best to pursue their interests and the social fabric reflects interdependent and multileveled bargains.

**Bargaining for Freedom: “Welcome to the middle class!”**

Jonathan Franzen’s 2010 novel, *Freedom*, explores various dimensions of human freedom in contemporary society: choosing the conditions of one’s life, seeking intimacy with others, and imagining and pursuing personal goals and projects in a complex and impersonal world. Franzen’s characters search for fulfillment and often see it in terms of some kind of freedom. Mostly they do this in a self-centered way, which is typical of the generations they represent. Walter Berglund and his wife, Patty, grew up in the 1960s/70s and started a family in the late 1980s. Walter suppresses his desires beneath a public self that grieves for the ruined, crowded earth and the vicious, soulless human society surrounding him. This is seen as early as his college years – the libidinal excesses of his musician roommate, Richard Katz, strike a sharp contrast with Walter’s asceticism and his incipient social conscience. While Katz is sleeping with everyone in sight, Walter lectures would-be girlfriends about overpopulation and corporate greed, earnest and boring compared to Katz’s aloof alt-rocker mystique. And yet Walter does want things for himself: particularly his athletic, beautiful, damaged and troubled classmate Patty Emerson, who ultimately agrees to marry Walter rather than to chase the elusive and nomadic Richard Katz.

Patty’s choice haunts the three of them – Patty, Walter and Richard – throughout the novel as their lives diverge and reconnect. Walter admires Richard; Patty has unresolved
feelings for Richard; Richard seems unsure how to feel about either of them. Meanwhile, the Berglunds’ children grow up to navigate the American society that has left their parents so unfulfilled. Their son Joey is a young Republican who imagines himself to be a deal-maker, a “hard person” rather than a “soft” one (Franzen 422). His politics are a means to distance himself from his father, and in fact he sees the world as a menu of means for him to get what he wants. He manipulates high school classmates to buy junk from him; he schemes to borrow money from his girlfriend while simultaneously planning a romantic liaison with his friend’s sister; he partners with defense contractors in a war-profiteering scam. The link between war-making and profit-making that Adorno emphasizes is seen clearly in Joey’s attempt to make a fortune off the Iraq War. His plan goes terribly wrong and he is forced to reevaluate not only his self-image but also his faith in renegade capitalism. He sees the real-life consequences flowing from his “seize the opportunity and get rich” fantasies and he’s shaken to the point where he walks away.

Franzen is adept at showing how, even in a world of seemingly limitless individual choice, nobody gets what they want. They calculate and conspire, they strike bargains in relationships, business and conservation, and are forced continually to confront the failure of their plans. They are unhappy. In Adorno’s terms, the characters in Freedom live in a setting where the sphere of experience is “ever-diminishing” (62). There is strong pressure to engage in “compulsive extravagance” and “champagne jollity,” and people lack awareness of their unhappiness because “illusory gratifications” have taken hold of them. Ibid. And this state of things will continue, perhaps indefinitely:
Only when sated with false pleasure, disgusted with the goods offered, dimly aware of the inadequacy of happiness even when it is that...can men gain an idea of what experience might be. Ibid.

In different ways, Walter, Patty, Richard and Joey are relying on the social milieu in which they live to bring them happiness (and freedom). Adorno’s critique of the culture industry would suggest that that reliance is misplaced.

*Freedom* helps the reader to see several things that are relevant for this inquiry into social bargains:

- Seemingly free choices are structured by larger forces;
- In particular, the context in which these negotiations take place is permeated by consumerism and late capitalism, and the characters (subjects) become absorbed in these conditions;
- The costs of the negotiated bargains, in terms of consequences, offer the beginning of a normative critique.

