

**Hysterical Realism and the Addiction to Excess: Narrative Proliferation,
Media Saturation, and Neoliberal Subjectivity in David Foster Wallace's
*Infinite Jest***

SURI Bhargavi^a and Dr M. Sambaiah^b

- (a) Lecturer in the Department of English, Akshara Junior College, Nellore,
Research Scholar, JNTUA.
(b) Associate Professor, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences,
JNTUA College of Engineering, Pulivendula.

Article Received: 28/07/2026
Article Accepted:30/08/2026
Published Online:31/08/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.08.675

Abstract

This research report reevaluates David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, departing from the traditional "New Sincerity" reading that interprets its formal overinvestment as an attempt to overcome cynical apathy and reconnect with human empathy. Instead, it argues that the novel's labyrinthine narrative architecture—characterised by recursive endnotes, encyclopaedic data dumps, multiple subplots, and temporal dislocations—is a deliberate mimetic enactment of the logic of addiction that pervades late-capitalist, media-saturated culture. Drawing on James Wood's concept of "hysterical realism," the analysis frames these structural excesses as an aesthetic simulation of the neoliberal debt economy.

Drawing on Avital Ronell's theorisation of the ontology of addiction, Sianne Ngai's concept of affective "stuplimity," and Dan Sinykin's analysis of the long economic downturn, the report demonstrates how the text structurally replicates the experience of compulsive consumption. By trapping the reader in an overwhelming, repetitive cycle of information-gathering, the narrative architecture forces the reader to mirror the compulsive behaviour of an addicted consumer. Consequently, the novel suggests that the quest for sincerity is not a simple cure for postmodern irony but is itself transformed into an endless, teleologically unsatisfied process of compulsive accumulation.

Keywords: Hysterical Realism, Neoliberalism, Addiction Theory, Affect Theory, Maximalism, Media Saturation, Contemporary American Fiction.

Introduction

This introduction sets up a critical reevaluation of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) by connecting its maximalist structure directly to late-capitalist economic logic. Rather than treating its 1,000+ pages, 388 digressive endnotes, and intricate web of subplots—spanning the Enfield Tennis Academy, Ennet House, and the lethal film cartridge *The Entertainment*—as mere thematic backdrops, the paper argues that the novel's form structurally mirrors the mechanics of addiction and neoliberal consumption.

The core research problem pivots away from standard "New Sincerity" readings—which frame Wallace's formal excess as a sincere push past postmodern irony—to examine how the text's "hysterical realism" (a term coined by James Wood) functions as an aesthetic simulation of the neoliberal debt economy. Under this framework, both hysterical realism and addiction share a foundational drive: the compulsive accumulation of data, stimulation, and narrative without the possibility of ultimate satisfaction.

By subjecting the reader to a corporate-branded chronology and a recursive, spatial footnoting system, the novel forces the reader to enact the very loops of compulsive consumption it depicts. The resulting affective exhaustion demonstrates how the contemporary addict and consumer collapse into the same figure, trapped in an endless cycle of unsatisfied accumulation.

The Research Gap

This section identifies a critical blind spot in David Foster Wallace scholarship, which has long been dominated by the "New Sincerity" and "post-irony" paradigms established by scholars like Adam Kelly and Lee Konstantinou. That prevailing model views *Infinite Jest* primarily as a revolt against postmodern cynicism—interpreting its encyclopedic scope as a therapeutic effort to restore human empathy through the unironic, cliché-bound rhetoric of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The central research gap lies in the failure of existing scholarship to reconcile this thematic desire for authentic human connection with the punishing, hostile mechanics of the text itself. Rather than facilitating an empathetic epiphany, the novel's hyper-technical digressions, pharmacological data dumps, and temporal dislocations constantly disrupt emotional engagement. Furthermore, current literature lacks an account of how the novel's maximalist form operates as a vehicle for neoliberal economic logic.

