

Bequeathing “new sincerity” in the age of the homo digitalis: Confessionalism and authorial self-consciousness in David Foster Wallace and Bo Burnham

Sergio Lopez-Sande 

University of Santiago de Compostela,
Santiago de Compostela, Spain

Correspondence

Sergio Lopez-Sande.

Email: sergio.sande@usc.es

Abstract

The notion of “New Sincerity” has become central to the study of David Foster Wallace's prose over the years. The present article explores how the tonal arrangement that characterises the movement has lived on to influence contemporary art, examining Bo Burnham's popular comedy musicals as a notable example of this influence. Wallace and Burnham's common stance concerning cultural reception is argued to be indissociable from their socio-cultural setting, with the two authors articulating parallel responses to an ongoing, multifaceted process of massification of public opinion, as well as to the consequences to cultural poiesis therein entailed.

KEYWORDS

20th century and contemporary, comedy, communication and media studies, comparative literature, cultural studies, literature, media studies, popular culture

1 | INTRODUCTION

David Foster Wallace's position as a pioneering figure in the development of a “New Sincerity” in US literature is now well-established. The notion of “New Sincerity,” understood as a movement concerning the tonal arrangement of some late postmodernist fiction, has become a common concept in the examination of contemporary art following its first application to the literary analysis of Wallace's prose by Adam Kelly (2010). As a poietic shift, the

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2023 The Authors. Literature Compass published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

movement is characterised by a wish to reject the perceived emotional emptiness of meta-experimentalism by infusing fiction-writing with some form of purpose derived from—or defined by the embracing of—affect. Wallace himself attested to this desire for a shift in his renowned “E Unibus Pluram” (1993), admitting to his own potential “lack of vision” in finding a way to exploit U.S. fiction’s possibilities to allow the “back[ing] away from ironic watching” and the “end[ing] of single-entendre values” that he held could be central to the following generation’s approach to story-telling (192). The interpretation of “New Sincerity” resulting from this shift is polyonymous, as it is similarly echoed in the preceding notion of “Post-Postmodern Discontent” (McLaughlin, 2004), which diagnosed a turn away from “self-conscious wordplay and the violation of narrative conventions” and the embracing of a new middle-ground where postmodernist form might merge with the mimetic aspirations of old (66–67), as well as in Lee Konstantinou’s later “Postironic Belief” (2012), which alludes to Wallace’s ambition to have his fiction result in the construction of “ethical countertypes” that could weaponize belief—in the possibility of communication, emotional communion, and the like—against the anti-earnest, detached stance of the “incredulous ironist” (85), or in Wilson Kaiser’s “proximal irony” (2013), described as “a style of writing that maintains its playful sensibility while also acknowledging an un-distanced emotional involvement with the narrative’s characters and events” (31).

A prominent quality of Kelly’s definition of “New Sincerity” by way of the interpretation of Wallace’s work is its focus on how the “anticipation of others’ reception of [...] their outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self” (136). The most renowned instance of this anticipation taking place in Wallace’s literature is perhaps the short story “Octet,” where “the unfortunate fiction writer” admits to finding himself resourceless before his want to attest to the “urgent, truly urgent” need of passing the “queer nameless ambient [...] interhuman sameness” he perceives onto his readers (133). Thus, standing at a creative crossroads, the fictionalised authorial voice in the text resorts to asking the reader directly, entreating her for some feedback on whether the story holds any value in an outburst of earnest worry—and so turning the question into an unexpected, structural meta-intruder working within the story itself. The desire to imbue the text with an explicit wish for interpersonal connection with his readership becomes apparent in Wallace’s metafictional exercises. It is, further, one tainted by a profound worry that the wish will not make it to the other end: the narrative voice in “Good Old Neon” is asked into silence by the end of the story, moments after having almost coyly revealed that David Wallace has “emerged from years of literally indescribable war against himself” (181), whereas the authorial insertee in “Octet” confesses to facing a conundrum before his anxiety of reception: “[t]he trick to this solution is that you’d have to be 100% honest,” and yet also admits to the dread that such an approach be “perilously close to [asking the reader] ‘Do you like me? Please like me’” (131).

