Communication Therapy:  
David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in U.S. Fiction

By

Elizabeth Janette Morris

Honors Thesis  
Department of English and Comparative Literature  
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill  
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Introduction

The majority of the writing that seriously uses the term “New Sincerity” as a description of a current in contemporary American literature and the other arts exists only on the internet. For the most part, this body of work amounts to a handful of self-published blog posts written mostly by young writers of fiction or poetry. As a whole, this small collection fails to provide a really cohesive idea of what such a movement consists in, which is unsurprising. Art movements are probably always hard to pin down while they are actually happening, since experimentation is what makes them new movements. In the most general sense, the term seems to describe art and cultural practices that 1) eschew cynicism, the belief that humans are by nature selfish and dishonest, and 2) are highly conscious of irony, rejecting its role as a dominant postmodern mode, yet at the same time not necessarily doing away with its use altogether.

New Sincerity as an idea is highly compelling to me on a personal level. Given that I mainly hear the term used by my peers, I believe that its appeal is generational, meaning that its examination may provide insight into the particular condition of young Americans today. In this paper I will attempt to investigate the idea of New Sincerity, its motivations, characteristics, and cultural significance. I will begin with a discussion of the cultural conditions that give rise to projects of New Sincerity. In order to consider how New Sincerity in fiction may experiment with narrative formats, I will then discuss what the formal qualities of narrative genres serve to communicate. Finally, I will investigate what an attempt at New Sincerity in American fiction might look like in practice with an analysis of *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace.

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In his 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction,” David Foster Wallace

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1Though imagine my surprise upon finding one blogger casually opining in a post from 2010 that New Sincerity is already “over now, I guess” (Gallaher).
describes the emergence of “irony as a cultural norm” (184) in the United States. *Irony* can mean several different things, but Wallace is primarily concerned with the rhetorical strategy of intentionally “saying what is contrary to what is meant” (Colebrook 1). Rhetorical irony is not meant to be deceptive, for if it isn’t recognized by its audience, it doesn’t work. The utility of the device lies in its potential to demonstrate a thought’s flaws in practice, which in some cases may be more effective than a plain-spoken critique; as the common writing advice goes, “show, don’t tell.” Voltaire's *Candide* successfully uses irony in this way to critique Leibneizian optimism. The absurdity of the protagonists' cheerful declarations and passivity in the face of seemingly endless historically-inspired horrors is apparent without being openly stated. The resulting satire is rhetorically successful because the ridiculousness of Leibneiz’ philosophy is made viscerally understandable to the reader.

It doesn’t hurt that *Candide*’s use of irony is also really funny, a fact that serves doubly in the novella’s rhetorical favor. First, a humorous tone avoids suggesting despair as the work’s logical conclusion, which is a very relevant concern for an argument against optimism. Second, the humor just makes for more engaging and memorable reading. Ironic critique is often amusing. It exposes the absurd and ridiculous, and those things tend to make people laugh. Still, its ultimate goal is exposure, not humor; the latter is a byproduct.

Wallace notes the presence of such ironic critique in American art of the 1960s, describing it as “socially useful” and “productive” for exposing hypocrisy in dominant culture in service of a belief “that etiology and diagnosis pointed toward cure; that revelation of imprisonment yielded freedom.” He contrasts such “frankly idealistic” (183) use of irony and ridicule with his analysis of these devices’ post-1960s transformation into “agents of great despair and stasis in US culture” (171). This transformation, Wallace says, is an effect of the rise
of the corporate interest-driven televisual entertainment industry. Effective entertainment and advertising capture viewers' attention, and in order to do this they try to appeal to audience sensibilities and provide novelty. This strategy leads to a tendency to absorb cultural beliefs and practices, emptying them of their original meaning in order to appeal to a mass audience. Televisual entertainment itself is a major force in the production of widespread cultural beliefs and practices, implicitly presenting itself as a source of information about how people look, talk, and behave. Appropriating strategies of ironic critique from '60s counterculture purely for their entertainment value, ironic gestures become embedded in American culture as they are depicted more and more as models of the way people interact with one another. Wallace explains that this effect creates a positive feedback-loop of social anxiety and isolation:

To the extent that TV can flatter [the viewer] about ‘seeing through’ the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of outdated values, it can induce in [the viewer] precisely the feeling of canny superiority it’s taught him to crave, and can keep him dependent on the cynical TV-watching that alone affords this feeling. And to the extent that it can train viewers to laugh at characters’ unending put-downs of one another, to view ridicule as both the mode of social intercourse and the ultimate art form, television can reinforce its own queer ontology of appearance: the most frightening prospect, for the well-conditioned viewer, becomes leaving oneself open to others’ ridicule by betraying passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability. Other people become judges; the crime is naïveté. (180-1)

According to Wallace, the “exclusively negative function” of irony has valuable potential as a “ground-clearing” in a reprehensible cultural situation, but is “singularly unuseful when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (183) and therefore
insidiously destructive when taken as an unremitting position towards reality. He locates the oppressiveness of ironic culture in its neutralization of all critique through its “ability to interdict the question without attending to its content” (184). In her 1999 book No Logo, Naomi Klein gives an account of the tendency of mass entertainment and advertising to appropriate beliefs and practices of cultural rebellion, emptying them of their original significance in order to sell products:

What were indeed subversive messages in the sixties—“Never Work,” “It is Forbidden to Forbid,” “Take Your Desires for Reality”—now sound more like Sprite or Nike slogans: Just Feel It. And the “situations” or “happenings” staged by the political pranksters in 1968, though genuinely shocking and disruptive at the time, are the Absolut Vodka ad of 1998—the one featuring purple-clad art school students storming bars and restaurants banging on bottles. (283)

In appropriating a practice of critique, mass entertainment and advertising can at once enjoy the glamor of a false association with rebelliousness while deflecting the actually rebellious critiques made against them. Culture jamming, “the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards” (280) with the aim of exposing corporate behavior, often uses irony to demonstrate its points. The anti-consumerist publication Adbusters creates a glossy image of the Marlboro Man riding into the sunset with another cowboy over the caption “I miss my lung, Bob”; performance artist Jubal Brown and his friends draw skulls over the faces of emaciated models in fashion ads all over Toronto. Klein points out that while these types of techniques do have potential to send a striking message, in practice they end up becoming inspiration for ad agencies with depressing frequency. She notes that “after a while, what began

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2 Miss My Lung.
3 Klein 286.
as a way to talk back to the ads starts to feel more like evidence of our total colonization by them, and especially because the ad industry is proving that it is capable of cutting off the culture jammers at the pass. Examples of pre-jammed ads include a 1997 Nike campaign that used the slogan ‘I am not/A target market/I am an athlete’ and Sprite’s ‘Image is Nothing’ campaign” (298).

Ad agencies in the ‘90s found this simulation of the rebellious image of culture jamming—minus the original anti-consumerist goal—can be quite lucrative. In these ads’ imitation of the techniques of ironic critique to parody themselves, actual critiques first aimed at the ads are often de-clawed. Klein highlights this effect with the story of an “aggressively ironic” (299) ad campaign for Diesel jeans. “One of the most popular ways for artists and activists to highlight the inequalities of free-market globalization is by juxtaposing First World icons with Third World scenes” such as “an obviously malnourished Haitian girl wearing Mickey Mouse glasses” or “Indonesian students rioting in front of McDonalds arches.” Diesel successfully co-opts the style of these political messages with a campaign that features ads within ads: a series of billboards flogging a fictional Brand 0 line of products in a nameless North Korean city. In one, a glamorous skinny blonde is pictured on the side of a bus that is overflowing with frail-looking workers. The ad is selling “Brand 0 diet—There’s no limit to how thin you can get.” Another shows an Asian man huddled under a piece of cardboard. Above him towers a Ken and Barbie Brand 0 billboard. (298)

In the four years after this campaign was first launched, Diesel’s U.S. sales increased by over $20 million. Culture jammers attempt to create cognitive dissonance in order to change individuals’ attitudes and behavior, but according to Klein “the real truth is that, as a culture, we
seem capable of absorbing limitless amounts of cognitive dissonance” (296) from mass media, and particularly on television. Perhaps this is because, as Wallace notes, television as a medium revolves off just the sorts of absurd contradictions that irony's all about exposing.

It is ironic that television is a synecesis that celebrates diversity. That an extremely unattractive self-consciousness is necessary to create TV performers' illusion of unconscious appeal. That products presented as helping you express individuality can afford to be advertised on television only because they sell to huge hordes. And so on...Television both fears irony's capacity to expose, and needs it. (161)

By the ‘90s, TV came to necessarily embrace such contradictions in order to keep Americans paying as much attention as possible—at that time, to the tune of six hours a day on average.4 Humorously parodying its own contradictions with ads making fun of hackneyed advertising gimmicks or programs riffing on their own predictable formats invites jaded viewers to feel congratulated for their own boredom and dissatisfaction with the medium, soothing their self-consciousness about giving it such a huge fraction of their waking hours. Take, for example, That ’70s Show, a popular sitcom from the late ’90s and early 2000s. The show is mediocre, with bad acting, corny jokes, and an obnoxious laugh track, but its presentation as a parody of ’70s television makes its predictability part of the joke itself, an asset instead of a flaw.

Probably the most irritating part of That ’70s Show is its treatment of the character Fez, a foreign exchange student whose comic appeal is tied to his status as a naïve and perpetually confused outsider. A running joke throughout the series is that no one knows what country he is actually from, though he speaks Spanish occasionally. This itself is pretty telling—a lot of the white Americans who constitute the show's target audience think that everywhere south of the

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4Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram” 151.
border is culturally homogenous. Fez's role is born of a paradigm that views white people as default humans, while black and brown people are just variations within a generic category of “other.” The jokes that revolve around Fez are by and large racist, but the sitcom's status as a period piece can assuage any audience discomfort by implying that the show isn't really making fun of his perceived cultural background, but of '70s TV's racist attitudes themselves, buying into the disturbingly common mythology that racism is America is over and everyone (read: white people) can all laugh about it now. *That '70s Show* subtly gives viewers the choice between laughing at it or with it depending on their individual sensibilities. The strategy demonstrates the utility of ironic gestures for courting mass appeal, but it also shows how mass media's use of irony can protect the status quo; in the end, Fez is still a racist caricature and a token in an otherwise all-white cast, and the paradigm remains.

Any experience one has for six hours every day is going to play a part in shaping one's perception of and interaction with the world outside of that experience. Even if the viewer does not agree with a message espoused by television or advertising, constant exposure to the message still makes it a part of the viewer's reality in some way. At the very least the viewer is given an impression that the messages are popularly accepted, which is going to affect the viewer's assumptions about how to interact with others. For example, while a particular viewer might fully believe that the media holds up an absurdly unhealthy and unrealistic body type as its beauty ideal, this belief alone may not negate the effect of that beauty ideal on the viewer's life. Perceiving from media that this body type is what most people will view as attractive, the viewer might easily still worry that his or her failure to achieve this body type will lead to social rejection.

