

Don G.

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At this point, down to eight of us in the class.

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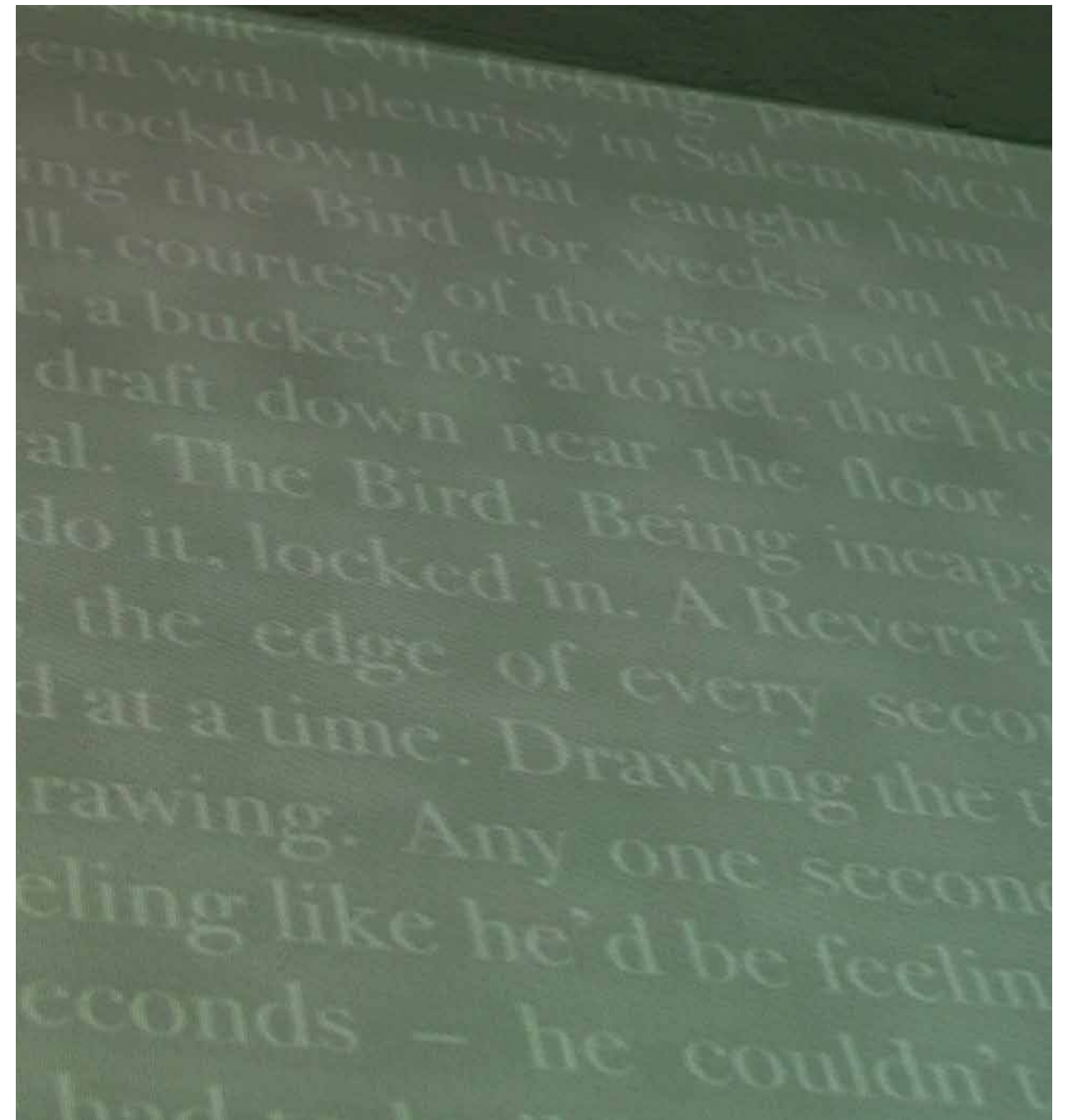
A slim volume containing a series of short stories based on Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity, which is an enjoyably quick and kind of fun read and which I have mistakenly referred to, more than once (appropriately or not) as *Lightman's Dreams*.

3

Alan Lightman, *Einstein's Dreams*. New York: Random House, 1993. pg. 6.