Questions on the likability of the artist are overtly dismissed by Wallace as inherently distasteful, and yet are featured not merely in his discourse on fiction-writing, but also in his fictions. Through his metafictional exercise in “Octet,” Wallace places his fictionalised self at the heart of a paradox of self-consciousness: being honest about one’s concern might result in empathy from the reader, but the honest voicing of the concern will remain an ingenious exercise in postmodernist metafictional experimentalism, and as such might be perceived to be a language game, a witticism deployed by an author nurtured by a tradition of disaffection, and thus fail to earn him any form of readerly like. The twist of “New Sincerity,” passed on from Wallace’s time and still greatly influencing contemporary US culture, calls attention to how the author is twice detached from the impersonality of a self-aware text that holds no narrative: not only does the text know that it is a text, or that it has an author, but, perhaps most importantly, it knows that its knowing these things about itself responds to a history, that it will be received in a particular way because of this history, and that it can use this knowledge to reach out for—or, as has been contended, manipulate¹—the consciousness of its readers.

This paper is set to examine how the deployment of these metafictional devices—resulting in cultural products that align with the notion of “New Sincerity” by trying to convince its reception of the congruence between avowal and actual feeling—conveys a fear of external judgement that is as endemic to some contemporary globalised culture as it was to Wallace’s own at the turn of the century. I agree with Jon Baskin, 2023 that “[t]he discourse around sincerity today is quite different” (119), with authors chasing aesthetic effects that cannot be achieved “merely by purity of intention or innocence of heart,” but rather by delving further into “an explicit thematization of the struggle

to write – and to live – as coextensive with a struggle to moderate their tendencies toward over-intellectualization and self-consciousness” (127). Burnham's work offers some such gestures, but in it, Wallace's aesthetic agenda is still undoubtedly present, as is the same appeal to the author's purity of intention that Baskin describes. It does not merely delve into the author's struggle, much as it does, but focuses just as direly on the work's reception, still showing a degree of overt resentment to readers for their uncontrollability. This will be argued to be partly the case due to live comedy's own generic idiosyncrasies, with the public's opinion becoming a source of immediate concern to the performer, which results in him feeling anxious about his reception.

Indeed, Wallace's fiction pioneeringly alluded to one such form of anxiety, and he often placed himself in the position of one such performer. His distress was indissociable from the sociological conditions of his time, with the significant influence of television on the habits of consumers being traceable in his fictions' textual urgency to inspire readerly appreciation. This compulsion seemingly attests to the dread that the author might end up exposed should his narratives fail, writing from the other side of a television-like screen, submitted to the opinion of the masses but unable to retrace his steps as the broadcast continues, and equally helpless before the possibility that he may want to contribute to the conversation in a significant manner. Social media has rekindled writers' interest in “New Sincerity” as a tonal approach to textual production, with some contemporary media showing equal—if not aggravated—anxiety as they self-consciously navigate their authors' awareness that their results will be scrutinised by a diverse array of people, now populating platforms allowing their opinions to be voiced *en masse*. Bo Burnham's musical comedy provides a significant instance of how the same tonal approach to fiction-writing that helped earn Wallace a position in the history of American letters has remained at the heart of present-day texts. By approaching this expression of Wallace's legacy, this paper aspires to shed light on how some contemporary culture is critically defined by attitudes around reception and personal exposition not much dissimilar to Wallace's; and thus, to bring forth a literary diagnosis of mediatized late-postmodern society as the twenty-first century reaches maturity.

2 | BO BURNHAM'S WORN-OUT STAGE: INHERITING “NEW SINCERITY” IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The deployment of postmodernist metafiction to approach a form of sincerity that counter-discursively challenges earlier self-reflexive prose has become one of the most recognisable characteristics of Wallace's literary project. Indeed, this is so much the case that his influence in contemporary culture appears at its most traceable when some echo of this apprehension toward reception takes the stage. Reminiscent of how Wallace has been argued to have developed his authorial voice through an anxiety of influence, springing from his looking back at the postmodernist patriarchs before him,² some contemporary writing shows comparable forms of indebtedness to Wallace. Bo Burnham's musical comedy is a salient example of this. His stand-up specials, which often feature tonal shifts towards earnest dramatism, provide an academically underexamined example of how Wallace's influence has lived on beyond written prose, and seen significant pop success at that. The self-consciousness Wallace conveyed via the spoken fear of cultural reception is, too, an omnipresent theme in Burnham's comedy, and the connection between the two is far from an innuendo underlying the latter's production, but overtly acknowledged by Burnham himself, who claimed to think of “Forever Overhead,” a short story by Wallace, as “one of [... his] favorite pieces of writing ever” in a tweet referencing the tenth anniversary of Wallace's death (@boburnham).