Wallace saw '90s televisual culture training viewers for those six hours per day to put up
with cognitive dissonance and to constantly take a position of ironic detachment. Carried into real life, this training has sobering social and political implications. Consider what David Harvey describes as the “emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970s.” Harvey defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” The theory's instantiation has been marked by increasing “deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” (2-3). Harvey makes a convincing argument that neoliberal theory in practice is inconsistent with its own values, because

a contradiction arises between the seductive but alienating possessive individualism on the one hand and the desire for a meaningful collective life on the other. While individuals are supposedly free to choose, they are not supposed to choose to construct strong collective institutions (such as trade unions) as opposed to weak voluntary organizations (like charitable organizations). They most certainly should not choose to create political parties with the aim of forcing the state to intervene in or eliminate the market. To guard against their greatest fears—fascism, communism, socialism, authoritarian populism, and even majority rule—the neoliberals have to put strong limits on democratic governance, relying instead upon undemocratic and unaccountable organizations (such as the Federal Reserve or the IMF) to make key decisions. This creates the paradox of intense state interventions and government by elites and “experts” in a world where the state is supposed to not be interventionist. (69)
Neoliberalism is then at its heart, Harvey argues, a conduit for securing class power, and to that end a driving force of “increasing authoritarianism” (81) in the United States and elsewhere. Its contradictory rhetoric carries a serious dose of cognitive dissonance. It’s not unthinkable that a culture known to give knee-jerk acceptance to advertising's empty use of anti-consumerist messages is likely to give knee-jerk acceptance to a political rhetoric based on emptied-out terms like “freedom” and “choice.” Where irony as a rhetorical strategy is aimed at exposing hypocrisy, irony as a cultural norm allows hypocrisy to flourish, nourished by conditions of widespread complacency, cynicism, and what amounts to a lot of really lazy thinking.

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Wallace's essay is now twenty-one years old, which is also my age. Today's America is, of course, not identical to that of 1993, but some key aspects of Wallace's cultural diagnosis speak to my own life experience. Especially relevant is his analysis of the interplay between everyday use of televisual technology and experiences of social anxiety and loneliness. Wallace characterizes television's effect on its viewers as “malignantly addictive” (163). His choice of phrase may sound extreme given that even the most devoted TV-viewers do not vomit, sweat, or shake when deprived of their entertainment for a few days, but Wallace's idea of “addiction” is a bit different in that he uses the word to refer to a psychological dependency rather than a physical one.

by ‘malignant’ and ‘addictive’ I…do not mean evil or coercive. An activity is addictive if one’s relationship to it lies on that downward-sloping continuum between liking it a little too much and downright needing it. Many addictions, from exercise to letter-writing, are pretty benign. But something is malignantly
addictive if (1) it causes real problems for the addict, and (2) it offers itself as relief from the very problems it causes. (163)

If '90s Americans really watched TV for six hours per day on average, there is probably a reason for it that goes beyond the medium's entertainment value. Most people do not want themselves to watch that much television; I do not have a statistic to back that statement up, but surely it is not unreasonable to say that when asked what their goals are in life, not many adults will answer that they want to afford themselves as much time to watch television as possible. And yet this TV-watching often displaces time that Americans would like themselves to spend working on their goals instead.

Wallace's explanation for the excessive screen time is that many Americans are lonely and socially anxious. Certainly a great portion of American society is set up in a way that facilitates aloneness. Living in the suburbs often requires driving to get anywhere, and children with busy parents may spend a lot of their time outside of school playing alone if they do not have friends on their street. My own mother worried openly over the fact that I did not have many friends over when I was a kid, an issue that I had little understanding of at the time. I remember worrying that our house was not very fun for my friends, because we didn't get Nickelodeon cartoons on our TV, or have Fruit Roll-Ups and Oreos in the pantry, or a Fisher-Price swing set in the backyard (I definitely knew all of these brand names in elementary school), or a lot of the other things that middle-class American parents often bought for their kids in the 1990s.

It is not a coincidence that my childhood social anxieties were so wrapped up in commercial messages about what was fun or desirable. I do not believe that my experience is at all uncommon among my peers. The American economic system is dependent on creating
feelings of inadequacy and want. Happy, healthy, satisfied people are a little too busy enjoying their time on earth together with their basic needs met to be depended on to do frequent extraneous shopping. Isolated, self-loathing or insecure individuals are much more vulnerable to an advertisement’s claim that this or that product will make life more fun, more meaningful, will increase their own personal value as defined by televisual culture—in Wallace’s words, “the ultimate arbiter of human worth. An oracle, to be consulted a lot” (176). To create this unhappiness and establish false needs, the oracle finds the most success in pushing impossible standards of personal value. For example, a woman watching television may receive the message that her worth is correlated with how well she conforms to the aforementioned virtually improbable body shape, at once boyishly thin and femininely curvy. If she is thin she can be sold padded bras, and if she is not, then she can be sold diet products. TV and ads often encourage the viewer to find something to dislike about themselves, and capitalize on that insecurity with false promises of solutions. With advertising this is probably a more intentional manipulation, while with TV programs the feelings of inadequacy may be more a byproduct of all the characters being unusually beautiful and interesting. Americans are exposed to these manipulative messages essentially from birth. Children have little ironic sensibility and are trusting of ads’ friendly and authoritative voices. They just absorb the explicit and implicit messages they receive from the way others around them behave. In a 2011 survey, over a third of boys and girls in grades three to six said they had tried to diet at least once, and about half were unhappy with their weight. American adults are not manipulated by advertising because they are unintelligent, but rather because most ads necessarily play off a whole set of insecurities and desires that are built into the basic assumptions about reality that many Americans form in childhood. This all sounds pretty sinister, but it is important to note that the whole situation is

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5 Haupt.
not some villainous mastermind’s orchestration, but an inherent side effect of a competitive capitalist economy.

Advertising often encourages Americans to be socially insecure and worried about the impression they make on others, to expect judgments of inadequacy. Given that it is so easy for many people to achieve aloneness—maintaining a professional distance from co-workers is in many cases not unusual, and outside of work many individuals can just return to a private room—the socially anxious often choose to maintain that solitude. Nevertheless, choosing solitude does not mean that the socially anxious do not feel lonely. Wallace points out that TV is a pressure-free stand-in for the desire to be with other people, as well as a tempting source of information on how to interact with others successfully for those who feel unsure. Simply put, it lets the viewer watch others without being seen. Wallace's argument is then pretty simple:

If it’s true that many Americans are lonely, and if it’s true that many lonely people are prodigious TV-watchers, and if it’s true that lonely people find in television’s 2D images relief from the pain of their reluctance to be around real humans, then it’s also obvious that the more time spent watching TV, the less time spent in the real human world, and the less time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel alienated from real humans, solipsistic, lonely. (163)

Essentially, televisual entertainment, when consumed for hours daily, displaces time spent practicing in-person social skills. Like any skill, social skills come with practice and familiarity with one’s cultural territory. Lack of social skills can lead to social anxiety, which makes it pretty tempting to stay home and watch more TV—or, to use TV as a way to spend time with others.

Silencing opposition to the status quo is not a new development in today’s United States,
nor was it one in Wallace’s 1990s. Hegemonic cultures throughout history operate, consciously or otherwise, to render challenging voices silent. What is so uniquely frightening about the current situation is that the technology that has come to play such a major role in the silencing is more powerful and embedded than ever. Screen-based technology has changed in the years since Wallace wrote “E Unibus Pluram,” but if anything, many Americans have become more dependent on these technologies to either facilitate or replace social interaction. Home internet access became ubiquitous during my early childhood, making my generation the first in all human history to have no memory of life without it. The huge popularity of social media platforms seems like evidence of a continued widespread desire to combat loneliness. These tools allow for social interaction among people otherwise isolated in their homes; at the same time, they provide a barrier that allows one to craft a more “perfect” public image of oneself. When instant messaging clients like AOL and MSN became available, my friends and I would spend hours every evening typing at each other from our respective homes. IM provided a relatively low pressure way to interact with other kids, because it facilitates conversation without having to be seen or heard, and allowed much more time to construct what one wants to say. IM is less popular now, having given way to more complex social media like Facebook and Twitter. Still, the basic preference among people my age is still to initiate contact via some form of text in most situations, at least partially because written communication allows for more careful construction of the message being sent.

It's not that there is something inherently wrong with enjoying a show or movie with friends, or sending a text message. The issue is that televisual technology has a constant and pervasive hold on my generation's interactions with one another. Social media, web surfing, and video games have displaced a significant chunk of TV time, but the total amount of time spend in
front of an electronic screen has held steady or even increased. My generation of Americans averages more than seven and half hours each day\textsuperscript{6} looking at screens of electronic devices, meaning that we give more time to televisual technology use than to any other activity in our waking hours. About half of that time is devoted to entertainment.\textsuperscript{7} And millennials now average less than seven hours of sleep per 24-hour period, meaning that elective screen time is cutting into the time allotted for a really necessary form of bodily care, which makes the “malignant addiction” description seem a little more fitting. The more that time spent directly interacting is displaced by consuming media together or apart, the less comfortable people tend to become with direct conversation. Shared experiences form the ways that friends interact with one another, establishing customs and ways of communicating. As young Americans’ shared experiences increasingly consist in what media they consume together, their speech and behavior with friends becomes increasingly modeled off of those mass-produced experiences that they share and less off of unique, self-directed interactions.

Dependence on mass media to facilitate togetherness indirectly amounts to a homogenizing third-party mediation of interaction, which is eery considering that said third party is commercially motivated. And my generation is really dependent on media. If we are not consuming it together, we are often talking about it, and if we aren't talking directly about it, it's often still informing our basic worldview and speech and sense of humor. Throughout this section I have been concerned with describing a systemic silencing of opposition to the status quo, but I want to point out that dependence on televisual tech can lead to a \textit{literal silencing}. People my age, even close friends, are by and large uncomfortable talking to each other about really emotionally or spiritually weighty topics, and are so skilled at steering conversations out

\textsuperscript{6} Lewin.
\textsuperscript{7} Jones.
of such territory with jokes that they seem to do this reflexively. There is a sense in which many young adults are in a process of recovery from trauma, just now learning how to identify and confront their emotions. Irony as a cultural attitude makes it easy to name things we reject, but is much less conducive to committing to a positive set of values, or even discovering what those values might be.

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In the two decades after “E Unibus Pluram,” irony as a cultural norm has become a common subject of discussion. One of the most telling signs of this heightened awareness is the current understanding of the “hipster” in popular imagination. It is telling that the defining archetype of middle-class American youth alternative culture is not an alternative culture at all, but a neutralized semblance of one. Decorated with symbols that in the past connoted some values that deviated from or challenged the mainstream, the hipster endorses none of these beliefs and treats them and their associated practices and products as mere entertaining commodities. Such a person is the theoretical embodiment of “postmodern rebellion become pop culture institution” (184) that Wallace sees in advertising and televisual entertainment’s appropriation of art and alternative culture. The hipster uses techniques of irony constantly to create a possibility of distance from anything he or she says or does, avoiding claiming responsibility and thus attempting to remain immune to ridicule.