These aspects of freedom converge in a brilliantly imagined (and darkly hilarious) scene where long-suffering environmentalist Walter Berglund delivers a manic yet insightful speech on the occasion of the launch of a business-environmental partnership venture. The project is intended to preserve nesting habitat for the cerulean warbler, a small songbird. But this protection is secured at a price: the mining company that funds the project is entitled to perform mountaintop removal (a violently destructive form of mining that tears away the top layer of a mountain, stripping away vegetation and leaving bare, scarred earth) in certain parts
of the preserve. This Faustian bargain became possible when longtime residents of the community of Forster’s Hollow reluctantly agreed to sell their landholdings to the developers. The result is a series of interconnected bargains: the environmentalists bargain with the mining interests to secure nesting habitat in exchange for mining rights. That eventual partnership enables them to bargain with the landowners, who get money as well as guaranteed jobs in a defense plant nearby. These are the benefits of the bargain; the losses are plain to see. A way of life is passing, and an unholy alliance between business and conservation actually brings environmental degradation in one spot alongside habitat protection in another. Walter initially calculates the bargain to be worthwhile: he has a pragmatic side to him, and he sees compromise as a necessary component of progress. Eventually, though, the deforestation he will help to bring about proves too much for him to bear, and he delivers an unexpected tirade at the groundbreaking ceremony. Before he is dragged from the podium and beaten by angry Forster’s Hollow residents, he manages to get through most of what he wants to say:

But, you know, back when you were refusing to have anything to do with us, I respected that. I didn’t like it, but I had respect for your position. For your independence. You see, I actually came from a place a little bit like Forster Hollow myself, before I joined the middle class. And now you’re middle-class too, and I want to welcome you all, because it’s a wonderful thing, our American middle class. It’s the mainstay of economies around the globe!

And now that you’ve got these jobs at this body-armor plant, ... you’re going to be able to participate in those economies. You, too, can help denude every last scrap of native habitat in Asia, Africa, and South America! You, too,
can buy six-foot-wide plasma TV screens that consume unbelievable amounts of energy, even when they’re not turned on! But that’s OK, because that’s why we threw you out of your homes in the first place, so we could strip-mine your ancestral hills and feed the coal-fired generators that are the number-one cause of global warming and other excellent things like acid rain. It’s a perfect world, isn’t it? It’s a perfect system, because as long as you’ve got your six-foot-wide plasma TV, and the electricity to run it, you don’t have to think about any of the ugly consequences. You can watch *Survivor: Indonesia* until there’s no more Indonesia (Franzen 483)!

As Walter chants that humans are a “cancer on the planet,” he’s dragged down, kicked and beaten until his assistant rescues him (484).

Berglund excoriates the Forster Hollow residents for trading away roots, history, way of life and perhaps even dignity in exchange for a better-paying future. And yet this is a bargain that he himself engineered and urged upon them. Moreover, his entire approach to battling environmental destruction is premised on a pragmatic, results-oriented activism, the forging of partnerships with those who possess true efficacy. Walter believes not only in this bargain, but in bargaining in general as a way to make the world better. He is conflicted, to be sure, as his angry speech shows, but at the same time he has long been committed to the process of persuading reasonable people to act by appealing to their self-interest. And herein lies the paradox of bargaining in a free society. One the one hand, agents free to choose and pursue their own visions of the good must be allowed to make any bargain that does not infringe on the freedom of others. These individual choices cannot be criticized on normative grounds
because value-neutrality is required by the liberal outlook Walter presents. Once someone (i.e., the government) can declare one version of the good to be invalid or inferior, then the freedom of all is no longer assured. Thus, Walter cannot tell the Forster Hollow residents that they have made a bad bargain by choosing money and jobs over their ancestral way of life. They were presented with a choice, and they made it, according to their view of what is good and valuable in life.