By treating Wallace's 388 endnotes not just as a narrative gimmick or a plea for sincerity, but as a "debt economy of attention," this analysis addresses how the text subjects

the reader to the same mechanics of compulsive accumulation and affective exhaustion that define late-capitalist consumption.

Literature Review

This literature review maps *Infinite Jest* across three major critical vectors: the debate surrounding "hysterical realism" and maximalism, the economic critique of publishing and neoliberal debt, and media theory regarding isolation and technological mediation.

Hysterical Realism and the Maximalist Novel

Coined pejoratively by critic James Wood, "hysterical realism" designates ambitious novels characterized by hyper-complex plotting and encyclopedic social data at the expense of human depth—a mode where "a thousand things are known, but not a single human being." Defenders and scholars reframe this style as a mimetic necessity that accurately reflects the epistemological anxieties of late modernity.

Stefano Ercolino classifies *Infinite Jest* as a benchmark "maximalist novel," a genre designed to capture the totalizing scope of the contemporary world through specific structural features:

Surface Feature	Theoretical Function
Length (1,000+ pages & 388 endnotes)	Imposes a vast expenditure of time and energy, extracting a heavy "attention debt."
Systemic Complexity	Maps invisible networks of power, information, and ecology (Tom LeClair's "systems novel").

The Neoliberal Debt Economy and Publishing

Recent economic critiques ground Wallace's maximalism in the material conditions of late 20th-century capitalism. Dan Sinykin argues that post-war economic shifts—deindustrialisation, financialization, and personal debt—reconfigured the citizen into a consumer-addict, making addiction the default state under neoliberalism. Concurrently, the consolidation of the publishing industry turned literary production into a cog of conglomerate media. Within this framework, *Infinite Jest*'s encyclopedic excess operates as an aesthetic simulation of a debt economy, where narrative accumulation mirrors borrowed financial and affective capital.

Media Ecology and Technological Isolation

Scholars within Wallace Studies demonstrate how the novel's media environment generates profound alienation. As Christoph Ribbat notes regarding the novel's videophony and customizable facial masks, mediated communication amplifies self-consciousness and vanity while eliminating authentic connection. This media ecology establishes a structural parallel: the isolating, addictive loops produced by Wallace's fictional technologies directly mirror the physical and cognitive demands imposed on the reader by the novel's recursive architecture.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

This research bridges four theoretical models to demonstrate how *Infinite Jest* operates as a formal simulation of late-capitalist addiction:

- **Reclaiming Hysterical Realism:** Recontextualises James Wood's critique of "hysterical realism" from a charge of shallow over-information into an accurate mimetic strategy. The novel's hyper-connectivity, manic digressions, and data overloads reflect the lived reality of a subject operating within late-capitalist media saturation.
- **Neoliberal Subjectivity & the Consumer-Addict:** Draws on Dan Sinykin's economic reading, framing neoliberalism as a producer of "entrepreneurs of the self" who must continually accumulate debt and capital. Because a growth economy depends on endless consumption without final satisfaction, the addict becomes the quintessential neoliberal subject.
- **Ontology of Addiction:** Uses Avital Ronell's *Crack Wars* to argue that addiction is the baseline ontology of technological culture. Rather than granting transcendence, addiction forces the subject into "fractal interiorities"—a solipsistic state of repetition that mirrors the reader's loop within the text.
- **Affect Theory & Stuplimity:** Applies Sianne Ngai's concept of "stuplimity" (stupor + sublime) to explain how encountering overwhelming data generates "comic exhaustion" and blocked agency, mirroring the fatigue of the contemporary consumer.

Mechanics of the Textual Architecture

The formal construction of the novel actively forces the reader to enact the mechanics of compulsive consumption and attention debt:

- **The Recursive Endnote System:** Over 388 endnotes—some containing hyper-technical data or sub-footnotes—disrupt linear reading. The reader is trapped in a

choice between narrative momentum and digressive footnotes (such as Note 24's extensive filmography), creating an endless deferral of narrative resolution that mimics an addict seeking a fix.