Also telling is that unlike various 20th century terms describing archetypes of past US counterculture—such as “beatnik,” “hippie,” “punk,” etc—“hipster” has positive connotations to virtually no one, especially those most likely to experience being labeled as such. The word is derogatory and even accusatory in virtually every instance of its use even though there is widespread disparity from person to person as to who qualifies as a hipster. To those not
immersed in alternative culture, a hipster might be any young middle-class American who appears to deviate from a perceived mainstream lifestyle. In this view, a young person who does not use social media, or listens to music outside of Top 40, or even just prefers to cook his or her own meals from scratch might be accused of hipsterdom. To the mainstream, the hipster is just a self-congratulatory weirdo who wears cool clothes and whose presence makes one feel self-conscious about one’s own social status and herd-like behaviors. To participants in the counterculture, the hipster is a foolish poseur who appropriates practices and appearances of rebellion without understanding or caring to learn about them, a mainstream would-be tourist of the underground if only the hipster could find the way down there. Such a person threatens to negate alternative culture’s resistance to the mainstream. When practices and appearances of rebellion become popular signifiers of “coolness,” the presence of any actual subversive activity is rendered less visible because the signs that once indicated it have been emptied of that significance by mass culture. Where once mainstream America was reminded of subversive activity by the unusual appearances of some youth on the street, now looking unusual is not necessarily symbolic of one's political values, and no longer provokes the same reaction from mainstream culture.

The “normal”/“alternative” binary is itself a falsehood of advertising. Marketing aims to divide a population into identity-specific niches to encourage more individual purchasing and target consumers more effectively. For example, marketing some shampoo as intended for one gender identity or another might encourage a man and woman living in the same house to each buy their own bottle instead of just sharing one. Some products are similarly marketed to signify an identity that is “alternative” or “normal” when in fact all of the products fit inside the same dominant framework. The binary, along with a popular fashion based on mashing together the
symbols of different countercultural movements into a single “look,” obscures the diversity of alternative cultures that exist in the US and boils “alt” down to mean “looks interesting” in popular usage.\(^8\)

But if the mainstream thinks the hipster is whatever fits its watered-down conception of rebelliousness, and the counterculture thinks a hipster is essentially a participant of the mainstream, who *are* the actual hipsters? The discrepancy reveals the myth for what it is: hipsters as they are imagined do not exist. Hipster behavior abounds in terms of clueless cultural appropriation in advertising, entertainment and fashion and in consumption of the resulting products, but in terms of individuals no one seems to fully embody the descriptions promulgated in popular media. Take for example this pretty typical description from a 2012 *New York Times* op-ed piece called “How to Live Without Irony”:

> The hipster is our archetype of ironic living…the hipster haunts every city street and university town. Manifesting a nostalgia for times he never lived himself, this contemporary urban harlequin appropriates outmoded fashions (the mustache, the tiny shorts), mechanisms (fixed-gear bicycles, portable record players) and hobbies (home brewing, playing trombone). He harvests awkwardness and self-consciousness. Before he makes any choice, he has proceeded through several stages of self-scrutiny. The hipster is a scholar of social forms, a student of cool. He studies relentlessly, foraging for what has yet to be found by the mainstream. He is a walking citation; his clothes refer to much more than themselves. He tries to negotiate the age-old problem of individuality, not with concepts, but with material things.

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\(^8\) On the other hand, maybe the general “alt” label may have the effect of creating a feeling of solidarity among otherwise disparate subcultures that could potentially increase their support of one another in collective political action.
The writer, Princeton professor Christy Wampole, expresses the entirely popular opinion that hipsters “produce a distinct irritation in me,” confessing that “they provoke me, I realized, because they are, despite the distance from which I observe them, an amplified version of me…I, too, exhibit ironic tendencies.” Wampole probably means well, but her spark of self-awareness here is left embedded in a cynical perception of deeper cynicism in others, rationalizing that, no matter how strong her own dependence on irony to get through life in post-modern America, there is someone out there who is way more guilty of the same, guilty to the point of deserving an epithet that she is at pains to declare her own “distance” from. This declaration is made despite her awareness that “scoffing at the hipster” is “a favorite hobby, especially of hipsters.”

Wampole’s derision for the hipster is poorly aimed: turbans and native American ceremonial garb are some significant examples of actually offensive cultural appropriation by mass-market Western fashion in recent years. Who cares if white people of the 2010s want to revisit white fashions of the 1970s as inconsequential and historically inconstant as hemlines and facial hair? Fixed-gears and portable record players hurt no one, and they along with home-brewing and (really) playing a musical instrument are all choices that might result from *being really deeply interested in something*. If today's crop of young people feel a need to resort to an air of ironic detachment towards hobbies in order to deal with fear of judgment in a culture that condemns pretty much all uncommon recreational activities as a statement of snotty superiority over “normal” past-times (like consuming televisual entertainment), that’s pretty sad, perhaps immature, but kind of understandable.

“Hipster” is a dehumanizing term. It asserts that another person’s existence is meaningless by his or her own fault, that his or her way of interacting with the world, the interests and knowledge and skills that one perceives as defining his or her identity are just an act.
The popularity of the word seems to demonstrate a widespread annoyance with irony as a cultural norm. But the term's use also demonstrates the continued power of the media to distort and empty cultural criticisms, because in labeling people as hipsters for not conforming to a certain set of expected behaviors or appearances, while also accusing those same people of being conformists to hipsterdom, non-conformist behaviors are uniformly dismissed as trivial. Thus, whatever cultural critiques those non-conformist behaviors may have communicated are largely ignored.

*It feels like a perfect night / to dress up like hipsters* sings ultra-bland country-gone-pop star Taylor Swift in “22.” Meanwhile the song’s accompanying music video looks like a commercial for Urban Outfitters, the clothing retailer perhaps most shameless in its appropriation of fashion from all walks of alt life for the mass millennial market. With this lyric/video combination Swift gets to claim distance from and distain for hipsterdom while also enjoying the faux-rebellious “hipster” aesthetic which is in fact current mainstream fashion. She is being ironic about being ironic, and smug about disliking smugness. *This place is too crowded / Too many cool kids* she complains over a sound bite of someone sneering “Who’s Taylor Swift anyway? Ew!” The sound bite is obviously ironic; Swift is mega-famous, has sold over 25 million albums, makes around 50 million dollars a year.⁹ Swift’s solution to the supposedly suffocating over-presence of fans of all that weird obscure music is to suggest that *We ditch the whole scene*, implying that she is undoubtedly “cool” enough to have been privy to underground music communities and knows well enough from experience that it is better to wash one’s hands of them entirely before turning on the radio. In another single she maligns an ex-boyfriend for his hipster tendencies in situations of relationship strife: *you would hide away and find your*

peace of mind / with some indie record that's much cooler than mine. Of course institutionalized rebellion is contradictory. By defining cool as that which subverts the mainstream, the mainstream is then deeply self-conscious about its own resulting implicit uncoolness. Swift deals with this discomfort by dissembling what's critical or rebellious for being smugly superior, simultaneously soothing the self-consciousness her actual fans may feel about enjoying her music by absurdly congratulating them for not giving in to some imagined peer pressure to like what's unpopular.

This type of convoluted and essentially empty message is not at all uncommon right now. Swift’s particular style of hate for her haters’ hate is an example of a practice that Tom Scocca identifies as “sarm,” a strategy of deflecting negative criticism by dismissing it as “snark” with an appeal to the half-baked notion that negativity itself is inherently bad, that destructiveness is always abhorrent no matter what one is trying to destroy, and that those who criticize are immoral in their very assumption of their own authority to criticize anything on a moral basis. Never mind that sarm itself is a negative criticism based on its own pretension as moral arbiter of what is or is not a proper style of expression. From the position of sarm, snark is “the problem of our times,” and Scocca notes a “troublesome misreading” in which “snark is often conflated with cynicism” when in fact “the practice of cynicism is sarm.”

In Scocca’s words sarm is “a kind of performance—an assumption about the forms of seriousness, of virtue, of constructiveness, without the substance.” A performance? That appropriates morally-inspired practices without subscribing to the values behind them? That lacks substance? If Scocca’s description brings to mind a certain archetype of youth culture, consider that many of his examples of smarmers-in-action are US politicians, a group immune to the hipster label. Scocca argues that although politicians and mass media both bemoan the “tone”

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10 Swift puts a really sarcastic emphasis on the word “much” here that does not come through as well in print.
of politics as overly nasty and negative, this concern over tone is created by “a thick flow of opaque smarm” that is actually “what carries contemporary American political campaigns along.”

“To openly disagree with a political foe, let alone to make an openly mean remark, is to invite a smarmy counterattack” that accuses “name-calling” or a “personal attack” in order to avoid addressing the criticism. Americans have a lot to be angry about—bank bailouts, NSA spying and data collection, unemployment and economic disparity, destruction of the environment, and the military-industrial complex to name a few things—but for some reason it is unthinkable that a viable candidate for public office would or should actually demonstrate the level of anger on our behalf that the national situation calls for. Of course this is not actually because the impropriety of such a candidate would be somehow more damaging to the US than its current situation, but because all the viable candidates are viable due to the positions of power they already occupy and their investment in maintaining a certain dynamics of power, no matter how much smarm is required.

What distinguishes the hipster’s shield of irony from the politician’s smarm is that while the former has no esteem for seriousness, taking an attitude that Wallace characterizes as saying “How very banal to ask what I mean” (184), the latter deflects criticism by pretending to be more mature, more serious, as if to say “How very rude to reveal what I do.” In its insistence that if one can’t say anything nice then one shouldn’t say anything at all, smarm neutralizes plain-spoken critique of hypocrisy with more hypocrisy to the same extent that irony neutralizes ironic critiques with more irony.

Claire Colebrook argues that “our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says,” adding that this “general and all-encompassing irony” is “at one with the problem of politics: how do we know what others really mean, and on what basis can we
secure the sincerity” of any message when “we live in a world of quotation, pastiche, and simulation?” (1-2)? Mass media and advertising intercept, distort, and complicate communication, making it difficult to talk back, or even talk to each other. American society has become saturated with advertising, which “as a discourse that reads itself and tries to anticipate and direct its own reception...is never innocent” (“David Foster Wallace” 138). Trained to do the same on an individual level—as evinced by social media behavior and the appearance of the term “personal brand”—it is understandable that many Americans might be cynical. If someone does want to express something deeply felt, widespread cynicism and detachment in the audience presents some intimidating obstacles. A writer cannot just say what she means, but must also convince readers that she really means it, and that they should take her seriously. In the current cultural context, that is not a simple task.

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In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling defines the quality of sincerity in the simplest terms as “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (2). According to Trilling, the concept of sincerity as it is now commonly understood has not always existed, and its meaning has changed over time along with Western thought and social structures. He points to differences between attitudes of modern literature and those of its ancestors to demonstrate its historical context:

We cannot say of the patriarch Abraham that he was a sincere man. That statement must seem only comical. The sincerity of Achilles or Beowulf cannot be discussed: they neither have nor lack sincerity. But if we ask whether young Werther is really as sincere as he intends to be, or which of the two Dashwood sisters, Elinor or Marianne, is thought by Jane Austen to be the more truly sincere,
we can confidently expect a serious response in the form of opinions on both sides of the question. (2-3)

Trilling notes an “obvious connection between sincerity and the intensified sense of personal identity that developed along with the growth of the idea of society” (47) in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. While both a community and a society can be described as “an aggregate of individual human beings,” the former implies a stronger sense of personal relationships within that aggregate that do not define the latter. Trilling notes that “society is yet something other than this, something other than human, and its being conceived in this way, as having indeed a life of its own but not a human life, gives rise to the human desire to bring it into accord with humanity” (19). Groups like the Calvinist divines “regarded society as fallen into corruption through false avowal” and aimed to combat this with passionate proclamations of what they believed to be the Word of God. Thus, in their time and context, “plain speaking became the order of the day” (21), and the concept of sincerity emerged to describe this mode of communication.