The connection between Burnham and Wallace should come as no surprise, provided the striking similarity of their experiences of turn-of-the-century US culture. This analogous outlook on creation goes beyond their being white men of upper-middle class backgrounds in the changing, digital societies of the late postmodern age, and can be attested to in the discourses on mainstream media that they each articulated. Despite the evident similarities in their backgrounds, their respective takes on their racial privilege are significantly different, with Burnham being more vocal about his position within social systems than Wallace ever was. In “Make Happy” (00:07:08), for instance, Burnham overtly jokes about the inconsequence of the hardships he has been made to face in society as a

straight white man. Halfway through "Inside," he sings about "times [...] changing" and accountability coming for the "perfectly lawful," but "not very thoughtful" things he did as a "sheltered kid" who "wrote offensive shit" and then said it (00:38:03–00:38:49). Wallace, on his part, has been criticised for never addressing any such privilege, neglecting the racialised experience of the US almost entirely, as well as for only giving it any proper consideration in its intersection with class struggle while simultaneously failing to address the way in which capitalism and race are inherently connected (see Saylor, 2023). Despite their belonging to different generations and the subsequent changes in their relationship to new cultural forms that naturally ensue, with Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram" being haunted by the influence of television and Burnham speaking from a post-social media standpoint, their remarks on fiction-writing share an acute concern with the omnipresence of critical disconnection at the end of reception. Both Wallace's and Burnham's stances on the mainstream media of their time are articulated against what they perceive to be the defining pathos of their age: a form of chronic *unawareness*, characterised by many readers' tendency to consume culture passively, without truly connecting with their humanity through the arts. Further, they share a sense of hopelessness both in terms of tone and content, by being agitated to the point where they might be read as desperate, and by denouncing contemporary media's appropriation of postmodern form to immunise itself against any criticism from those who fear its disaffected, uniformizing influence. "[T]elevision has become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it," writes Wallace. "It's not that charges of nonconnection have become untrue. It's that any such connection has become otiose" ("E Unibus Pluram" 160). By virtue of the passivity of its reception—and without television necessarily forwarding "diabolic designs"—its "Audience-conditioning" capacities, paired with the impossibility to successfully criticize it, turn it into a rapacious influence on popular culture, argues Wallace (173–174). Burnham's position in this regard is not quite that of a consumer charging hopelessly against a television that has learned to deflect his every complain. Instead, his discourse is articulated from within, since he is one of the many contributors to the digital—and often televised—repositories of content of the contemporary Internet. His work not only resists television's inability to be criticised, but also contemporary media's persuasive ability to turn people into self-enclosed creators. As stated by Byung-Chul Han, "[i]n all the imaginary spaces of virtuality, the narcissistic ego encounters itself first and foremost [...] and] the function of 'friends' is primarily to heighten narcissism by granting attention, as consumers, to the *ego exhibited as a commodity*" (43). The digital self, it follows, is consumed by a want for earnest connection, but has been taught to look for it via the purchase and sale of ego-performances. Whereas unawareness in Wallace comes from the voyeuristic call to inaction of self-conscious, turn-of-the-century television, Burnham denounces an unawareness that, perhaps paradoxically, keeps individuals active in their productive chain of constant performances, which they have been taught to project into the world from a very young age—or, one might point out, the time of Wallace's writing.

Burnham's comedy show *Make Happy* (2015) features a monologue where he defends that his whole project is "about performing," and that it has a generation sick with an "arrogance [that] is taught or [...] was cultivated" as its target. The most poignant manifestation of this arrogance, he goes on, is the appearance of social media, which Burnham defines as "the market's answer to a generation that demanded to perform," and to do so constantly, but a response that has become "[...] prison; it's horrific, it is performer and audience melted together" (00:47:51–00:48:04). Social media's immunity, contrary to television's, does not come from its having assimilated postmodern form to the extent that it can successfully deflect criticism by means of mockery or self-deprecation, but rather by the public's learned necessity to be a part of its circus-like stage. This suspicious attitude toward the public's mass response to social media is equally present in Burnham's offstage discourse. "We used to colonize land," he affirms in an interview on teenage self-esteem following the release of his film *Eighth Grade* (2018). "We colonized the entire Earth; there was no other place for businesses and capitalism to expand into, and then they realized: human attention. They are now trying to colonize every minute of your life" ("Self Esteem in the Age of Social Media," 42:14–42:31). The influence of capitalism on time expenditure would thus put subjectivity in a vulnerable position, for it would chain it to a compulsive need to consume performances and be consumed, too, as a "performance of self." The shift from passivity to activity in the digital space, however, is not perceived to be a liberating one. The resulting increase in individual agency is not experienced as one that also increases well-being. "We're hyperconnected and we're lonely," writes

