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The Politics of the Apolitical

Irony, Sincerity, Engagement

Academic Dissertation

Eva Sancho Rodríguez

The Politics of the Apolitical: Irony, Sincerity, Engagement

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Promotiecommissie

<i>Promotores:</i>	prof. dr. J. Früchtl prof. dr. P.P.R.W. Pisters	Universiteit van Amsterdam Universiteit van Amsterdam
<i>Copromotores:</i>	prof. dr. R. Celikates	Freie Universität Berlin
<i>Overige leden:</i>	prof. dr. E. Peeren prof. dr. H.Y.M. Jansen prof. dr. E.A. Brinkema dr. A.M. Geil dr. R. Sinnerbrink	Universiteit van Amsterdam Universiteit van Amsterdam Massachusetts Institute of Technology Universiteit van Amsterdam Macquarie University

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This book is dedicated to Anaïs, who demanded to be included, and to my ancestors *soñando caminos*.

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You can call me artist (artist)
You can call me idol (idol)
Anim eotteon dareun (Dareun) (*No matter what you call me*)
mwora haedo (*I don't care*)
I don't care
I'm proud of it (proud of it)
Nan jayurobne (Jayurobne) (*I'm free (free)*)
No more irony (irony)
Naneun hangsang nayeossgie (*Cuz I was always just me*)

From “Idol” by BTS (방탄소년단, *Bangtan Sonyeondan/Bulletproof Boy Scouts*),
performed on *The Graham Norton Show*, 12 October 2018 (BBC One).

I'd like to feel that
You could be free
Look up at the blue skies
Beneath a new tree

From “Hymn of the Big Wheel” on *Blue Lines* by Massive (Attack), 1991.

Run Pyrrho, Run!

Introduction: Exploring Political Apathy

It may be hard to imagine in the context of today's revitalised political engagement, how political apathy characterized Western democracies in the 2000s. Since 2015, the visibility of progressive movements such as Black Lives Matter and FridaysForFuture has brought back momentum and vocabulary for appeals to justice, reform, and democratic governmental accountability. We are in the midst of a historically crucial cycle of political contestation, as the world heads towards irreversible climate change amidst vast economic misdistribution. Yet this moment of revitalisation contains no guarantees and political apathy may re-emerge unexpectedly, much like the quiet 2000s following the anti-globalisation storm of the 1990s (this protest cycle took place in the midst of post-cold war optimism and 'the Third Way' of Clinton, Blair, and Kok). Right now, among younger demographics voter turnout and satisfaction with democracy itself is at risk.¹ Apathy can erode the legitimacy of democratic societies themselves, obligated to foster the possibilities for vigorous citizenship they need in order to survive. And yet while political apathy is a standing threat to democracies, it is itself nebulous and far less researched than 'citizenship'. What does political apathy signify, what kind of problems does it contain? Is it a lack of interest and care, an *absence* of engagement with democracy or is it principally a *deficient*, misdirected form of engagement?

My fascination with the elusive meaning of political apathy drew me towards the high-profile debate about the problem of apathy in prominent newspapers and online magazines that spread from the U.S.A. to the wider Anglosphere, including countries such as the Netherlands. For example, a debate-stirring *The New York Times* piece argued that affluent societies are

¹ R.S. Foa et al., "The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020" (Cambridge: United Kingdom, 2020); Michael J Hanmer, "Turnout in the 2012 Election: A Review and Call for Long-Term Solutions," *The Forum* 11, no. 2 (2013): 277–94.

characterised by an ironic, anti-committed way of life that is “not viable and conceals within it many social and political risks.”² Here, I thought in 2012, I would find concrete discussions of how political apathy was conceived, what caused it and perhaps even what alleviated it. Instead, the commentary debate is full of contradictions and bewildering claims, where the term ‘irony’ meant political apathy and ‘sincerity’ meant political engagement to some, yet this meaning was exactly the other way around to other commentators.

This debate crystallised an already familiar popular tendency to conceive of democratic citizenship in terms of *irony* and *sincerity*, highlighting a new vocabulary for political engagement. At the heart of the debate lies a deep disagreement over the political meaning of the ‘postmodern ironic’ style that dominated 1990s popular culture and the subsequent meaning of the shift to a ‘new sincerity’ visible in post-2000 literature, cinema or pop music. It is the post-2000 renaissance of sincerity that produces a strange contradiction: to some sincerity means moral commitment and political substance “to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles”, while to others it represents a kind of navel-gazing that precisely lacks any idea of justice, equality or beneficence.³

Adding to the confusion was the appearance of a now familiar media trope that claims a current generation as ‘less apathic’ than its predecessor. Here, cultural commentators claimed in the late 2000s that millennials (Gen-Y) were more sincere and therefore politically engaged than Generation-X. This optimism seemed to me rather puzzling and unconvincing, given how quiet the 2000s were whilst being nonetheless filled with enormous geo-political events such as the post-9/11 Afghanistan and Iraq invasions, destructive climate

² Christy Wampole, “How to Live Without Irony,” *The New York Times*, November 17 2012. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/17/how-to-live-without-irony/>.