Sincerity therefore has a history of association with virtuousness. Trilling points to *Hamlet*’s treatment of the topic of sincerity to illustrate a nuance necessary to understanding the concept. He focuses on the scene in which Polonius famously entreats Laertes to remember “This above all: to thine own self be true/And it doth follow, as the night the day,/Thou canst not then be false to any man” (1.3.80-82). Trilling calls this “a moment of self-transcendence, of grace and truth” in which Polonius “has conceived of sincerity as an essential condition of virtue and has discovered how it is to be attained” (3). Polonius’ statement presents sincerity as a type of relationship one should have with one’s self, for the purpose of having a moral relationship to others.
But there is a tension in the simultaneous acceptance of concepts of individuality and society that makes the seemingly simple aim to be true to one's self and honest with others difficult to navigate. Trilling explains that the individual in society “is subject to the constant influence, the literal inflowing, of the mental processes of others, which, in the degree that they stimulate or enlarge his consciousness, make it less his own. He finds it ever more difficult to know what his own self is and what being true to it consists in” (61). Perhaps these questions of the nature of the self became especially confusing with the advent of modern society because it caused people to realize how mutable they are in response to others around them. Living in a largely populated area might mean that one belongs to several different social groups without much overlap. One might act differently in each group—at work, at home, at church, at school, and so on—and thus might have trouble deciding which “self” is the authentic one.

On the one hand, Europeans came to conceive of themselves as individuals with unique selves to be true to. On the other hand, these supposed individuals became subject to the homogenizing force of public opinion. This conflict may be a reason why the concept of sincerity already came to seem antiquated or naive in the late 20th century. Trilling argues that the purpose of “avoidance of falsehood to others...does not figure as the defining purpose of being true to one's own self” in current common moral thinking, which he characterizes as ever-changing throughout the history of Western society. He differentiates “the unmediated exhibition of the self, presumably with the intention of being true to it” from “an effort of sincerity,” proposing that “if sincerity has lost its former status, if the word itself has for us a hollow sound that seems almost to negate its meaning, that is because it does not propose being true to one’s own self as an end but only as a means” (9) to self-indulgence.

As poet and self-proclaimed “New Sincerist” Anthony Robinson notes in a 2005 blog
post that “The New Sincerity has built-in irony. There’s nothing ‘new’ about sincerity.” What is new, however, is what sincerity looks like. William Wordsworth's poetry sounds sincere to the modern reader, but it also sounds its age, which is over 200 years old. Take the opening stanza of perhaps his most famous work:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

“I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” seems like a genuine expression of appreciation for the beauty of nature, and that appears to be its singular purpose. One important factor in its effectiveness as a communication is that the reader believes that Wordsworth really means it when he says that his “heart with pleasure fills / And dances with the daffodils.” And while his sincerity is still touching today, it also sounds quaint to the modern reader, perhaps even naïve.

Today's poets typically do not want to sound like Wordsworth, and any that do would risk sounding more fake than sincere. It would most likely seem like they were just putting on a stereotypically poet-like tone, either in an ironic sense or from simple lack of creativity. Today's writers therefore have a puzzle to work out if they want to communicate something deeply felt. An attempt to be straightforward may fail to come off as intended, especially because Americans are trained to suspect selfish motivations from others. A side effect of this training, along with advertising’s constant appropriation of art, is a change in the very way one thinks of art and artists. Klein notes a tendency for some contemporary artists to act as “a walking sales pitch for
themselves already, intuitively understanding how to produce prepackaged art, to be their own brand” (294)—and even in cases where they do not, the audience may still come to their art expecting that it was made with an eye primarily toward social recognition and economic gain.

*There has evidently emerged a cultural situation in which it is often very difficult to talk about problems in a way that effects change, and to create art that successfully fulfills a purpose beyond that of a marketable commodity. As a fiction writer, Wallace observed U.S. fiction meeting the same frustrations as culture jammers in attempts to enact critique. The work of young writers attempting “to transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television” in Wallace’s time comprise a genre which he calls “the fiction of image” (or “image-fiction”). This genre, he says, fails in its attempt “almost without exception” (173). He points to a tendency to “render their material with the same tone of irony and self-consciousness that their ancestors, the literary insurgents of Beat and postmodernism, used so effectively to rebel against their own world and context” (173) as the source of the imagists’ failure. Because televisual entertainment has come to render its own material in the same way, “image-fiction doesn’t satisfy its own agenda. Instead, it most often degenerates into a kind of jeering, surfacy look ‘behind the scenes’ of the very televisual front people already jeer at, and can already get behind the scenes of’ (173) via TV programs about TV, or shows that parody TV tropes. In its attempt to apply techniques of literary realism to a world now permeated by fictitious and ironic images and messages, image-fiction falls into the trap of author and reader self-congratulation for spotting hypocrisy, a trap that TV depends on to remain compelling. Wallace uses Don DeLillo’s White Noise as an example. White Noise is in many ways a brilliant novel and Wallace seems to think so as well. Nevertheless he points out that “the authorial tone throughout is a kind of deadpan
Morris 28

sneer. Jack [the narrator] himself is utterly mute - since to speak out loud in the scene would render the narrator part of the farce (instead of a detached, transcendent 'observer and recorder') and so vulnerable to ridicule himself. With his silence, DeLillo's alter ego Jack eloquently diagnoses the very disease from which he, Murray, barn-watchers, and readers all suffer” (171), but leaves the reader with no real suggestion of how to respond effectively to all the “white noise” of consumerism, mass media, pop culture and so on. The reader can feel shame for his or her complicity in the absurd state of affairs that DeLillo diagnoses, or more appealingly and likely, can entertain the self-satisfaction of understanding DeLillo's irony and thus feel a transcendent superiority.

This effect is ultimately unsatisfying, because it does nothing to dismantle the actual situation that White Noise critiques. Image-fiction’s ironic critique of televisual culture is neutralized in its context, because in ironically critiquing something that is essentially ironic it remains trapped inside the conceptual framework that it opposes. But one can see why young writers would find ironic detachment a necessary element in their writing. To ignore the presence of the device in American speech and attitudes in Wallace’s time would mean writing in a way that sounds outdated and unrelatable to young readers raised on TV.

Wallace’s awareness of the problems of television and U.S. fiction informs his own artistic project, which could be seen as an attempt to grapple with problems of clear communication and effective critique created by ironic culture. At the end of his essay, he posits that perhaps there is still a way for fiction to effect change, if only the right approach is found. Though Wallace never uses the words “New Sincerity” here, this passage has come to be taken as a sort of prediction of the so-named movement, and Wallace’s work is now often associated with the term.
The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of 'anti-rebels,' born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point, why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk things. Risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. The new rebels might be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'How banal.' Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity. Willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows. Today's most engaged young fiction does seem like some kind of line's end's end. I guess that means we all get to draw our own conclusions. Have to. (192-193)

II

To discover how New Sincerity might achieve effective methods of expression for the current cultural situation, it is necessary to consider the extent to which formal qualities determine an artwork's effect on its audience. Since I am particularly interested in New Sincerity in fiction, my investigation will focus on narrative forms.

The formal qualities that distinguish different genres of narrative are not simply the result
of arbitrary stylistic preference. A narrative is a communication, and as such the form a narrative takes reveals deeply held beliefs about how to communicate effectively, as well as what should be communicated or what even is communicable. Comparison between contemporary forms and those they have eclipsed therefore provides clues as to how a culture has changed over time in terms of its members' habits of interaction and their shared assumptions about reality.

The process of modernization in Western society coincided with a shift from a predominately oral tradition to a practice of written narrative. In “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin compares these two modes of communication in an effort to describe the cultural change that accompanied modernization. With the simple observation that “what distinguishes the novel from the story” of pre-modern oral tradition “is its essential dependence on the book” (87), Benjamin directs attention to a revealing difference between the two narrative modes' ways of fitting into everyday life. The novel typically exists as a multiplicity of virtually identical physical objects—a variety of incidences in space—while the existence of a story does not depend upon its being written down, but rather its being passed on through oral tradition as a variety of incidences across time. A story is not necessarily confined to an exact wording nor even a particular tone or speaker, and so may be adapted to suit a unique context each time it is told. Its physicality only depends on there being a person to tell the story, another to listen to it, and a space within which that activity can take place. The novel is less readily adaptable to changing circumstances. Time may eventually destroy a book, either through physical degradation and lack of reproduction or because of change in cultural context, language and attitudes that can make its static and finite narrative outdated or even incomprehensible.

In an oral tradition, history and other cultural narratives must necessarily be located in the consciousness of a community's members in order to persist. One utility of a written record is
that it can be stored so that if its content is forgotten there is still an opportunity, as long as the physical record is maintained, of the content being found and remembered once more. As a side effect, this utility allows for history and other cultural narratives to be put out of mind in everyday life, and exposure to them becomes more subject to individual interest and reading ability and less an inherent aspect of membership in a culture. The accumulation of various writings over time in a society with effective preservation methods also creates incongruity as to which works individual members are familiar with as the number of writings preserved becomes more than any one person could realistically read. In contrast, the volume of storytelling material that persists over time in a community's oral tradition is naturally limited and filtered by the priorities and capacities of storytellers and the reaction of their audience. Stories that either party does not find important or interesting are simply not re-told, if they are ever told at all, and a storyteller can organically condense the most salient points of a great volume of cultural history that would take much longer to read all the written records of.

Benjamin associates the adoption of printing technology and a concomitant proliferation of written works with the rise of information as a “new form of communication” (88). Always expressible in straightforward written language, information distinguishes itself from other sources of knowledge in that it “lays claim to prompt verifiability” (89), presenting itself as proven true by reference to empirical data. As information becomes the most ubiquitous and privileged form of communication in modernized society, objectivity becomes the dominant epistemological standard. Within this cultural mindset, every event is “shot through with explanation” (89), a phenomenon that stems from the increasingly pervasive assumption that not only is everything explainable given enough of the right empirical data, but that there is only one true explanation for anything and that such knowledge can only be legitimately obtained through
objectivity. Benjamin says that “now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling,” a practice in which “the psychological connection of the events is not forced upon the reader” (89) and one is free to interpret meaning as one finds appropriate. Instead in modernity “almost everything benefits information” (89). To view information as the only true source of knowledge is to believe that knowledge only comprises that which can be reduced to sentences in plain written language. This misconception results in narrowed access to other modes of perception in its dismissal of ineffable experiences as a source of knowledge.

The rigidity of wording in the form of the novel is reflective of an approach to reality that takes a similarly rigid view of truth. Issues of translation aside, a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* is only considered “really” *Pride and Prejudice* if it appears in the exact wording that corresponds to a particular standard of what the “true” wording of *Pride and Prejudice* is. But although information that “confronts storytelling” (88) as communication and the proliferation of the form of the novel both arise with the same modern technology, Benjamin observes that the rise of information also “brings about a crisis in the novel” (88). If there really was only one objective truth to anything, then that reasoning indicates that there is only a single truth as to what any particular novel is attempting to communicate to its reader. Of course even if that were so, one would be hard-pressed to verify as a piece of information which interpretation of a novel is the “correct” one. Even if this singular meaning could be somehow verified, the meaning would then need to be weighed itself as either truth or falsehood, a project that itself most likely could not be made subject to an objective standard. The novel, as well as the story, will then always be thought an inadequate mode of communication in a society that privileges information for being “understandable in itself” (89).