just another manipulative pseudopomo Bullshit Artist who's trying to salvage a fiasco by dropping back to a metadimension and commenting on the fiasco itself" (135), is mirrored in Burnham. Here, however, it becomes an overt plea that readers observe the artist's untrustworthiness, instead of being speculative and introspective: "I am an artist, please don't revere me/I am an artist, please don't respect me" ("Art Is Dead" (02:04–02:09). The fear that an author may be misread into unlikability becomes, onstage, a declaration, with Burnham outlining the readerly responses he is not aiming for with his writing. Indeed, this may be argued to spring from the different types of media each was creating, with literature allowing a distance and a deferral from readerly opinion that live comedy would not afford Burnham. The discrepancy between one and the other might also be tentatively connected with the shift in the public perception of creators over the last 2 decades, with so-called "influencer culture" inadvertently inviting Burnham to articulate a discourse "against" his own influence—an influence that, as contended Marjorie Garber, is "often a part of the artwork itself [... i]n these days of mash-ups, avatars, transformers, and surgical makeovers" (759).

Parallelisms can also be traced between Wallace's tendency to have his fiction focus on the darkest dimensions of subjectivity while fearing that any such thoughts be associated with him, and Burnham's own ambiguous relationship with the idea of being seen. In "The Nature of the Fun," Wallace contended that "writing fiction becomes a way to go deep inside yourself and illuminate precisely the stuff you don't want to see or let anyone else see, and this stuff usually turns out (paradoxically) to be precisely the stuff all writers and readers everywhere share and respond to, feel" (1998). These shades of subjectivity that one may wish to keep private define the turn to sincerity of many of Burnham's songs. In "Can't Handle This," for instance, the shift away from vacuous playfulness and comedy for comedy's own sake takes place when Burnham's own mental distress enters the narration as he explicitly addresses his audience: "[...] come and watch the skinny kid/With a steadily declining mental health/And laugh as he attempts to give you what he cannot give himself" ("Make Happy" 00:54:49–00:55:00). This expression of "New Sincerity" in Burnham shares with Wallace a desire to "expose" his reception, bringing about empathy through a feeling of shame. "Although self-deprecation describes moments in which someone becomes an object of derision to himself, shame is produced by the presence of another," writes Johannes Voelz in his discussion of "New Sincerity" and literary hospitality. "Rather than accusingly pointing at myself, I feel shame because in the presence of another, a displeasing aspect of myself suddenly comes into view that wasn't visible before" (217–218). Both self-deprecation and shame play a significant role in Wallace and Burnham's appeal to sincerity. Further, they both fuse these two dimensions in their work, earnestly exposing the difficulties before them while also pointing at the reader directly, evincing their passivity before the author's struggle as they are, narratively, made a part of it. This considered, one may argue that empathy is invited through an appeal to the readers' wish for redemption, as they, however inadvertently, are shamed by their curiosity, their enjoyment, and their inaction before the struggling other—whom, through his use of metafiction to insert a narrative replica of himself into an otherwise banal text, is felt to be the real author at the other end.

3 | "SINCERELY" RESENTING RECEPTION: SOME REMARKS ON WALLACE AND BURNHAM'S TURN TO THE CONFESSIONAL

The line connecting Wallace and his legacy to Burnham's writing is accentuated by the idiosyncrasies of comedy, with both writers recurrently turning to the unexpected to "shock" their readers and make their experience enjoyable. Despite Wallace's intention to have *Infinite Jest* read as "a book that was sad," as he told Mark Caro (*Chicago Tribune*), his magnum opus was widely perceived to feature a deeply comedic tone. This fed into one of Wallace's voiced fears: disconnection from his readership. Following the book's release, he admitted to being somewhat displeased by the radical difference in their—i.e. his readers' and his own—outlooks on the novel, and later wrote to his editor Michael Pietsch that "[e]verybody thought that book was funny," which, he conceded, "was of course nice, but also kind of frustrating" (Max 255). The distance between mass readership and Wallace in what concerns tonal reception appears to have worked both ways, with Wallace's essay "Laughing with Kafka" featuring an account of how his students would fail to find the humorous component to Kafka's texts: "For me, a signal frustration in trying to read Kafka with college students is that it is next to impossible to get them to see that Kafka is funny" (23).