On the other hand, though, Walter does want to criticize them, even though he delivers his criticism in a manic and sarcastic way. He shows them what the effects of this kind of choice will be. By selling out to the business-environmental partnership, they would be joining a worldwide force that continues to bring about harms to the earth itself. Plasma TVs consume energy; energy production contributes to global warming; manufacturers strip raw materials from the developing world. These effects will not be felt by the residents themselves, at least not immediately, and so they do not figure into the calculus by which the residents decided whether to sell their land. Nonetheless, the effects are very real. The sellers will not feel those effects and so they have not made a bad bargain in that sense, and yet Walter’s description of the processes of destruction to which they are contributing is accurate. Marathe in *Infinite Jest* comes to mind here because he voices the critique that is not available to the defender of liberalism. In his conversation with Steeply (who is in fact defending liberalism), Marathe mocks the “free choice” that Americans prize so greatly because the choice is always for the short-term good and never takes greater ideals into account. Americans lack a “wise, loving-filled father,” Marathe says, who can help them make good choices, and so the “U.S.A. freedom” is meaningless in his view. In a beautiful and poignant passage in this section of the book, Franzen
describes the songbird migration that touches Appalachia each spring (and in fact would pass through the preserve Walter had been trying to create) (485). Contemplating this natural spectacle, in which vast numbers of tiny and colorful birds travel thousands of miles as they follow the spring winds north to their nesting grounds, the reader has a vivid picture of what is being lost as consumer capitalism digs in even deeper, as wealth-related incentives fuel development. But of course, this passage in *Freedom* communicates its poignancy only to those who view the preservation of natural habitat and promotion of biodiversity as important goods to be pursued. For those who don’t value such things, any gesture of environmental protection makes no sense. And for defenders of the environment, value-neutrality stymies them as they try to argue for the primary importance of the environment within the philosophical framework of liberalism.

For the power-broker Vin Haven, who helped Walter to put this deal together in the first place, it is simply incomprehensible that anyone would see things differently, whether through moral objections, idealism or absolutism. Bargaining is how things get done; it is how the nation moves forward. For Haven, compromise is not so much an ethical choice as a fundamental force in modern life. Haven thinks that Walter was being sensible all along until he started to “intellectualize” what was a simple solution, a win-win situation (486). Of course, Adorno would see things differently. The compulsion to make these bargains is itself a bourgeois malady, in his terms. It arises from the false equation in which *instrumental patterns of thought = knowledge* and it arises from the “dislike of thinking” that modernity has brought about (124). Knowledge projects fix on their objects randomly, in the manner of a dog out for a walk, which chooses some “unexplained spot” to relieve itself (125).
Evaluating lifestyle bargains and their consequences (1): fueling a lifestyle

As suggested at the beginning of this article, multiple bargains are being made at once when consumers demand (and buy) large gas-powered vehicles. The buyer wants the SUV (and is willing to pay a lot of money for it), and the buyer wants gas to be available, at an affordable price, so that the SUV can be driven wherever and however often the driver wants. Satisfaction of these demands generates harms to the earth that are easy to see: picture, for a moment, the sight of a congested freeway at rush hour, with thousands of cars burning fuel as they sit completely still on the roadway. And yet the reason this sight appears over and over again, every day, all over the country, is the preeminence of value neutrality as a social and political norm. The value-maximizing agent seeks goods that are important and meaningful to her; she is guaranteed the opportunity to engage in this pursuit even if her choices turn out to be unpopular with some. The limits of free choice are marked out by regulation, in particular by criminal law, and Americans are sensitive to the demarcation of those limits. Laws limiting gun possession (as challenged in D.C. v. Heller, 2008) and laws requiring purchase of health insurance (as challenged in NFIB v. Sebelius, 2012) provoke vigorous and angry opposition. In the health insurance cases, the plaintiffs and their supporters emphasized how unjust it was to force people to buy something they did not want. This intense reaction reflects a deeply felt sense, widely shared through American society, that substantive value choices are to be left to individuals. Bill Mc Kibben notes that “only in recent times have people decided that ‘because I want to’ is sufficient reason for annoying others. Only in a culture of hyperindividualism would it occur to you to do what you wanted without reference to anyone else” (133). And yet this is without question the culture in which Americans now live.
This prioritization and defense of individual choice can obscure the ways in which those choices are structured in advance. It is difficult to opt out of the routines of modern life. Choices of products seem limitless, but the assumption is that everyone will make those highly detailed and specific choices. The consumer is free to choose between soft drinks, or wireless networks, but it is harder to reject supermarket foods and cellphones entirely. Utah resident Daniel Suelo decided years ago to forego the use of money. He lives in a cave and eats only what he can forage from dumpster or desert. He owns virtually nothing and maintains none of the ties that most people take for granted (street address, phone number, place of work, retirement plan). But it took Suelo a long time and much soul-searching to break those ties and to commit to living as he does. He receives no medical or dental care and he is left unprotected against illness, weather and scarcity. Learning about Suelo’s life, one cannot help but commend and respect him for the stand he has taken. At the same time, one senses the gulf that separates him from other people -- even from those who sympathize with him and understand his response to the predicament of living in our consumption-obsessed world and its entrapments. His biographer, Mark Sundeen, readily admits that he himself could not “quit money” -- and that, in fact, some part of him wished at first to turn away from Suelo and from what his scruffy appearance represents. The point here is that we are thrown (to take a Heideggerian turn of phrase) into a set of conditions that structure and limit some of the larger choices about how to live. Rejecting automobiles, electricity, grocery stores and money is not impossible but it is certainly difficult and complicated, and those rejections foreclose other choices.
To say that some choices are structured for us is not to absolve people for all the lifestyle choices they make. Of the millions of Americans who drive cars, only some know of and support the Tar Sands Pipeline. Still, the project represents a response to consumer demand, an opportunity for a firm to profit from a popular consumer preference for driving large gas-powered vehicles at a time when known fuel supplies are dwindling. Keystone has devised a way to extract oil deposits from the sandy soil of Alberta, Canada’s plains region. Their product -- raw tar sands crude -- would then be shipped south to refineries in the Gulf Coast region.