The only thing that a novel might then attempt to pass off as information, and thus valid
knowledge, is communication of an individual's experience. That individual experience is specifically that of the author, because she only has access to her own. No matter how masterfully written a novel is, however, it can never communicate any individual experience fully, because it is the nature of individual experience to not be fully communicable.

Incommunicability makes an experience individual. Because a society with an information-centric epistemology does not conceive of ineffable knowledge as legitimate knowledge, a given individual in that society may not even give her own experiences much weight in forming her understanding of reality, which could lead to a lack of self-understanding. Without self-understanding it is even harder to empathize with others' experiences which are already not fully communicable. Benjamin thus describes the novelist as “isolated,” in contrast to the storyteller, who “takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others” and “makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (87).

Given this distinction, it seems that Benjamin holds the story in much higher esteem than the novel, attributing to the former “the ability to exchange experiences” that he describes as fundamental to human life and social connection while criticizing the latter as essentially useless for that purpose despite its best efforts. The very experience of reading a novel is characterized by the isolation of a reader with a book. This reader of a novel will in most cases never meet the author and cannot ask questions of this individual who is considered the sole authority on interpretation of the narrative. The storyteller, however, is in the presence of the story's audience. The telling of the story is an interaction, a shared experience in itself. A listener may ask a question of the storyteller and thus participate in creation of a new part of a story that would not have ever been uttered had the question not been asked. Storytelling also gives rise to “counsel” among those engaged in the activity, because to Benjamin “every real story...contains, openly or
covertly, something useful.” For the listener that usefulness might come in the form of “a moral,” “some practical advice”, or “a proverb or maxim” (86). The acting storyteller could also receive counsel for a personal and current story, a counsel which Benjamin describes as “less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding” (86). The interaction of “counsel” is a very basic form of human care and connection. Considering that, it becomes clear that the change that Benjamin sees in the predominant narrative aesthetic is nothing less than a fundamental shift in the way humans in the Western social context interact with one another and perceive reality.

It is significant that the novels that manage to survive in a society's consciousness for many generations achieve this preservation mainly through formal literary education. In such education a group of students read a work together and a teacher helps them interpret that work and gain non-informational knowledge from it through discussion. In its facilitation of shared experience this type of interaction is perhaps not unlike the interaction of listeners with the storyteller that Benjamin describes. Because Western society privileges information, however, there is now a common confusion about why literary education is important and what is to be gained from it. From an information-centric perspective, literary studies appear to be about pointlessly memorizing “what happened” in works of fiction. Students who choose to pursue an education specializing in literature or other arts often confront attitudes that their studies are frivolous or useless, a widespread mindset that is apparent in a current trend in public education towards de-funding studies of the humanities. A general disconnect with sources of knowledge outside of empirical observation results in a distortion of priorities. If study of the human experience of being in the world is no longer given importance, there is nothing to inform everyday choices with an eye toward spiritual wellness.
In *The Theory of the Novel* György Lukács says that “the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). He equates the epic form with youthfulness because its heroes are “guided by the gods: whether what awaits them at the end of the road are the embers of annihilation or the joys of success, or both at once, they never walk alone, they are always led” (86). Meanwhile to Lukács the novel demonstrates the melancholy of the adult state [that] arises from our dual, conflicting experience that, on the one hand, our absolute, youthful confidence in an inner voice has diminished or died, and, on the other hand, that the outside world to which we now devote ourselves in our desire to learn its ways and dominate it will never speak to us in a voice that will clearly tell us our way and determine our goal. (86)

What does it mean to feel spoken to by God, to feel like the purpose of one's existence is immanent? In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Émile Durkheim notes that feelings of religious ecstasy have been observed in worshipers of all cultures regardless of the particularities of their practices. He therefore argues that the feeling of religious experience must come from a source different than whatever specific thing the worshiper believes it to be, and that that source is society itself. According to Durkheim, society’s influence is felt “only if it is in action,” which only occurs when “the individuals who compose it are assembled and act in common,” as in religious ritual. Such ritual nurtures in the worshiper the feelings of belonging and safety that come from participation in a group and “raises him above himself” by making the worshiper feel part of some force bigger than one can be as an individual. Durkheim concludes that because religion sets up the framework for life and conceptualizing the world, and because the source of religion is society, “it is society that makes [the worshiper]” (313) by determining thought and
action. If cohesive social experience is religious experience, religious experiences are not inherently tied to explicitly religious institutions, but more generally to instances of human communion.

The meaning of life feels apparent to humans experiencing that oceanic feeling of connection with existence that is religious ecstasy. A society that believes that the only legitimate knowledge is that which can be expressed as information is at odds with understanding why an ineffable experience is still valuable, indeed essential to human well-being. But existence is ineffable. No matter how much empirical data one might collect to describe the functioning of the universe, its being will on a deep level always be inexplicable in terms of information. To disregard this wholly self-evident but ineffable experience because it is not congruent with an epistemology that insists on explaining everything in words is to rob oneself of the fundamental, spiritual experience of being a part of the universe.

According to Lukács, “when the structures made by man for man are really adequate to man, they are his necessary and native home; and he does not know the nostalgia that poses and experiences nature as the object of its own seeking and finding” (64). To a being who feels itself a part of existence at core, comprehending an inherent and inextricable connection to everything there is, it would seem absurd to ask “what is the meaning of life?” This question is a symptom of the “transcendental homelessness” (41) that Lukács describes, a feeling of unrootedness that arises when humans conceptualize themselves as wholly separate from nature. To ask the question “What is the meaning of life?” is to assume that this request for knowledge might potentially be fulfilled as would a question like “what is for lunch today?” or “what is twelve times nine?” The folly in this thinking is failure to realize that the meaning of life may well not be communicable through information. It is not a fact that could be looked up somewhere and
verified according to any empirical data, but perhaps an experience, namely that of connecting with other conscious beings through shared experience, of finding a way to not be isolated and to feel oneself as part of existence.

Benjamin urges his reader to see that *Erfahrung*—shared, communicable experience, which he differentiates from individual experience—“has fallen in value” (83-84) in Western culture. Seeing that *Erfahrung* is exactly what produces a sense of profound meaning and connection, it is no wonder that “the meaning of life is really the center about which the novel moves” (99). Lukács highlights this fundamental aspect of the form by contrasting the protagonist of the novel with the pre-modern epic hero. The latter, for example Odysseus, feels a sense of divine guidance and “is, strictly speaking, never an individual. It is traditionally thought that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community...The autonomous life of interiority is possible and necessary only when the distinctions between men have made an unbridgeable chasm.” This chasm is created by the modern humans' conception of themselves as individuals as does “the hero of the novel [who] is the product of estrangement from the outside world” (66). Trilling likewise asserts that the idea of the individual only emerged in Western thought “at a certain point in history” (24). He observes that the current conception of the individual is now so embedded that it can be hard to imagine what alternative form of self-perception existed prior to the current model:

"Taken in isolation, the statement is absurd. How was a man different from an individual? A person born before a certain date, a man—had he not eyes? Had he not hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? If you pricked him, he bled and if you tickled him, he laughed. But certain things he did not have or do
until he became an individual. He did not have an awareness of what one historian, Georges Gusdorf, calls internal space. He did not, as Delany puts it, imagine himself in more than one role, standing outside or above his own personality; he did not suppose that he might be an object of interest to his fellow man not for the reason that he had achieved something notable or been witness to great events but simply because as an individual he was of consequence. (24)

Here Benjamin's apparent preference for the story over the novel as a communication seems suspect. How could a time before a conception of the individual with a claim to inner subjectivity and inalienable rights be truly better, more socially cohesive and spiritually fulfilling? These modern concepts have given way to struggles against evils like slavery and sexism, elements of the hegemonic culture that New Sincerity—at least in its most noble potential application—would aim to challenge. Benjamin's apparent nostalgia seems naïve and hard to justify. Note, however, that Benjamin describes the storyteller as only taking shape in cultural imagination now that storytelling is not a part of our everyday experience, visible from a distance “prescribed for us by an experience which we may have almost every day” (83) in life is no longer characterized by this type of shared interaction with others. Describing a current archetype of the past regardless of that archetype's historical accuracy is useful, because it potentially reveals something about modern experience and desires. The nostalgia surrounding the idea of the storyteller points to what aspects of modern life are felt to be absurd or dissatisfying, and what of the situation is perhaps not inherently inevitable or unchangeable. Trilling writes that the social effects of rapid population growth associated with urbanization entail “a condition of life that literature has chiefly deplored.” As a result, for many generations the educated bourgeoisie has characteristically shuddered
away from the moral and spiritual effects of the circumstance from which it 
derives its being and its name. Its vision of the good life, so far as it has been 
enlightened and polemical, has been largely shaped by the imagination of the old 
rural existence. (20)

The existence of this idyllic archetype of the past in the modern mindset is a 
manifestation of what appears in the novel as “the nostalgia of the characters for utopian 
perfection, a nostalgia that feels itself and its desires to be the only true reality” (Lukács 70).
Only after modernization did isolation become such a common thematic topic in Western art, for “it is when he becomes an individual that a man lives more and more in private rooms; whether the privacy makes the individuality or the individuality requires the privacy the historians do not say” (Trilling 24-25). Recognition of this dissatisfaction does not require a dismissal of valuable aspects of reforms that came out of ideas of classical liberalism in the West, nor does it necessarily express a longing to return to feudalism.

Lukács is perhaps misguided in connecting the novel to maturity and thus implying that there is a straightforward sort of intellectual progress to be seen in its rise to the position of privileged narrative form. New problems, such as the issue of widespread social isolation, have resulted from the changes that dominant Western thought often characterizes as part of a destiny of purely desirable, linear improvements to humans' understanding and lifestyle.11 To conceptualize history in terms of constant progress implies incorrectly that there is no legitimate knowledge that pre-modern people were more aware of than people today. Humans only have so much attention to give anything in a day, and where attention is directed molds perception.

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11As if it were some sort of perceptual holdover, the Western myth of constant progress parallels the trajectory of the epic. The former anticipates a similar trajectory towards a glorious and victorious fate for its people under the direction of a more powerful force. The former is guided by science, the latter by religious belief; these two guides perhaps play more similar roles for their followers than typically thought.
Certain modern conveniences allow one to get by without paying attention to aspects of the world that people before these conveniences could not afford to ignore. One such aspect is death. Before industrialization no one was far from reminders of death, for people commonly died in the same rooms they lived in. With modernization it became routine for people to die in hospitals, privately and according to routine procedure, their corpses dealt with by professionals rather than family. Surely the illusion that the fundamental truth of death is far away has an effect on one's perspective on life.

It follows that different kinds of knowledge are nurtured by different ways of life and the mindsets associated with their common activities. With the rise of modernity and capitalism, the dominant mode of production changed from self-directed artisan craftsmanship to industrial factory work in which the laborer makes a product as efficiently as possible according to the orders of whoever owns the means of production. Benjamin suggests that the storyteller is like a craftsman for whom it is “his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, unique way” (108), and that as “the role of the hand in production has become more modest...the place it filled in storytelling lies waste” (108).