The comedic in *Infinite Jest* is the result of Wallace's constant interplay with the unexpected—or, at times, even the absurd. Passages from the novel read as jokes because of their utter betrayal of readerly anticipation. They might even be taxonomized as jokes because of their rhetoric structure, as they generally fall into Salvatore Attardo's pragmatic analysis of humorous texts (20). This is so because of their resorting to what Salvatore, following Victor Raskin's earlier work in *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour* (1985), labels "Script Opposition:" the inner logic explaining the funniness is based on their call to superstructural opposites. That is to say that the texts' humorous nature is founded on their diegetic conflation of binaries (the actual vs. the non-actual, the normal vs. the abnormal, the possible vs. the impossible). *Infinite Jest*'s opening scene, appearing at the beginning despite its being the last event in the novel's chronology, features Hal Incandenza collapsing before a board of examiners. The collusion of normality and abnormality runs throughout the passage, climaxing when his perfectly uttered sentences feature in the narration, but are met with perplexity and disgust as the examiners perceive him to be uttering prelapsarian sounds. "I am not what you see and hear," Hal tries to reply as he is taken away, completely disconnected from his reception (13). As the excerpt closes on this note, the reader is met with an abnormal turn on a standardised, everyday situation, and one that is left unresolved, frozen on a moment of tension. The same conflation of normal and abnormal can be traced to the level of the sentence—functionally instituting a joke—at various moments in the narration. "The Admissions staff is looking at standardized test scores from you," reports a member of the board in remarkably uneventful fashion before serenely pronouncing the results "subnormal" (6). The same turn on readerly expectation, conflating normal and abnormal, takes place as the character of Madame Psychosis twists a Biblical reference at the open of her radio show. We may read:

And as pinkie meets palm, she says what she's said for three years of midnights, an opening bit that Mario Incandenza, the least cynical person in the history of Enfield MA, across the river, listening faithfully, finds, for all its black cynicism, terribly compelling:

Her silhouette leans and says "And Lo, for the Earth was empty of form, and void".

"And Darkness was all over the Face of the Deep".

"And We said":

"Look at that fucker Dance." (184)

The labelling of passages such as this one as comedic is not limited to the diegetic, thematic interplay of binaries, but can be maintained, too, to be structural. Jokes, argues Hannah Gadsby in her renowned *Nanette* (2018), revolve around the interaction of a setup and a punchline (00:29:55-00:30:10). Central to the purpose of her special, which could itself be easily argued to exemplify yet again a turn to a "New Sincerity" in contemporary pop culture, is the idea that jokes' twofold structure allows no resolution. Unlike narrative, which favours a tripartite arrangement, Gadsby argues that comedy freezes its reception in its second half, twisting expectation to result in tension diffusion, and releasing both author and reader from the responsibility to affectively navigate the nature of the told (00:39:46-00:40:12). *Infinite Jest*'s peculiar structure, which Wallace revealed in an interview to have been inspired by the non-linear mathematical set known as the Sierpiński gasket, was potentially designed to echo Jean-Luc Godard's contention—traced to various moments in the latter's career—that a story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order. However, when read from beginning to end, the novel's comedic component may be seen to be a result of its sections' apparent open-endedness. Thus, it evokes Gadsby's anatomy of the joke more than it does Godard's claim on de-structuration, causing Wallace's postmodernist use of form in *Infinite Jest* to be perceived as funny. The above passage, drawing on an explicit reference to Genesis, "corrupts" a sequence that works in storylike fashion to instead provide a vignette.

This twist, however, working as the opening to a fiction within *Infinite Jest*, succeeds in earning its known reception's attention and care, with Mario Incandenza being described as the enthralled, illuminated reader Wallace overtly

wished for himself as Madame Psychosis seemingly-endless call upon the marginalised kindles his devoted fanaticism (189). The reference to Madame Psychosis' "black cynicism" is also far from arbitrary, as Wallace himself feared being associated with the vacuity of first-generation postmodernism, and lamented that "what's been passed down from the postmodern heyday is sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints on conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem" ("Conversation" 49). In light of this, Mario Incandenza finding her speech "terribly compelling" turns him into an idealisation of Wallace's readership, and simultaneously sets an example, depicting a character who has understood the sincere nature of the cultural product before him and has connected with the person at the other end; and done so, further, despite the formal obtuseness of Madame Psychosis' intervention. Mario has found, in short, something "worth having" in the narrative before him—and, moved by its sincerity, exercises his fanatical listening to understand a voice that is "sparely modulated and strangely empty [...] low-depth familiar [...] the way certain childhood smells will strike you as familiar" (189).