³ This quotation is from an essay by David Foster Wallace from 1993 and a key reference point in the debate, presented as a prophetic diagnosis of what sincerity would mean. The essay and Wallace’s argument are in fact much more complex as Chapters 1 and 3 will explore. David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 193.

change and the 2008 financial crisis. The 2000s were hardly the decade of political re-engagement that advocates of sincerity claimed, at least not in any traditional sense.

Consequently, what in fact had changed, was the meaning that these commentators assigned to political engagement. A shift in preoccupation *away* from geo-political events, legal and economic institutions and – above all – activities of national and local democratic government, turning towards something else, a kind of ethos left undefined in terms of citizenship practices. Then, commentators point towards the broad artistic movements of ‘postmodern irony’ and ‘new sincerity’ as indicators of the state of political engagement. However, the cultural criticism debate produces an impasse on what irony and sincerity are supposed to indicate and why they matter so much for discussions of citizenship. So, what kind of problems are people trying to express when they complain that young people are too ironic or too sincere?

The central question of this research project is thus: *what do irony and sincerity represent terms of political apathy or engagement?* As subjects of continuously recurring debate and important elements of popular culture, there is a need for clarity in how irony and sincerity express distinct forms of political imagination and self-understanding.⁴ This clarity can emerge by looking beyond the cultural commentary (analysed in Chapter 1) to how artistic movements in popular culture *themselves* reflect upon questions of political engagement, particularly in narrative works of cinema and literature. This requires a philosophical examination of *the ideal of sincerity* that implicitly shapes this cultural formation (set out in Chapter 2). In this project, I want to draw attention to the overlooked importance of Romantic ideas within Western popular culture. Specifically, to

⁴ My project focuses on the years between 1989 and 2016 for the use of irony and sincerity. The 2016 political events of Brexit and the Trump-election have left an impression of democratic fragility that has started to shift the meaning of political engagement and apathy. In addition, the visibility of reactionary online movements such as the ‘alt-right’ has eroded irony’s connotation with progressive politics that it had gained since the 1960s.

the influence of the Anglo-American Romantic tradition's focus on everyday life, the expression of one's inner self, and the practice of autobiography. In order to understand why sincerity can be an ideal for citizenship and antidote to apathy, I will draw on the philosophical work of Stanley Cavell, Charles Taylor and Lionel Trilling. This will allow me to draw out what the *criteria* are for sincerity as a form of political engagement, but also to take a critical and evaluative perspective. Because I want to ask: is 'postmodern irony' indeed a form of apathy or does it show a different form of (dis)engagement? Why would 'new sincerity' be a form of re-engagement and is that a productive or depoliticised engagement? As these kinds of questions indicate, the popular fixation on irony and sincerity contains a struggle to put into words what makes political engagement enabling or constraining, conducive to social change or a 'misguided' waste of effort.

My hypothesis is that irony and sincerity as embodiments of *the political* has emerged a response to a lack of vocabulary for citizenship.⁵ Therefore, it is important to know what kind of problems are indicated by them. The project will investigate what irony and sincerity represent within the commentary debate *and* within the cultural formations that underlie them, in order to show how they allow new ways of reflecting upon political dimensions of life. In contemporary post-welfare, privatising societies that no longer conform to traditional boundaries between private ethics and public politics, citizens face a challenge of locating the political landscape. The political in 'postmodern times' seems to be everywhere yet out of reach, constantly slipping from the grasp of knowing

⁵ Social scientists have recently turned their attention the problem of what 'the political' means to citizens, an uncertainty that produces many challenges for empirical work. A similar crisis that turned attention to the concept of citizenship in the 1990s takes place in relation to the concept of the political after the 2010s. See for example Swedish and USA studies: Carl Görtz and Viktor Dahl, "Perceptions of Politics and Their Implications: Exploring the Link between Conceptualisations of Politics and Political Participation," *European Political Science* 20, no. 2 (2021): 297–317; Jennifer Fitzgerald, "What Does 'Political' Mean to You?," *Political Behavior* 35, no. 3 (2013): 453–79.

how everyday life interacts with larger social arrangements.⁶ Against this backdrop, the popular fixation on irony and sincerity reveals the importance of popular culture. Cultural works, particularly narrative forms like film and literature, have broader expressive possibilities than formal language and can engage aspects of social change not yet formally named and articulated. These cultural works shape our potential for public deliberation, serving as barometers for the current state of society as well as what society should aspire to be.