At the crossroads/vague midpoint of the 2010 Spring semester, in *Design Studio II*, we¹, mysteriously, were given the choice of two studio projects to work on, the idea being that we would ride this project out for the duration of the term, into the sunsets of the summer and our impending thesis year. The first choice Prof. Brian Lucid gave us was to design a system to display information from the San Francisco BART. The system would use a live stream of data, and the resulting display environment had to be glance-able from a distance of two city blocks. The other choice was to pick a short story from Alan Lightman's *Einstein's Dreams*² and create a narrative experience based on whichever particular time concept was on display in our selected story. This narrative experience could be delivered in the form of a proof-of-concept video or a series of drawings or an installation; basically it was pretty open-ended. Needless to say, *everybody* chose the *Einstein's Dreams* assignment, rendering the fact that we were able to pick our assignment somewhat arbitrary, and making me feel bad that no one chose the BART project, because it seemed like a good project, and someone should have chosen it, at least to keep the general feeling of choice/free will alive. Granted, I didn't feel bad enough to actually choose that project.

In the story from *Einstein's Dreams* that I chose to work with, the narrator speaks of a world in which "time is a circle, bending back on itself. The world repeats itself, precisely, endlessly."³ The people in this world are unaware that such a circle exists. Later, the narrator states, "Some few people in every town, in their dreams, are vaguely aware that all has occurred in



the past. These are the people with unhappy lives, and they sense that their misjudgments and wrong deeds and bad luck have all taken place in the previous loop of time.”⁴

4
Ibid. pg. 7.

This passage directly resonated thematically and conceptually with a section of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, a book I had read in Summer/Fall 2009 and which had a seismic influence on me, creatively, emotionally, all-encompassingly, in the way *The Catcher in the Rye* might resonate when you’re fifteen or *The Wire* might if you’re white and liberal and in your twenties. But anyway, since reading the novel, I had been looking for a way to somehow incorporate its influence into my work. Using the lens of the Lightman story seemed to provide a perfect opportunity.

5
Infinite Jest, from here on in.

About three-quarters of the way through *IJ*⁵, the character Don Gately, through a series of unfortunate and spoiler-riffic (for anyone who might be interested in reading the book) events, finds himself hospitalized and bed-ridden. In a series of flashbacks, flash-forwards, hallucinations, and, yes, dreams, we learn about Gately’s past life, his absurdly difficult childhood in Beverly, Massachusetts, his descent into drug abuse and his life as a habit-induced career burglar. In this world, he is one of Lightman’s unhappy people, reliving his misjudgments and wrong deeds whilst in extreme pain, refusing painkillers in a steadfast and, at times, heroic gesture to maintain sobriety. But so how to make something that illustrates this narrative concept?

Almost immediately, I had the idea to create an experience synthesizing what it would be like to be Don Gately, in a near-coma, reliving essential and quasi-essential episodes and words and sounds and imagery from his life, his life being perceived as cyclical and oblique and on a loop. I envisioned this experience to be an installation, in a small, cube-like, hospital-esque room, in which imagery is projected onto the ceiling and walls. The viewer would lie down on a bed (again, mimicking Gately’s physical position), gazing up at the media. Thus, the viewer becomes one of Lightman’s unaware cyclical perceivers.

So I had the source of the content: a passage in *Infinite Jest* filtered through the conceptual cast of Lightman’s short story. The next big thing to figure out was how to represent the content in the way that best evoked

the emotional content of the work.

I knew that I wanted to use the source text as a visual element. DFW’s words are so well chosen and visceral that it would be somewhat absurd to not include them in some capacity. I identified three classifications of the source text and created mini visual languages that would dictate the way each would be displayed. I then created animations in *AfterEffects* (Adobe Systems, Inc., San Jose, CA, USA) based on these classifications. I displayed direct excerpts of the extended passages in a justified block in a serif typeface, similar to how it appears in the printed book. These blocks start above the frame and extend below it, fading in and out via blurs and shifts in opacity. They’re big blocks of text, and the amount of time they appear clearly is short, making it difficult, if not impossible, for the viewer to read it completely. This treatment is supposed to mimic Gately’s personal educational history and his frustration with his inability to comprehend the meanings of words, especially in his hospital environment. It’s also supposed to heighten the sense of helplessness and struggle within the viewer as they attempt (and likely fail) to read through the text.