The most remarkable common ground between Wallace and Burnham lies in their approach to this "illumination" of their reception. This connective epiphany is recurrently sought via person-to-person understanding, with self-consciousness being the pathway they most often resort to in their attempts to call upon readerly empathy. Such a call is featured in their writing as a counterpoint to the comic exploitation of absurdity, and, as previously hinted at, heavily relies on exercises bordering on—or overtly taking the form of—meta-confessions. Both authors earnestly confess to being tormented by the uncertainty of whether their texts will succeed. This anxiety becomes a driving force in their literary expressions, fundamentally shaping their approach to creative honesty. This, one should also note, is hardly dissociable from their being men in a culture that is still largely defined by the patriarchal imperative that male vulnerability is demeaning, and thus to be kept from public view, since it is partly because of this very imperative that the turn to earnest metafiction in their discourses is met with affective commotion. The voicing of male psychic pain despite the existing taboo, factoring in the perception of their fearlessness before the possibility of structural judgement, contributes to their pieces' drawing of readerly sympathy. Or, what is the same: their discomfort, placed in a frenzy of banality and comedic experimentation, is regarded as graver not only because of the discomfort's context, but also because of its voicer.

The tonal shift toward sincerity, in this regard, springs from a form of confessionalism. It stands as the product of a fictionalised authorial voice who speaks in allegedly honest terms about what troubles him amid a diegetic chaos of his own making. This earnestness, however, is twice removed from its reception: first, by virtue of the impossibility that readers "reply," give back to the text and its author—should one *believe* the confession to speak of him—and thus answer Wallace's "do you feel it to?" ("Octet" 131) or fill in Burnham's "parting questionnaire" ("Make Happy" 00:57:27-00:57:29); and second, because of the impossibility to subtract fictionalisation from the product, and thus to distinguish David Foster Wallace and Bo Burnham, creators, from the surrogates doing the telling within their fictions. The effort on the authors' end, however, is in both cases directed at the idea of reaching out, and hence asks for an answer that is, functionally, impossible. This happens at the literal level, as shown in the excerpts above, but also metaphorically. Burnham's "All Eyes on Me" is built on one such metaphor. The song, which explores the feeling of catastrophist anxiety resulting from the idea of performing before others, submitting one's exposed sense of subjectivity to their judgement, opens with—and repeatedly goes back to—a close-up of Burnham's face where he stares into the camera, as though figuratively asking his reception to empathise with the sense of fatalism he is singing about. "Are you having nervous?/Are you having fun?," asks Burnham as he makes his call upon readerly attention explicit: "Look in my eye" ("Inside" 01:13:05-01:13:22).

This urgent call for confirmation of the author's success is not directed at whether the reader has processed the information before her, but rather at the emotional component to this reception. It is, much as it happens in Wallace's "Octet," the intricate, insecure expression of an anxious want to be *liked*. This desperation to be seen and liked, paired with the explicit declaration that both Wallace and Burnham are aware of the fact that the verbalisation of any such desire does not change its nature as a childish impulse, is recurrent in the latter's career. In an exercise of metacommentary featured halfway through *Inside*, Burnham reacts to a piece of his own making and confesses,

as the reactions to reactions start to pile up, to his “being a little pretentious,” a stance resulting from his “pretty unlikely [...] desperate need to be seen as intelligent” (“Inside” 00:27:54-00:28:12). As the reactions continue to pile up and Burnham begins to put forth reactions of reactions, he labels his previous confession a “defence mechanism,” springing from the belief that criticism levelled against him will be deflected if he proves to be self-conscious of his own self-stated unlikability. However, moments before shutting down the loop, he mumbles: “Self-awareness does not absolve anybody of anything.” (00:28:40-00:29:00) This, indeed, puts forth yet another paradox of self-conscious meta-earnestness: if self-awareness is deployed as a defence mechanism aimed at shielding authorial consciousnesses from outer criticism, and that defence mechanism—on which the authors’ call to readerly empathy is often founded—becomes the target of its own self-aware impulse, then how is a fiction founded on structural contradiction and the disregard of its own technique to sincerely ask for its readers’ like and understanding? Wallace faced the same paradox in his discussions on fiction writing, as he too claimed to fear his own need for readerly approval. This fear led him to self-consciously criticise his own expression of the need itself, as, he acknowledged, the fear threatened to result in him resenting his audience for holding the power over whether his fictions would ever feel successful. He delved deeper into this concern in a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, where he conceded that

if the artist is excessively dependent on simply being *liked*, so that her true end isn’t in the work but in a certain audience’s good opinion, she is going to develop a terrific hostility to that audience, simply because she has given all her power away to them. It’s the familiar love-hate syndrome of seduction: “I don’t really care what it is I say, I care only that you like it. But since your opinion is the sole arbiter of my success and worth, you have tremendous power over me, and I fear you and hate you for it.” [...] I often think I can see it in myself and in other young writers, this desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader.