Benjamin also describes a particular mental state that is necessary in order for a listener to retain a story in order to retell it later. This “gift for listening” is activated as a listener engages in “activities that are intimately associated with boredom” such as monotonous artisan tasks like “weaving and spinning.” These mindless, repetitive occupations make one “self-forgetful” and therefore more open to assimilating the experience of a story as one's own. With the disappearance of the artisan production, “the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears” (91). What Benjamin does not address is that boredom certainly still exists in everyday life in capitalist society—many if not most jobs are repetitive and unengaging, the
commutes to and from those jobs are often long and tedious, and so on. But now there are all kinds of chatter to fill that space of boredom. In most commercial spaces there is music or radio playing and often televisions playing, there is radio in the car, there are billboards to look at, there are even ads on the back of the bathroom stall door. There is now a proliferation of messages to absorb in boredom, but these messages tend to have a particular commercial motive. And they are often there whether one chooses them or not, crowding out self-directed activities that people might otherwise be more motivated to discover.

The implication of Benjamin's assertion is that the switch to capitalism results in widespread social isolation. If a change in the mode of production facilitates the loss of the ability to listen to one another and share experiences, then there is no cohesive community, only individuals searching for meaning within their own experience and vulnerable to external messages about reality not informed by human need. If a change from oral to written narrative signals such a shift in human social life, or perhaps even serves as a driving force for that shift, there arises the question of the value of literacy. Surely it is not ultimately detrimental. It is entirely possible that I am just too attached to literature as a personal source of meaning and connection to consider life without it, but in any case, those who live in the aftermath of modernization do not have the option of simply undoing the resulting systems in one motion. Already being literate and dependent on the myriad benefits of literacy, it seems more promising to search for methods by which written narrative can communicate something more meaningful than the narrow, isolating perceptions of reality that characterize the traditional novel.

Understanding the significance of the novel as dominant narrative form and the history of interplay between literacy and human relationships in the West are valuable to the project of New Sincerity. Such a movement is concerned with effective communication from author and
audience, and necessarily must search for a way to subvert corporate media's hold on interpersonal and artistic communication. New Sincerity therefore must open the reader to alternative modes of perception. It must also strive to facilitate *Erfahrung*, if not through the experience of art itself then in the image of life it encourages the reader to live.

III

Wallace seems to imply in “E Unibus Pluram” that he thinks himself not creative enough to be a member of this next group of “literary rebels,” that he is personally out of ideas as to how to tackle the artistic problem he describes. Perhaps he is just too self-conscious to fully own his display of sentimentality and idealism in his essay, because in any case there remains the fact that he went on to write *Infinite Jest*. Significantly, this work of fiction deals in depth with thematic topics of irony, sincerity, and communication, as well as American televisual and political culture, literary theory, and virtually every concern he touches on in “E Unibus Pluram.” The phrase “E Unibus Pluram” as well as several other phrases from the essay even appear verbatim in the novel.

*Infinite Jest* is indeed presented as a novel. Wallace refers to it as such in at least one interview in 1996, the year it was first published.\(^\text{12}\) The back cover of the most recent printing of *Infinite Jest* describes the work as “one of those rare books that renew the idea of what a novel can do.”\(^\text{13}\) Such renewal is characteristic of New Sincerity's search to discover more effective methods of communication through art. The book is huge at over a thousand pages long, and has a unique and experimental narrative style that will perhaps provide insight into what an attempt at New Sincerity looks like in practice.

In the aforementioned interview, Wallace agrees with host Michael Silverblatt's

\(^{12}\) “David Foster Wallace,” KCRW.

\(^{13}\) It seems safe to assume that Wallace himself did not write the back-cover blurb, and unknown as to whether he actually wanted it there or not.
observation that the structure of *Infinite Jest* displays fractal-like patterns. Silverblatt explains that

the way in which the material is presented allows for a subject to be announced in a small form, then there seems to be a fan of subject matter, other subjects, then [the first subject] comes back in a second form containing the other subjects in small [instances], and then comes back again as if what were being described were...fractals.

Wallace reveals that because he is “trying to do a whole bunch of different things at once” in *Infinite Jest*, he chose to model its narrative structure after a Sierpinski gasket, also called a Sierpinski triangle (see fig. 1) in order to remain organized while working with such a large volume of writing. David Hering gives one analysis of how the novel maps to this particular fractal design, keeping in mind that the structure was not perfectly retained in the editing process:

The process of constructing a Sierpinski gasket can potentially go on indefinitely...*Infinite Jest* follows broadly a pattern of 28 chapters, containing subchapters, which gradually grow in size, and are chronologically non-linear. The novel begins with 15 chapters in 179 pages and climaxes with just 1 chapter in 173 pages. This begins to illustrate the triangular “fractal”...[There is] an increase in the size and focus of the chapters...and the initial smaller chapters—relatable to the smaller triangles of the gasket shape—are later retrospectively understood to form part of the overarching structure so we are ultimately aware of the gargantuan system of relationships that operates across the entire novel. (89-90)

Wallace tells Silverblatt that he does not feel it important that the reader think of actual
fractals while reading. The style simply emerged out of his need to follow what “tastes true” to him, and in his view it seemed an intuitively appropriate approach to representing modern experience given that so much of pre-millenial life in America consists of enormous amounts of what seem like discreet bits of information coming, and that the real kind of intellectual adventure is finding ways to relate them to each other and to find larger patterns and meanings, which of course is essentially narrative.

Wallace emphasizes that he does not intend to “impose” a complex narrative structure on the reader with *Infinite Jest*, and in fact felt very concerned during the writing process that the novel would come off as “gratuitously long or gratuitously hard.” Silverblatt expresses a “tenderness” toward *Infinite Jest*, noting that part of his reading experience included a perception of an “extraordinary effort that was going into writing it,” an effort that amounted not to “difficulty for difficulty's sake” but an “immense difficulty being expended because something important about how difficult it has become to be human needed to be said, and that there weren't other ways to say that.” Silverblatt's reading experience describes my own very accurately, and seems to fit well with the reaction of *Infinite Jest* fans that I have spoken with. Those who like it tend to **really like it**, and they often share Silverblatt's sense of tenderness; my brother once described the book to me as “very sweet.”\(^{14}\) Which is not to say that everyone feels that way, and there are definitely readers who are put off by Wallace's prose style. The risk of being perceived as somehow show-off-ish or pointlessly unorthodox is perhaps inherent in pursuing New Sincerity projects, since they are necessarily experimental. Recalling Wallace's project as an attempt to succeed where he saw image-fiction failing to “transfigure a world of and for,”

\(^{14}\) I understand that some people hear it as a condescending put-down, but in my family “sweet” is never an ironic word and pretty much amounts to the highest compliment.
among other things, “mass appeal” (“E Unibus Pluram” 173), it seems reasonable to not expect him to achieve universal popularity. That observation leads to an interesting question of balance, though, because his project is to communicate a sincere message to someone. Perhaps the effort to be sincere renders the question moot, however, because to be sincere the author has to be faithful to what feels true as well as put forward his or her best effort to communicate effectively, and those two demands may well just decide the whole issue. What feels true to any one author is not going to feel true to every reader, after all. My analysis of Infinite Jest is therefore necessarily based, at least in some respects, on my own subjective experience of reading it.

The overarching plot of the novel concerns the existence of a film entitled Infinite Jest but more often referred to as The Entertainment. The film is so singularly compelling that anyone who watches it becomes hopelessly addicted. Unable to make a compromise between the desire to watch it over and over again and the need to care for their bodies, its viewers are pretty much invariably doomed. The parallel between this fictional entertainment and real-life American television is obvious. While the latter is not compelling enough to keep most people from getting up to visit the bathroom or show up to work, TV commands rapt attention to the point of encroaching on many Americans' time for sleep or exercise. Wallace confessed to interviewers that he chose not to own a television, because when he had access to one he found it very difficult to not watch it habitually and compulsively, regardless of how inane the programs were. Of Infinite Jest the novel he told Rolling Stone that it's about the question of why am I watching so much shit? It's not about the shit. It's about me: Why am I doing it? The original title was A Failed Entertainment, and the book is structured as an entertainment that doesn't work...because what

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15 To avoid confusing the novel and the film, I will stick to calling the latter “The Entertainment.”
16Untitled interview with ZDF, 2005
entertainment ultimately leads to is 'Infinite Jest,' that's the star it's steering by.

(Lipsky 6)

Here Wallace uses the phrase “infinite jest” to indicate the promise of eternal light-hearted fun that broadcast television promises the viewer in its encouragements to “stay tuned” for the next show, and the next, and the next. The Entertainment is just the hypothetical ideal product of corporate-interest driven entertainment, a business in which programs must find a way to ensure as much watching as possible in order to be competitive for advertising revenue. N. Katherine Hayles notes that the film represents an “ironic end point” (687) of American consumerist ideology in which individualistic prioritization of self-preservation, self-gratification, and personal choice results in a contradictory lack of self-determination and ultimately in self-destruction.

Though not made for monetary gain, The Entertainment exists for another individualistic goal. Its creator is James O. Incandenza (or “Jim”), who is all at once an alcoholic, tennis academy founder, optics expert, and filmmaker. Hayles observes that Jim is “so inward-bent” that his children usually refer to him as “Himself,” as if he cannot be properly mentioned without an “intensifier of selfhood” (689). It is no coincidence that this nickname implies an aura of distant mystery, because that is exactly what Jim is to Orin, his eldest son, and Hal, his youngest. Only the middle child, Mario, connects with his father through a shared obsession with filmmaking that dominates the final years of Jim's life.

Jim is desperate to connect with Hal, a desperation intensified by frequent hallucinations that young Hal never speaks.\(^{17}\) The hallucinations themselves are perhaps evidence of Jim's

\(^{17}\) Hal experiences an inability to make himself verbally intelligible to others later in his life, which will be addressed in more detail later. While that later incident suggests the possibility that his father is not hallucinating, the hallucination theory still makes the most sense in this earlier scene because 1) there is never any mention of Hal ever having this problem with anyone besides Jim before his senior year of high school, and
intense preoccupation with himself. In an early scene, Jim dons a disguise and pretends to be a so-called “professional conversationalist,” renting an office and sending Hal to an unexplained appointment. The whole ruse reeks of insecurity, as the appointment seems to be more about Himself than helping Hal in any meaningful way. It is as if Jim's hallucinations come out of an anticipation that Hal dislikes him, and he is pretending to be someone else in order to make sure that his son's silence is a general affliction and not something more personal. At the beginning of the session, Jim can indeed hear what Hal says, and their conversation is revealing of Jim's extreme lack of parental attention to his son on an everyday basis. “You're how old, Hal, fourteen?” he asks, to which Hal replies, “I'll be eleven in June” (27). Just a few minutes later it dawns on Hal that the conversationalist is his own father, but as soon as he calls Jim out, Jim stops listening and begins to rant about all kinds of family secrets that are entirely inappropriate to share with a ten-year-old.