Opponents of the project, including members of the House of Representatives, have protested that there are significant health risks associated with the transporting and processing of tar sands crude. In addition to the risks posed by any pipeline (e.g., leaks, natural habitat destruction), the tar sands project presents unique concerns. Tar sands crude is particularly dirty, and the refining process sends more harmful pollutants into the environment as compared to oil from other sources. Although the Obama administration refused to grant the permit for Keystone, the project’s supporters saw greater opportunities for approval once he left office.

Automobile users implicitly demand new fuel research and exploration initiatives like the tar sands extraction project simply because they rely on automobile use and the known sources of fuel are diminishing. So even if some (many) drivers don’t know about the pipeline or its status, they nonetheless provide support for Keystone in the fight to get permit approval. They represent a constant demand, even a dependency on oil. Part of the bargain of choosing a car-centered lifestyle is to encourage the endless search for new sources of oil.
As for those who do know the details about the Keystone project, they can support or oppose the project. To oppose it obliges one to come up with an alternative both in terms of one’s own lifestyle (hybrid vehicles, less driving) and in public policy terms (more mass transit, gas rationing, gas tax). In the 2008 presidential campaign, John McCain’s running mate, Sarah Palin, loudly and unapologetically argued that oil drilling should be increased, that the need for auto fuel trumped environmental concerns. This perspective, which is frequently encountered in policy discussions in the United States, is a predictable result of a “hyperindividualized,” consumption- and convenience-focused society. Of course, there are effects flowing predictably from this course of action: immediate harm to those located in the vicinity of the refineries (an externality for most of the project’s supporters), and long-term harm to the environment. Since these costs are not direct, they are difficult for many consumers to see. But it is still possible to express opposition, or even get arrested while protesting, as some did.

Evaluating lifestyle bargains (2): externalizing disaster.

When individual choices cause large-scale harms, one response is to acknowledge the cause of harm, and change action, either individually or at the policy level. Another response is to explain away the harms as the result of some external force. Mike Davis has shown how Californians have repeatedly attributed disasters to external forces rather than seeing the role of human action in the occurrences. This displacement of blame has occurred with regard to drought, brush fires, and animal attacks, among other events. In each case, lifestyle choices have produced harms:

- Agribusiness has drained off water, leading to shortages.
Wealthy homeowners live in fire-prone brushlands, where a small fire can escalate into a destructive blaze very quickly as the prevailing winds spread it through miles of dry brush.

As homeowners encroach further into the Sierra Madre, animals such as mountain lions become more accustomed to people, and more likely to attack.