(“Conversations” 25)

The same binary, defining their shared fear of reception, appears as Burnham’s special *Make Happy* nears its close: “The truth is my biggest problem’s you,” confesses Burnham to his audience. “I wanna please you/But I wanna stay true to myself/I wanna give you the night out that you deserve/But I wanna say what I think/And not care what you think about it” (00:54:02-00:54:16). In “Art Is Dead,” featured in the earlier collection of comedy songs *Words Words Words* (2010), Burnham’s stage persona reflects on the source of this need, admitting to being “self-centred” and “self-obsessed,” but deeming these flaws the result of “a little attention attractor” growing up to see his need for external validation systemically rewarded (00:43:00-00:58). This want to be liked by their reception could even be argued to be direr in Burnham’s case because of live comedy’s own teleology: its finality is that of creating joy in its audience, and, lest the fun interfere with the audience’s ethos, it is often the case that a successful comedian earns his reception’s like. “Look at them, they’re just staring at me,” points out an affected Burnham halfway through his singing (“Make Happy” 00:54:46-00:54:49). Indeed, his metafictional closing of the show is all too aware of the alignment of appreciation and comedic success in his context, and aims his self-doubt accordingly: “I hope that you had gut trembling or something resembling fun” (00:57:06-00:57:11). The same verbalisation of this concern with reception is featured halfway through *Inside*, with Burnham metafictionally breaching the fourth-wall to present his listeners with a list of questions on his project: “How are you feeling?/Do you like the show?/Are you tired of it? [...] Are you finding it boring?/Too fast? Too slow?” (00:49:38-00:49:55). The list is recurrently interrupted by a musical hook where Burnham confesses to not wanting to know if his special has succeeded to draw “good” attention and “like” from his reception (00:50:30-00:50:32).

Succeeding is articulated as a teleology of such importance that it emotionally defines both authors’ call to empathy. Their “sincerity” is deployed as a self-dismantling shield, programmed to self-destruct should it be met with hostility. What these texts share, ultimately, is a verbalised anxiety that the authorial consciousness behind them will be met with a reception, or even a form of feedback, beyond their control. The turn to earnestness in Wallace injected an affected, human subject into the metafictional exercise, moving the history of metafiction forward and away from

the playful, technical exercises that had previously dominated the paradigm. The narrative voices in his metafictional stories, however, also betray a struggle to place their faith in reception: they distrust or dismiss absolute empathy, and fear that a culturally-mediated text may never prompt any form of connection that truly involves its author. The surrogates in Wallace's narrations share a self-conscious fear of the other outside the text as much as they share an urgency to reach out for an-other, a need to trust the indeterminacy and unconstrained nature of that very other as she consumes the work. In Burnham, the adoption of an honest tone is informed by near-identical diegetic and paratextual information, with his stage personas recurrently suspecting their reception while openly confessing to needing them direly. The catastrophism that finds its way into Burnham's comedy, together with the overtly pained tone that traverses his "Octet"-like attempts at sincere metafiction, can be effortlessly linked to the synchronic, cultural setting informing his production. Unlike Wallace, Burnham's fear of his audience is deeply embedded in his post-social media setting, as evinced by his desire not merely to be liked, which he clearly shared with Wallace, but also to meet his live audience's expectations—all the more "live," in a sense, because of social media giving them the ability to have their potential backlash be harsh, unmediated, and immediate. The fact that much of his own work is itself televised adds yet another potentially preoccupying element to the connection between the two authors: has television engulfed "New Sincerity," parallel to how it absorbed postmodernist technique and turned it politically sterile and vacuous? Could Wallace's attempt at moving past the cynicism of much mid-century fiction be no longer effective, and Burnham's televised comedy specials serve as proof that "New Sincerity" has already been commodified and integrated into television itself? Or, on the contrary, does Burnham's work evince growing resistance against the isolative, capitalising tendencies in contemporary mainstream media, to the point that attempts at dismantling its grip on culture are now coming from within? Perhaps these are both at play simultaneously, evincing a (perhaps necessary) tension running through contemporary narrative. In light of these questions, the line traced between the two authors may be contended to speak not merely of Wallace's late-postmodernist legacy, but of an ongoing, trans-generational concern of significant sociological reach, shaping contemporary attitudes toward culture, and conditioning artists' ability to convey sincerity and vulnerability in language in the digital age.

ORCID

Sergio Lopez-Sande  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7247-8981>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For an analysis of the treacherous discourses holding together the perceived benignity of Wallace's metafictional exercises, see Hudson, 2018.
- ² See Harris, 2014.