Included in this familial dirty laundry is the revelation that Jim “used to pray daily for the day his own dear late father would sit, cough, open that bloody issue of the Tucson Citizen, and not turn that newspaper into the room's fifth wall,” and further that he is tormented by his belief that he has “spawned the same silence” in Hal (31). Jim's father was an alcoholic as well, apparently emotionally unavailable and self-absorbed. Jim's perfectionism and overachieving tendencies may be seen as an effort to please his own distant father, and his parenting style is clearly inherited. Hal in turn has inherited perfectionism and overachieving tendencies—perhaps partially out of a sense of guilt for the sense of personal failure that he embodies for Jim—as well as an addiction to marijuana in place of his father's alcohol.

Jim has a narcissistic streak, often seeming both self-obsessed and self-loathing. All-

2) Jim always seems to believe that Hal is utterly silent when Hal believes himself to be talking, whereas in Hal's later communication breakdown, others experience him as making bizarre animal noises.
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consuming perfectionism, after all, comes out of a constant evaluation of one's efforts as consistent failures to meet an impossible standard, combined with a hope that one has the genius to meet that impossible standard. It is fitting that the filmmaker creates the improbably-compelling Entertainment with the hope that it will provide a way for him to connect with his son, only to never show it to Hal because it is “too perfect” (940) and for that reason a failure. Finally achieving perfection results in no satisfaction. And Jim's idea of connection is not to become familiar with Hal's personal life, his emotions and experiences, but to make a film that will secure his son's attention and admiration. The result of Jim's egoistic goal is an extremely dangerous piece of art. After creating the film, the auteur himself has to resort to a slew of high-tech brain implants. A “gyroscopic balance sensor and mise-en-scène appropriation card and priapistic-entertainment cartridge” (31) work together to deliver to some part of his brain the Entertainment that it craves while leaving other parts free to continue operating his strange, tortured life.

Despite Jim's decision to not release the film, his work takes on a life of its own, “bringing the entire family, and indeed the nation, into imminent danger” as a group of Quebecois separatist terrorists seek it out for use against the United States. Hayles writes that “the radiating consequences make clear that the scale of the problem exceeds family dynamics, encompassing international politics and ecological crises,” and points out that “in a large sense the culprit is no single person, family, or even nation, but rather an ideology that celebrates an autonomous, independent subject who is free to engage in the pursuit of happiness, a subject who has the right to grab what pleasure he can without regard for the cost of that pursuit to others” (691-2).

*Infinite Jest* shows this particular ideology in its extreme application in order to reveal its
absurd and terrible consequences. In this respect the novel provides an ironic critique in the same style as *Candide*, resulting humor and all. Sincerity and irony may appear to run counter to one another, given that sincere language speaks straightforwardly while ironic language says the opposite of what is meant. The two terms are not antonyms, however, because behind them is the same intent to reveal truth, or at least not to deceive. Sincerity wants to be recognized as sincerity, and irony wants to be recognized as irony. For this reason a communication can be simultaneously sincere and ironic: sincere in that the message that it conveys comes from a place of deeply felt belief, but ironic in the language that it uses to create that message. A work of New Sincerity, understanding that critique that is either solely plain-spoken or solely ironic will be ineffective in contemporary U.S. culture, embraces this fact and uses both communication strategies while also attempting to be open about this communication strategy. Such art makes a concentrated effort to make the reader aware of the earnestness of its message, encouraging the audience to put aside cynicism in their approach to the artwork while not pretending that skepticism is without merit in the current cultural situation.

This rejection of the ideology of the autonomous individual in society distinguishes *Infinite Jest* from the traditional novel. There are at least thirty-six characters in the work with names. Some appear more often than others; Hal Incandenza and his family members, Don Gately, Joelle van Dyne, Remy Marathe and Hugh Steeply are the most prominent, with the lives of other characters in their varying relationships to these nine branching off into increasingly smaller subplots. Though many of the characters never interact directly, their stories are all inextricably connected and each has some bearing on the work's overarching plot. This depiction of total inherent interconnection is a more accurate depiction of life in a modern society, in which every person is subject to the force of public opinion, habits, and beliefs, and in which
individual actions combine to create unintended economic, environmental, and political consequences that in turn affect individual lives. Because the overarching plot of *Infinite Jest* concerns the fate of American society, American readers are encouraged to compare the nation’s real-life economic, environmental, and political trajectories with those portrayed in the novel.

*Infinite Jest* is actively engaged with literary theory. An intended “failed entertainment” about a failed entertainment, it looks directly at the struggle of artists to communicate through art. Jim works obsessively throughout his twelve year career as a director, making around seventy-five films. It is hard to say exactly how many films, first because many of the projects end up unfinished, but also because, according to the filmography provided in one of the novel's footnotes, “certain of his high-conceptual projects' agendas required that they be titled and subjected to critique but never filmed, making their status as film subject to controversy” (985). Jim constantly changes the style of his work, inventing new artistic concepts and using his optical expertise to create original filming techniques and special lenses. His work is never mere aesthetic representation, seeming to always attempt to affect the world—for example, one of his artistic periods is characterized by an attempt “to militate against received U.S. commercial-prettiness-conventions” (743). Still, he seems to hold himself back with over-intellectual acrobatics, using them as a way to keep a distance between himself and the subject matter and not commit to any really sincere messages. Joelle van Dyne, a film student who forms a working friendship with him through her relationship with Orin, observes that his films are often characterized by “cold hip technical abstraction” (742). She perceives his film *The Medusa v. the Odalisque*, for instance, to be “cold, allusive, inbent, hostile: the only feeling for the audience one of contempt.” Joelle suspects that this is not due to a lack of emotional depth in Jim, observing to the contrary that he would often insert extremely fleeting, almost impossible-to-
notice glimpses of sentimentality in his films, “like he couldn't help putting human flashes in, but he wanted to get them in as quickly and unstudably as possible, as if they compromised him somehow” (741).

In general his films remind Joelle of “a very smart person conversing with himself” (740). Jim's films can be related to Wallace's concerns about art. According to Wallace scholar Adam Kelly, Wallace believed that fiction “should be viewed not primarily in terms of aesthetic representation, but of ethical intervention.” Kelly quotes Jon Baskin's take on Wallace's concerns about art: “Modern art, [Wallace] believed, too often treated pain as corresponding to some existential truth, converted it into an abstraction, or glared at it for amusement. Wallace's therapeutic art always treated pain as a symptom of distress, confusion and isolation.” Baskin calls this tendency toward unhelpful abstraction “the plague of the irresponsible intellect” whose work passes on to its audience the implicit message that “the authentic contemporary subject, just like the real artist, sacrifices sincerity and fellow feeling for the deeper truths of abstraction, alienation and cynicism” (“Birth of a Discipline”). For Wallace, art should necessarily be created with an eye toward helping the community it exists in, should attempt to help its audience manage the complex difficulties of existence, and not simply identify contradictions and suffering in order to show off the artist's cleverness.

Virtually all the characters in Infinite Jest suffer some type of pain and are looking for ways to deal with it. Wallace depicts emotional pain as a major force behind the addictions which afflict virtually all of his novel's characters in some form. Social isolation or discomfort in particular seems to make characters vulnerable to compulsive drug use, and there are numerous scenes that show individuals alone in private engaging in self-destructive behaviors. The impulse to self-destruction drives the desire to be isolated, and the isolation drives the desire
to self-destruct. Modern society with its proliferation of private rooms make this cycle easily accessible if one has the impulse. Ken Erdedy, for example, might not work himself into a frenzy over binging on marijuana if he were not all alone at home. In fact, for a while his method of dealing with his binges is to ask each dealer to never sell to him again, a method that does not work because the structure of life in Boston allows him to simply find another dealer, and another one, and keep it all a secret.

It is not simply the presence of other people that *Infinite Jest* then suggests to be therapeutic. There are several scenes depicting multiple characters on drug binges together, but their togetherness only consists in physical proximity. Don Gately could save his friend and co-worker Gene Fackelmann from being murdered, his dependence on heroin wins out, compelling him to sit down to binge with the doomed man instead. Beyond just being together in the same room, Wallace suggests that the experience of empathetic connection is crucial to healing. Therapy groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, which the tenants of The Ennet House Drug and Alcohol Recovery House attend on a daily basis, are taught the importance of trying to identify (or “ID”) with other attendees' experiences. These meetings are essentially story-telling sessions in which members of other AA groups come to share their personal experiences with addiction. In their emphasis on finding what is shared in the AA members’ experiences, and in their communal experience of overcoming addiction in the meetings themselves, effective group therapy is depicted as essentially a facilitation of *Erfahrung*. *Infinite Jest* shows empathetic connection through communication to be absolutely necessary to well-being.

Stopping going to meetings is a key factor in recovering addicts' slipping back into substance abuse. “Boston AA stresses the utter autonomy of the individual member,” (356), and it is true that no one is forced to attend meetings or behave a certain way. Yet the group seems
almost cultlike in the behaviors it suggests, behaviors in which members find they must engage in order to for AA to work for them personally. “You have to want to take the suggestions, want to abide by the traditions of anonymity, humility, surrender to the Group conscience” to be successful with AA, which means trying to take seriously cliches like “one day at a time” or “easy does it,” praying daily to one's higher power of choice, and committing to attend meetings for life. “It's all optional; do it or die” (357). The reason why this model for recovery works is treated as a mystery, and the senior AA members laugh at the question, recognizing it as pointless. Wallace acknowledges that deciding what to believe is a major struggle for a conscious being, because it both theoretically possible to infinitely question the basis on which one knows something, and necessary to stop that line of questioning in order to choose a course of action. Boston AA calls the phenomenon of endlessly questioning reality “analysis paralysis” (203) because it creates an uncertainty that prevents any decisive action. Through AA, Wallace shows that it is necessary for every individual to actively decide where in the line of infinite questioning to place faith in an answer in order to have a chance at self-determination.

Wallace tells Silverblatt that “fiction's got a very weird and complicated job because part of its job is to teach the reader, communicate with the reader, establish some sort of relationship with the reader where the reader is willing on a neurological level to expend effort” in order to understand what the author is trying to communicate. Wallace scholar Adam Kelly writes that this view of fiction results in a “dialogic quality” to Wallace's work as he attempts all at once to 1) transcend the limits of written language, 2) make the reader aware of the difficulties created by those limits, and 3) convince the reader to commit the energy to understanding what he really means. Kelly calls the resulting authorial strategy a “radical method for waking readers up to agency” (“Birth of a Discipline”) as a characteristic of Wallace's work and of New Sincerity art
in general. By encouraging an engaged effort towards understanding both reading and the world, Wallace's work has the potential to change readers' lives, and therein lies its political significance. For example, the connections of the novel's fractal structure nurtures an alternative mode of perception from one of linear, obvious cause-and-effect. This mode is helpful to achieve individual understanding of insidious, invisible effects of social systems like those discussed earlier in this paper, e.g. the significance of irony as a cultural norm, the interplay between corporate motives and human relationships, and so on.

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Wallace shares Colebrooks concern for the difficulty of ascertaining the sincerity of any message in a modern world full of ironic or empty messages, and understands that this uncertainty threatens an author's ability to communicate a message with full force. According to Wallace, "there is, in writing, a certain blend of sincerity and manipulation, of trying always to gauge what the particular effect of something is gonna be" (Lipsky 24). Because the presence of advertising trains Americans to expect motives behind messages, a writer may feel conflicted about trying to manipulate reception, and can find it a struggle to convince the reader that a work's message comes from a place of wholly genuine sentiment. One way Wallace deals with the issues of irony, sincerity and communication is to discuss them throughout the novel and thus bring them to the reader's attention. It is not hard to imagine parallels between Jim's struggle with his theoretical experiments and attempts at communication through The Entertainment and Wallace's own attempt to deal with those artistic problems in his novel.