One of the main things that happens in the *IJ* passage, while Gately is in the hospital bed, is that he’s repeatedly visited by a wraith, formerly Jim Incandenza, who is one of the novel’s other central characters, whom Gately doesn’t actually know personally, who is a deceased scientist/inventor/independent filmmaker, who sort of buzzes around the room in a way somewhere between a hummingbird and a fairy, and who uses a potpourri of esoteric and archaic words in his conversations with Gately, which themselves are somewhere in-between telepathic communications and fever-dream associations. These words, like “ACCIACCATURA”, “LORDOSIS”, and “CERISE MONTCLAIR” are wholly unknown to Gately, and “come crashing into his head with...ghastly intrusive force.”⁶ I chose to represent these words in all caps, as they appear in the text, but with a sans-serif, mid-century typeface so as to be more scientific or clinical, and with an abrupt transition of opacity in and out of the frame.

A third treatment was given to excerpts from the text which were chosen as key or illuminating passages from the book that serve to explain what’s happening in clear, fairly straightforward language. I represented

6
David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1996. pg. 832.

GERRYMANDER a
sudden it occurs to G
LEXICAL themselves
and MENISCUS and
and CERISE MONT
DOLLY and CIR
RIAGE and then mor
and then HELIATED
speed, and Gately trie
but nothing comes ou
hind him where Gate
him and it turns out



these fragments with the same serif typeface as the long, justified passages, but in smaller, readable chunks that faded in and out very slowly, allowing the viewer to read and glean specific meaning from the text.

All of the text treatments were superimposed on a color field that very gradually faded between earth-toned, de-saturated greens, grays and blues. This served as the primary video stream, which was to be projected on the wall directly in front of a bed within the installation and then looped over and over again ad infinitum, comprimising the predominant visual experience of the work.

As an additional visual component to the installation, I filmed video segments based on films that the wraith character made, when still alive and known as Jim Incandenza⁷. These (meaning my interpretations of the films) ranged from filming things like the corners of ceilings and walls, to a female character wearing a linen veil, to the edges of surfaces that might be in the hospital room with Gately, such as a table or an out-of-focus view out a window. I gave these a rounded-edge-to-simulate-16mm-film matte in *AfterEffects*. These vignettes were scaled considerably smaller and projected on the ceiling of the installation room, fading in and out and positioned randomly, to represent Gately's fading in and out of consciousness and lack of awareness of his surroundings. Again, these videos were to be looped, in order to reflect the cyclical nature of time in both Lightman's and DFW's imagined worlds.

This was the eventual set-up: A small room⁸ with white walls, a bed, two projectors, and two video sources, the room dark except for the light from the projections, silence except for the hum of the projectors—in other words, an immersive, meditative environment for the contemplation of the text and the videos and interplay between the two.

Whether or not this installation/experience/imagined *mise-en-scené* worked as something that someone could experience without having read *IJ* is somewhat beside the point. Don Gately is a lost character, and subsequently if a viewer feels lost or confused, they're feeling what Gately is feeling, and that's supposed to be the point of the work; to simulate Gately's experience and consciousness. A more appropriate question to ask might be "Did this work accurately depict or engender the specific *kind*

of confusion and helplessness that Gately felt in the novel?" To honestly answer that question—I'm sorry—you're going to have to read the book. If you do, stick with it. It's long, and it might take you three months to finish, but it'll be worth every last hard second.