REFERENCES

- Attardo, S. (2001). *Humorous texts: A semantic and pragmatic analysis*. De Gruyter.
- Baskin, J. (2023). After analysis: Notes on the new sincerity from Wallace to Knausgaard. In C. Hayes-Brady (Ed.) *David Foster Wallace in context*. (pp. 119–128). Cambridge University Press.
- @boburnham. (2018). His short story, Forever Overhead, is one of my favorite pieces of writing ever. I would not have written Eighth Grade if I hadn't read it. It's about a young boy jumping off a diving board. Here's David reading it himself. Rest in Peace. 2/2. *Twitter*. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/boburnham/status/1039998341902348288>
- Burn, S. J. (Ed.) (2012). *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Burnham, Bo. (2010). *Art is Dead*. Words Words Words, Comedy Central Records. Spotify Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/track/3n9ABQpqK6EgaOPEtfzD4I?si=23869cf869574135>
- Burnham, Bo. *Make Happy*. 2015/2016. Netflix, Retrieved from <https://www.netflix.com/title/80106124>
- Burnham, Bo. (2021). *Inside*. Netflix. Retrieved from <https://www.netflix.com/title/81289483>
- Burnham, Bo (2021a). *Happy sad confused with Josh Horowitz*. Spotify. Retrieved from <https://open.spotify.com/episode/2QkvdmB0YJQOppvgMt7Jeh7?si=b0213bbf10bd41da>
- Caro, M. (1996). The next big thing. *Chicago Tribune*. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1996-02-23-9602230384-story.html>

- Gadsby, H. (2018). *Nanette*. Netflix. Retrieved from <https://www.netflix.com/title/80233611>
- Garber, M. (2016). Over the influence. *Critical Inquiry*, 42(4), 731–759. <https://doi.org/10.1086/686960>
- Han, B.-C. (2015). *The burnout society*, translated by Erik Butler. Stanford University Press.
- Harris, C. B. (2014). The anxiety of influence: The John Barth/David Foster Wallace connection. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55(issue 2), 103–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2013.771905>
- Hudson, C. M. (2018). David Foster Wallace is not your friend: The fraudulence of empathy in David Foster Wallace studies and good old Neon. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59(issue 3), 295–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1399856>
- Kaiser, W. (2013). Humor after postmodernism: David Foster Wallace and proximal irony. *Studies in American Humor, New Series*, 3(28), 31–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/23823875>
- Kelly, A. (2010). David Foster Wallace and the new sincerity in American fiction. In D. Hering (Ed.), *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical essays* (pp. 131–146). Sideshow Media Group Press.
- Konstantinou, L. (2012). No bull: David Foster Wallace and postironic belief. In S. Cohen & L. Konstantinou (Eds.), *The legacy of David Foster Wallace* (pp. 83–112). University of Iowa Press.
- Manovich, L. (2009). The practice of everyday (media) life: From mass consumption to mass cultural production? *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), 319–331. <https://doi.org/10.1086/596645>
- Max, D. T. (2012). *Every love story is a ghost story: A life of David Foster Wallace*. Granta.
- McLaughlin, R. L. (2004). Post-postmodern Discontent: Contemporary fiction and the social world. *Sympløke*, 12(1/2), 53–68. (Fiction's Present). <https://doi.org/10.1353/sym.2005.0029>
- Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic mechanisms of Humour*. In D. Reidel.
- Saylor, C. (2023). David Foster Wallace and racial capitalism. In C. Hayes-Brady (Ed.), *David Foster Wallace in context* (pp. 293–302). Cambridge University Press.
- Self Esteem in the Age of Social Media. (2019). YouTube, uploaded by child mind institute. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmUm7oBqCVw>
- Voelz, J. (2016). The new sincerity as literary hospitality. In J. Clapp and E. Ridge (Ed.), *Security and Hospitality in Literature and Culture*. (pp. 209–226). Routledge University Press.
- Wallace, D. F. (1993). E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction. *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13(2), 151–194. Summer.
- Wallace, D. F. (2001). *Brief interviews with hideous men*. 1999. Abacus.
- Wallace, D. F. (2005). *Oblivion*. 2004. Little, Brown and Company.
- Wallace, D. F. (2016). *Infinite Jest*. 1996. Little, Brown and Company.
- Wallace, D. F. (1998). *Laughing with Kafka*. Harper's Magazine.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Sergio Lopez-Sande holds a PhD from the University of Santiago de Compostela, where he has undertaken research and teaching duties for the past years. His research interests include postmodernism, contemporary literature, and short fiction studies.

How to cite this article: Lopez-Sande, S. (2024). Bequeathing “new sincerity” in the age of the homo digitalis: Confessionalism and authorial self-consciousness in David Foster Wallace and Bo Burnham. *Literature Compass*, e12744. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12744>