*Infinite Jest* explores the difficulties modern subjects face in communicating themselves to others and achieving the necessary empathetic connection. Through AA meetings Wallace depicts a social environment that demands sincerity, because each personal story
can't be a calculated crowd-pleaser, and it has to be the truth unslanted, unfortified. And maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in church. Irony-free zone. Same with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity. Sincerity with an ulterior motive is something these tough ravaged people know and fear, all of them trained to remember the coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they'd had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle. (369)

The question of the roles of sincerity and irony in communication runs throughout *Infinite Jest* as its different problems are explored in various characters, particularly the members of the Incandenza family. Hal Incandenza suffers from an inability to achieve a congruence between avowal and actual feeling. Though he has memorized the *Oxford English Dictionary*, he does not have much use for it in attempting to communicate himself to others because he is emotionally silent inside, and this profound emptiness is obscured to most other people by his impressive performance in academic and athletic pursuits. His mother Avril’s explanation of her father to Hal’s brother Mario seems also pertinent to understanding Hal when she says that “certain types of persons are terrified even to poke a big toe into genuinely felt regret or sadness, or to get angry. This means they are afraid to live. They are imprisoned in something…frozen inside, emotionally” (766). Later in the book when Hal experiences a sort of emotional awakening, his condition reverses. He begins to forget much of his *OED* vocabulary and suddenly cannot match his facial expression or other body language to the feelings he is trying to communicate, causing other characters to think he is overcome with mirth about very sad things or grimacing instead of being friendly. But while Hal was previously unaware of the incongruence between his inner world and outer expression, the reversal brings his attention to
the frustration of not being able to communicate himself as he quite earnestly but futilely attempts to convince others that “I am not what you see and hear…I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I’m complex…please don’t think I don’t care” (11-13).

Wallace explores distinctions in motivations for sincerity through several characters. One of these is Avril, who paradoxically is so committed to being open with other people that she somehow seems to become the most obscured to the reader, who receives very different interpretations of her attitudes and motivations from other characters. Avril is obsessive in her effort to love her sons unconditionally and to not cause them any sort of trauma or self-esteem issues by displaying even the slightest amount of distrust or controlling behavior. Despite her devotion to this style of parenting, her eldest son Orin resents her deeply and cuts off contact with her. His childhood friend Marlon Bain points out that Avril’s parenting, which taken to extremes results in absurd decisions, may be more about “safeguarding…her own vision of herself as a more stellar [mother] than any human son could ever hope to feel he merits” (1051), comparing her to

the sort of philanthropist who seems humanly repellant not in spite of his charity but because of it: on some level you can tell that he views the recipients of his charity not as persons so much as pieces of exercise equipment on which he can develop and demonstrate his own virtue. What’s creepy and repellent is that this sort of philanthropist clearly needs privation and suffering to continue, since it is his own virtue he prizes, instead of the ends to which virtue is ostensibly directed. (1052)

It is significant that the reader does not come away from the book with the message that Avril is exactly such a person as Marlon speculates. Hal and Mario think of her in much more
positive terms, which does not discount the possibility that Marlon’s analysis is correct—they
could truly be taken in by a false altruism—but also does not mean that their experience of her is
less legitimate. It is worth noting that much of the negative interpretation made of Avril’s
“unimpeachable” (1050) behavior comes to the reader by way of Orin, whose version of all
events is somewhat discredited by his sociopathic behaviors such as torturing Mario, lying
pathologically but without an effort to be convincing, or methodically feigning insecurity and
sincerity to seduce women whom he coldly thinks of as “subjects” (43). There is also a strong
suggestion that Avril is a survivor of child abuse and that perhaps her parenting behavior is not in
any way intentionally self-serving but is a coping mechanism for emotional trauma. The
ambiguity of her character, which appears in some instances quite admirable and in others
poisonous, leaves the reader with an understanding of the complexity of intent and motive in
human relationships more than with any decisive judgment of Avril herself.

Contributing to this and other ambiguities of the characters is the fact that the primary
narrator of Infinite Jest is not totally omniscient. Although this narrator possesses a great deal of
information about the characters’ actions, thoughts and feelings, this information never seems
enough to perpetrate the “invasion of the ‘he’” that Roland Barthes attributes to omniscient third-
person narration which gives the reader a full account of a character’s inner world. Barthes calls
such narration “a progressive conquest over the profound darkness of the existential ‘I’” (37)
because it suggests that to each consciousness there is a sort of static true state that is potentially
fully knowable. Lacking full access to experiences besides one’s own, it is easier to conceive of
others as consistently moral or immoral, well-intentioned or malicious, intelligent or not
intelligent, and so on, whereas when thinking of one’s own self it is much easier to recognize the
fluidity of one’s personality. That fluidity is especially apparent to anyone who has felt that they
have been misinterpreted by others, or only partially understood. Self-concept is in a significant way formed by one’s relationships with others and the self’s perceptions of how others perceive it. Instead of information that allows the reader to make definitive judgments of what kind of person each character “really is,” narration in *Infinite Jest* places its focus on illustrating the relationships between characters as they each uniquely perceive them. The primary narrator’s lack of total knowledge is made conspicuous to the reader in occasional displays of ignorance of information that would in theory be simple objective fact in the real world. For example, there is a scene in which the narrator demonstrates impressive awareness of the various whereabouts of many of the characters during Hal’s tennis match against Ortho Stice, including those of characters who are nowhere near the tennis academy, yet after disclosing many of their locations admits that “Avril Incandenza’s whereabouts on the grounds were throughout this interval unknown” (655).

Besides the primary third-person narration, the reader of *Infinite Jest* receives the narrative in a variety of voices. Hal gives a first-person narration which only begins at his emotional awakening. Some sections are written as characters’ monologues or dialogues without any narration. There are letters, magazine interviews, interrogation transcripts, Hal’s father’s extensive filmography, scene-by-scene descriptions of various films made by characters, academic essays written by tennis academy students and excerpts from sections of fictitious books that these essays quote, footnotes citing real and made-up sources, references to real and made-up commercial products and works of art, mathematical diagrams and formulas, and detailed chemical descriptions of various drugs. Often information about a given character is received not from the narrator but through other characters’ retellings of that character’s story, making much of what is said unreliable. Narration is sometimes in the past tense, sometimes in
the present, and constantly switches among three major intersecting storylines and the related side stories that they each branch off into. Various events are not presented in chronological order, and because in the world of *Infinite Jest* years are not referred to by number but are named by commercial sponsors, aside from understanding the narrative as taking place in the not-too-distant future, the reader cannot be sure when exactly in the future that is.

The fragmented style of the narrative has several effects that are not typical of the traditional novel. Barthes points out that the preterite in novel writing calls for a “sequence of events…an intelligible Narrative” and in doing so “presupposes a world which is constructed, elaborated, self-sufficient, reduced to significant lines, and not one which has been sent sprawling before us, for us to take or leave” (30). While there is an “intelligible narrative” (30) to *Infinite Jest*, it is not easily intelligible (requiring for most readers probably a couple of readings to discern without help) nor is it conclusive. There are elements to it which remain a total mystery and are up to the reader to decide, for example the question of whether Joelle van Dyne is hideously deformed or overwhelmingly beautiful. Presenting the narrative in a fragmented style prevents the reader from reading each section primarily for development of the overarching plot and an eye towards some final informational message. Stranded without the context which can only be acquired from reading the entire book, the reader first reads each section for its immediate, self-contained significance, making his or her own connections and conclusions about events and characters. This style of narrative gives the impression of both the intricate interconnectedness of human lives and a lack of any sort of master plan towards which these lives are connected. Their tendency towards connectedness exists prior to and apart from any higher purpose which may be interpreted from those connections; the connectedness itself is what is significant.
*Infinite Jest* renews the form of the novel by making its primary aim therapeutic, rejecting a belief in individual autonomy for an acknowledgment of humans' need for one another, and at the same time encouraging readers to actively engage with the world and claim agency. As a piece of writing, it cannot create an actual instance of *Erfahrung* for its readers, and does not try to. Instead, it attempts to guide the reader to his or her own understanding of connection with others as necessary to well-being, hoping that this could improve the reader's actual life with the understanding that “it's a lot easier to fix something if you can see it” (*Infinite Jest* 55).

**Conclusion**

Literature published after *Infinite Jest* that is most often discussed in relation to New Sincerity does not necessarily resemble Wallace's fiction formally. For example, most of Tao Lin's novels are very short, and his prose style is a flat, brief deadpan that reads nothing like Wallace's often paragraph-length sentences. Different writers feel different truths, and pursue whatever formal qualities they hope will serve to convey those truths sincerely. Jennifer Moore suggests that whatever form New Sincerity writing takes, it necessarily risks the failure of its project, perhaps even fails inevitably, yet is not without merit:

> The idea of risking anything implies that what is being risked has a certain value; what’s at stake for these writers seems to be the possibility of human expression in any form. The hazards involved with the divulgence of interiority (embarrassment, sentimentality, readerly critique) turn it into a necessity in which one is *required* to risk the self in order to produce art. But this risk reaches beyond simply aesthetic concerns and extends to the world of actuality: art becomes a social obligation with the capability of “making ourselves, and everything, better.”

What is at stake, then, is not just poetic assertions of real emotion and human
value, but those emotions and values as lived in the world.

Perhaps, says Moore, New Sincerity writers embrace impossibility in their project, making use of “techniques of failure” to reveal the inadequacy of language and thereby, like Wallace, reminding the reader of the need to actively engage with the text to discover the intended communication. Whether New Sincerity writing actually succeeds or fails in communication is a matter of both author and reader effort. New Sincerity thus resembles conversation in its need for both parties' cognitive participation.

Jason Morris notes a “messianic impulse inherent in the promise of a 'New Sincerity'” which might culminate in salvation from “all the threats of late-late capitalism.” One of the most promising signs of New Sincerity's effect on American culture is what appears to be an increased openness among young adults towards alternatives to capitalism. In the results of 2011 poll by the Pew Research Center, slightly more than half of Americans from ages eighteen to twenty-nine expressed positive attitudes towards the idea of socialism, and negative attitudes towards capitalism. On the left, there seems to be a recent resurgence in youth interest in political activism. This resurgence is evinced by, among other things, youth participation in the Occupy movement (which was, notably, inspired by an Adbusters graphic), the 2006 revival of Students for a Democratic Society, and the flurry of political activity popping up on college campuses across the U.S. by organizers who see themselves as part of a global student movement, taking inspiration from peers in places such as Chile and Quebec. I think it makes sense to connect these activities to New Sincerity sensibilities. Activist communities provide nurturing spaces for young people to actually talk about what they value and to learn from one another. The conversation in these spaces can be remarkably irony-free, and this community activity often amounts to a kind of therapy for youth who feel dis-empowered and demoralized by the cultural
situation they have grown up in. And collective political action, for which people work together to achieve a goal they feel to be bigger than their individual selves, can be a form of *Erfahrung*.

What this and other signs of New Sincerity will come to is yet to be seen, but they are promising in their efforts to perform transfiguring critique.
Figure 1

Sierpinski triangle


<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sierpinski_triangle.svg>
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