As Californians experience these events, they understand them as manifestations of a malevolent (or at the very least, capricious) Nature visiting tragedies upon the long-suffering populace. But Davis demonstrates how human action, taken in disregard of environmental processes, has made these forms of disaster almost inevitable. Moreover, willful blindness to natural features of the landscape has been intertwined with California’s history throughout the 20th century. Consequently, Californians persist in the same habits that brought about disaster, and it happens again and again. Each individual narrative applied to a type of calamity links up to a more general overarching view of Nature as hostile and dangerous, guaranteeing more of the same and even new forms of natural threat (for example, there have been many more mountain lion attacks from 1980 on, as compared to only a handful in the first half of the 20th century).

For the purposes of this discussion, Davis’ critique is most important for its illumination of a basic problem with the concept of lifestyle design. Externalizing disaster serves to facilitate environmentally destructive behavior, in the sense that when things go wrong, it is a tragedy rather than a human-engineered problem. Building new homes in the mountains, and continuing to live in brushfire- and mudslide-prone areas of southern California, are in a sense freely chosen bargains in which people choose a lifestyle element after weighing risks. From the
perspective of philosophical liberalism, one might say that people ought to be able to do this, as benefit-maximizing agents. The problem, however, is that their choices are based on a false premise: it is not random catastrophe or untamed Nature that they contend against, but rather the cumulative effect of their own decisions. Whether this blindness is deliberate or simply ignorant, it creates a teleology of destruction in which, as Davis shows, disasters become bigger, more frequent and differentiated. When Marathe in *Infinite Jest* talks about long-term vs. short-term consequences, he suggests that wise guidance is needed to choose well, for we do not always see where things are headed. Davis’ story, though, is a kind of fast-forward version of long-term vs. short-term – in 1998, he could document the acceleration of disaster in each form of crisis, and 20 years later Americans see it even more fully formed, as in California’s water crisis.

The literary representations of freedom discussed here envision freedom as the ability to bargain in the consumer society. They present a vivid picture of this freedom as at once unassailable and fraught with harm and hurt. The language of bargaining helps one to understand why the free choice of ends is so critical to the conception of the modern subject, and yet the life-world in which bargaining takes place virtually guarantees long-term consequences that are disappointing, frustrating, and sometimes disastrous. All the while, the “monstrous machinery of amusement keeps alive and constantly grows bigger without a single person being amused by it” (Adorno 139).

**Works Cited**

i This conflation of consumer and citizen has been criticized by Mark Sagoff in his influential book The Economy of the Earth. Sagoff argues that when economic analysis focuses only on cost-benefit tradeoffs and maximization of efficiency, public values get shortchanged or even eclipsed. When a person acts in the marketplace, that person is a consumer seeking to satisfy a preference efficiently. But when a question of policy arises, that same person is acting not as a consumer but as a citizen. A citizen seeks input into constructing and enacting public values. Sagoff illustrates these distinct aspects of human experience — consumer and citizen — by describing a classroom exercise in which he asks students whether they would prefer construction of a resort or a wilderness park. The students’ personal preference is for a resort, as that experience fits better with their desires...
as consumers and what they would enjoy more. However, when the discussion turns to resource use, the students express a desire to preserve the wilderness. This apparent contradiction suggests to Sagoff that questions of public values (of “who we are,” as he puts it), are best left to the process of deliberative democracy. It is a mistake to let such questions turn on efficiency. There needs to be a separation between the market and the public sphere.

ii Birders often seek access to dump sites in order to observe rare gulls and other bird life. The author has tried, without success, to gain access to an active landfill.

iii Some have questioned the methodology of the recovery movement. See, for example, Dodes, Lance (2014), The Sober Truth: Debunking the Bad Science Behind 12-Step Programs and the Rehab Industry. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. Whatever the possible objections might be, those who come through and out the other side will be unshakably convinced that it worked for them, and probably that it is the only thing that would. This seems to be Wallace’s view, as shown by his focus on “recovery fiction.”

iv By “liberal” here, of course, is meant liberalism as a philosophical doctrine rather than “liberal” as a label for one’s politics, in contrast to “conservative.”

v In fact, this was the basis for the Supreme Court’s ruling that the mandatory insurance provision of the Affordable Care Act violated the Commerce Clause, even though the law was ultimately upheld on other grounds by a narrow majority of the justices.