- **Subsidised Time as Commodification:** The restructuring of the timeline around corporate sponsorship (e.g., *Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment*) privatises temporal reality. Readers must reconstruct chronology using brand identity, forcing them to navigate narrative time as a corporate asset.

Institutional Profiles & Media Ecology

Context	Structural Function	Critical Outcome
Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA)	Elite training ground for "entrepreneurs of the self."	Produces high-functioning, hyper-informed subjects like Hal Incandenza who experience total emotional emptiness and solipsistic isolation.
Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)	Structural counterweight based on cliché, surrender, and flat collective identity.	Operates via behavioral substitution; its reliance on mechanical earning and rote repetition mirrors the addictive logic it treats.
Videophony & InterLace	Speculative history of videophones, masks, and media saturation.	Highlights technological vanity; users broadcast curated masks to each other, illustrating how visual media exacerbates isolation.
"The Entertainment"	Lethally addictive film cartridge that renders viewers catatonic in infantile rapture.	Represents weaponised consumer satisfaction—the logical endpoint of hyper-capitalism where total entertainment destroys the consumer.

Stuplimity and the Politics of Readerly Exhaustion

The ultimate effect of *Infinite Jest* relies on generating *stuplimity*. By bombarding the reader with dense information on topics like Québécois separatism and complex pharmacology, the text denies cathartic narrative payoff.

This state of physical and cognitive exhaustion is the primary mimetic tool of the novel. By systematically blocking readerly agency and trapping the reader in fractal interiorities, the text forces an experience of prolonged endurance—directly indexing the affective fatigue of the subject under the long downturn of neoliberal capitalism.

Critical Analysis and Discussion: The Trap of Sincerity in an Economy of Excess

This critical analysis synthesises the structural and thematic arguments, delivering a definitive refutation of the "New Sincerity" paradigm by examining how *Infinite Jest* traps both reader and subject within an inescapable economy of excess.

The Fallacy of the Post-Ironic Cure

If *Infinite Jest* were purely an attempt to transcend postmodern irony and achieve authentic human connection, its narrative vehicle would not be systematically designed as an engine of affective depletion. The text demonstrates that under late capitalism, sincerity cannot exist in a vacuum of pure, unmediated vulnerability. Instead, the desire for authentic connection is itself commodified, absorbed, and subjected to the logic of compulsive accumulation.

Dimension	New Sincerity Reading	Neoliberal / Addictive Economy Reading
Sincerity's Function	A therapeutic antidote to postmodern irony.	A commodified desire trapped within an economy of excess.
Encyclopedic Scale	An effort to exhaust postmodern games to reach empathy.	An epistemological trap that enforces compulsive data gathering.
Hal Incandenza	A tragic figure longing for emotional expression.	A subject overflowing with language yet rendered entirely mute; the ultimate failure of self-entrepreneurship.

Dimension	New Sincerity Reading	Neoliberal / Addictive Economy Reading
Narrative Non-Ending	An open-ended invitation to readerly empathy.	A structural "cold turkey" withdrawal that denies cathartic resolution.

The Mechanics of the Epistemological Trap

Drawing on Avital Ronell's ontology of addiction, the novel functions as an addictive substance in its own right:

- **The Pursuit of the "Outside":** The reader approaches the text seeking an "outside"—a teleological resolution, cathartic meaning, or the promised post-ironic epiphany.
- **Fractal Interiorities:** The hysterical realism of the narrative continually pushes the reader back inward through recursive endnotes, subplots, and technical data dumps. The more information the reader ingests (names, acronyms, dates), the more meaning feels deferred.
- **Cold Turkey Withdrawal:** By aborting the plot without resolving key arcs—Hal's mutism, the fate of *The Entertainment*, or the Les Assassins des Fauteuils Roulants plot—the novel removes its narrative payload abruptly.