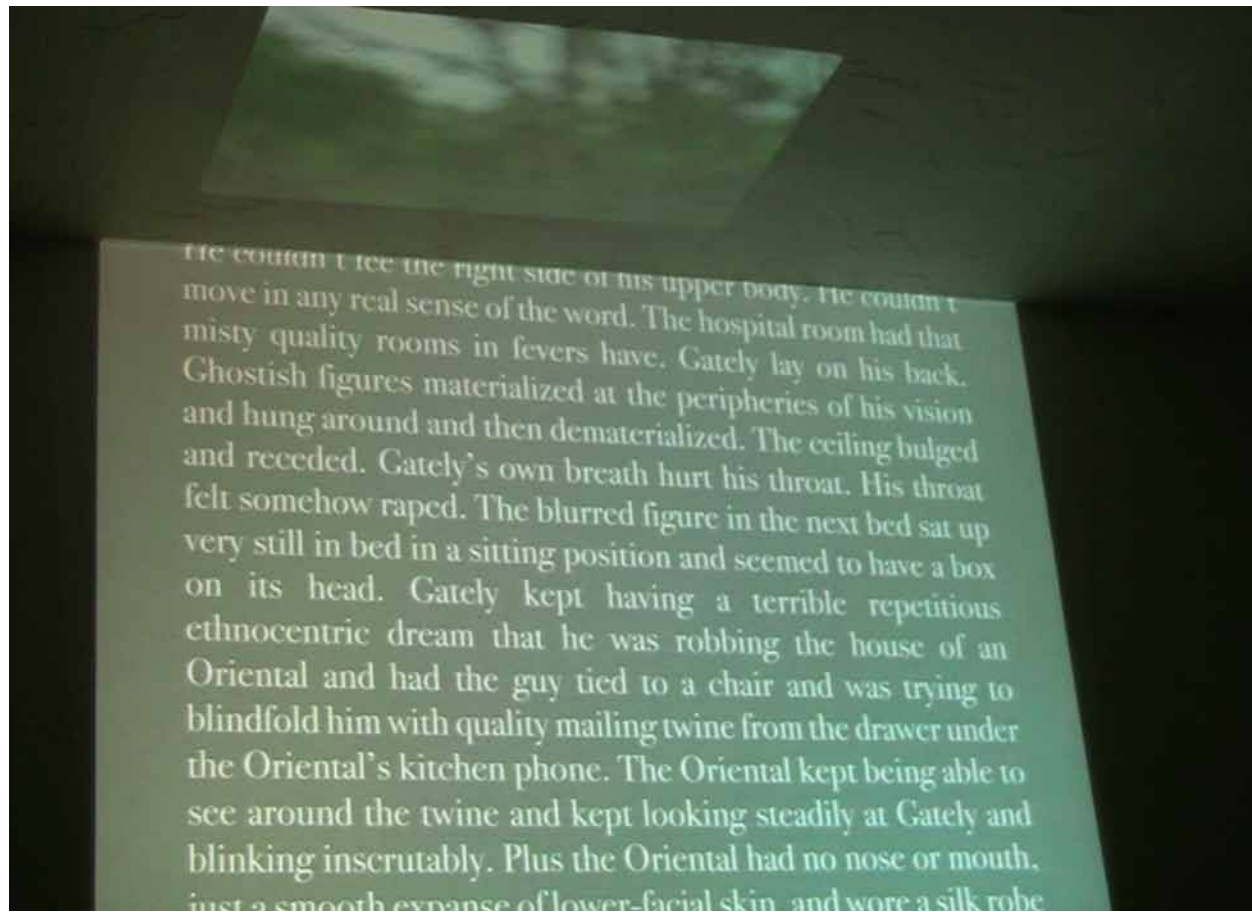
Within the context of *Don G.*, I tried to extract and express emotional content and deduce which media might best express that emotional content in the most direct way. The project is really about taking something that's difficult and hard to grasp and seeing how it can be represented through text and the moving image, through combinations of the two, and the emotional response those combinations foment in physical space/time. It's not so much stating, "This installation creates the same effect as the passage of the book", as asking "What kind of effect does this create, and how does this content, expressed in different media forms, differ from the experience of the book?" Again, I hate to say it: there's only one way to find out. Get comfortable.