Suspended Agency in Late Capitalism

The lack of narrative closure mimics the late-capitalist systems the novel reflects: capitalism, media cycles, and addiction do not resolve; they only proliferate. The reader is left in a state of suspended agency—exhausted by the sheer volume of data consumed, yet perpetually unsatisfied. Ultimately, *Infinite Jest* reveals that in a hyper-commodified culture, even the quest for sincerity becomes just another endless, teleologically unsatisfied process of accumulation.

Conclusion

This conclusion provides a definitive synthesis of the research report, formally establishing *Infinite Jest* not as a failed or over-indulgent attempt at "New Sincerity," but as a weaponised aesthetic simulation of late-capitalist addiction.

Core Research Synthesis

- **Reconceptualising Hysterical Realism:** James Wood's critique of formal overabundance is inverted into a precise descriptive category. The novel's hyper-

connectivity, recursive endnote maze, and temporal fragmentation do not reflect stylistic excess, but rather a deliberate, controlled enactment of the late-capitalist media environment.

- **The Neoliberal Debt Economy:** Drawing on Dan Sinykin, the text's encyclopedic nature maps the condition of the neoliberal subject—the consumer-addict—who operates within an economic imperative of infinite growth and perpetual debt, where satisfaction is structurally impossible.
- **Structural Mechanics of Addiction:** Utilising Avital Ronell's ontology of addiction, the novel functions as an addictive machine. The physical act of reading—navigating over 388 endnotes and erratic subplots—forces the reader to experience the "fractal interiorities" and compulsive routines of an addict.
- **Affective Stuplidity:** Applying Sianne Ngai's concept of stuplidity, the text systematically replaces cathartic narrative payoff with physical and cognitive exhaustion, directly indexing the fatigue of the contemporary subject trapped in hyper-commodified space.

Key Takeaways

Analytical Dimension	Conventional "Sincerity" Model	"New Sincerity" Model	Structural & Socio-Economic Model
Formal Excess	A barrier to be overcome in pursuit of human empathy.		A mimetic simulation of the neoliberal debt economy.
Reader Experience	An empathetic journey toward emotional epiphany.		A physical enactment of compulsive consumption and attention debt.
Sincerity's Fate	A viable antidote to postmodern irony.		A tragically commodified desire trapped inside an economy of excess.
Narrative Closure	An open door inviting readerly connection.		A "cold turkey" withdrawal that leaves agency suspended.

Final Assessment

Infinite Jest achieves its literary power not by offering an easy exit from postmodern cynicism, but by locking the reader inside the very machine it critiques. By demonstrating how authentic human connection becomes commodified within an economy of excess, Wallace's maximalist architecture stands as a devastating simulation of late-capitalist subjectivity—where consumption, addiction, and profound isolation are inextricably bound.

Works Cited

- Ercolino, Stefano. *The Maximalist Novel: From Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow to Roberto Bolaño's 2666*. Translated by Albert Sbragia, Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Hering, David, editor. *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Sideshow Media Group, 2010.
- Holland, Mary K. *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*. Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, edited by David Hering, Sideshow Media Group, 2010, pp. 131–146.
- Konstantinou, Lee. *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Harvard UP, 2016.
- LeClair, Tom. *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction*. University of Illinois Press, 1989.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard UP, 2005.
- Ribbat, Christoph. "Seething Static: Notes on Wallace and Journalism." *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, edited by David Hering, Sideshow Media Group, 2010, pp. 187–198.
- Ronell, Avital. *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania*. University of Nebraska Press, 1992.
- Sinykin, Dan. *American Literature and the Long Downturn: Neoliberal Epiphany*. Oxford UP, 2020.
- Sinykin, Dan. *Big Fiction: How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature*. Columbia UP, 2023.
- Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. Hamish Hamilton, 2000.
- Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest*. Little, Brown and Company, 1996.
- Wood, James. "Human, All Too Inhuman." *The New Republic*, 24 July 2000.