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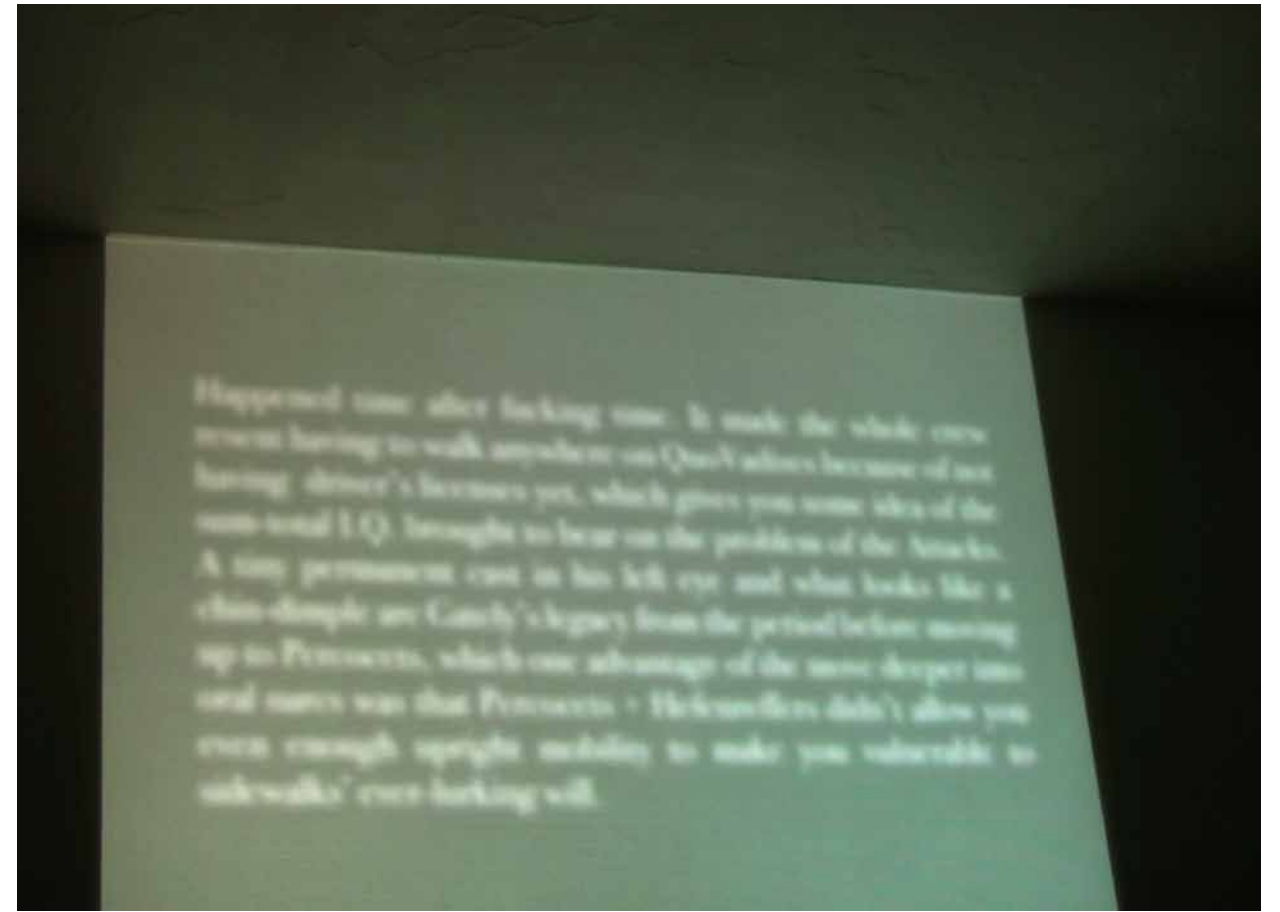
James O. Incandenza is supposed to be an underground/experimental filmmaker in the pantheon of Stan Brakhage, Hollis Frampton, Alejandro Jodorowski, Andy Warhol, et al., and DFW includes an absurdly detailed imagined annotated filmography of his work in the endnotes of the book.

8

Our bedroom.



He couldn't see the right side of his upper body. He couldn't move in any real sense of the word. The hospital room had that misty quality rooms in fevers have. Gately lay on his back. Ghostish figures materialized at the peripheries of his vision and hung around and then dematerialized. The ceiling bulged and receded. Gately's own breath hurt his throat. His throat felt somehow raped. The blurred figure in the next bed sat up very still in bed in a sitting position and seemed to have a box on its head. Gately kept having a terrible repetitious ethnocentric dream that he was robbing the house of an Oriental and had the guy tied to a chair and was trying to blindfold him with quality mailing twine from the drawer under the Oriental's kitchen phone. The Oriental kept being able to see around the twine and kept looking steadily at Gately and blinking inscrutably. Plus the Oriental had no nose or mouth, just a smooth expanse of lower-facial skin, and wore a silk robe



Happened time after fucking time. It made the whole crew seem having to walk anywhere on QuasiAdoles because of not having driver's licenses yet, which gives you some idea of the non-total I.Q. brought to bear on the problem of the Anakin. A tiny permanent cast in his left eye and what looks like a chin-strap are Gately's legacies from the period before moving up to Perseus, which one advantage of the more deeper tone oral news was that Perseus + Helios didn't allow you even enough upright mobility to make you vulnerable to sidewalk's even fucking will.