My methodological approach will combine philosophical exploration of the ideal of sincerity with aesthetic and cultural-historic analysis of irony in the 1990s (Chapter 3) and sincerity in the 2000s (Chapter 4). To bring the coherent ideas of political engagement to the forefront, it is necessary to narrow down on broad, wide-ranging categories of ‘postmodern irony’ and ‘new sincerity’. It also requires avoiding the common assumption that irony and sincerity have essential, automatic, or timeless political meanings. For example, some cultural critics use irony as synonymous with a progressive counter-culture position, to others it stands for disengaged moral relativism, but a clearer picture will emerge by examining the postmodern ironic practices of the 1990s. For this reason, I situate irony and sincerity in the respective period where they take on the dominant political connotations that circulate as intertextual knowledge between producers and audiences. This means that I approach them as *structures of feeling*, a term introduced by Raymond Williams, meaning “the different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history. It appears in the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts.”⁷ Structures

⁶ As Jeffrey Alexander put it, the famous postmodern cultural logic proposed by Frederic Jameson is an account of one’s experiencing a disoriented blockage in meaning making: Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Modern, Anti, Post, Neo,” *New Left Review*, no. 210 (March 1, 1995): 81.

⁷ Ian Buchanan, “Structures of Feeling,” in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 455.

of feeling are artistic pre-formal *responses to social change* that recount a shared societal (hence structural) experience which cannot yet be put into words.

Irony and sincerity are terms that appear as ‘placeholders’ in common language for discussions of citizenship, where their political meaning becomes coherent through the way they embody two very distinct structures of feeling. By tracing them within film, literature and popular culture, the structures of feeling *ironic authenticity* in the 1990s and *avowed sincerity* in the 2000s can show what kind of political engagement is at stake. The richness of artistic works, as well as historical and theoretical debates of these periods, will allow us to understand the significance of irony and sincerity *from within* and show how *changing ideas* of political engagement emerge in informal, artistic contexts. Before explaining this in more detail, I want to make clear what kind of ideals and values are at stake.

The Central Yet Versatile Ideal of Sincerity

Why is sincerity so self-evidently hailed as a corrective for the waning state of democratic citizenship? What does it actually encompass? Sincerity is an ideal that may be so central to Western culture since the beginning of the Modern Age, it has become implicit and therefore unknown. My research concentrates on philosophers that are sympathetic to the valuation of sincerity rather than critically dismissive of it, in order to ask: what are the *internal* criteria for sincerity as an ideal for citizenship? By exploring the work of Stanley Cavell and Charles Taylor, I want to make clear how sincerity can be understood as a form of civic re-engagement and antidote to political apathy. Both philosophers draw on Romanticism to reinvigorate the expressive possibilities for democratic citizenship and share a Pragmatic perspective on the self, rather than a post-

structuralist one.⁸ Here, the pragmatic, social practice of self-expression, creativity and everyday life are important (rather than notions of intentionality or virtue). Yet how does the ideal of sincerity imagine the relationship between self and society? How does sincerity relate to social norms and why does it prioritise the everyday and autobiographic expression? All these aspects remain implicit in the criticism debate and within the artistic works, yet are explicit subjects in philosophical works. Furthermore, Cavell and Taylor's thought is relevant to both sides of the debate, as both sincerity *and* irony are used in ways that mobilise Romantic valuations of inwardness, autobiography, and everydayness. That is why in the label 'ironic authenticity', I connect irony to authenticity and not to postmodernism, but the specifics of sincerity's different historical modulations (including authenticity) will be explored in detail in Chapter 2 with the additional insights of Lionel Trilling. For now, I want to make clear that contrary to what I had first and wrongly suspected, the opposition between irony and sincerity is *not* based on disagreement over the political ideas of postmodernism (where irony takes on a radical, anti-foundationalist meaning) or about postmodern subjectivity being 'decentralised' and multiplicitous (themes central to postmodern novels). Surprisingly, the sincere positions do *not* represent Habermasian prescriptive norms through deliberation (despite the claims of 'single-entendre principles', specific norms remain conspicuously absent), and irony's proponents do *not* hold post-structuralist, Rortyan anti-prescriptive views on normativity. Rather, what characterises the ironic culture at hand is a disdain for particular traditional norms and a Romantic valuation of inwardness that characterises 'authenticity'.

⁸ The artistic movement of New Sincerity (primarily theorised in literary studies) is differentiated from postmodern works that thematically explored the *instability* of traditional ideas of subjectivity and language signification (more congenial with post-structuralist, postmodern deconstructive philosophy). New Sincerity is sometimes labelled post-postmodernism but I want to counter the notion of sequentially emerging movements. A structure of feeling approach will emphasise culture's heterogeneity rather than a neat sequence. A strand of Romantic thinking can become 'residual' during a period that another is 'dominant' and then become 'emergent' again.

So instead, the political senses of irony and sincerity are rooted in different – respectively authentic or sincere – Romantic ideas of how the self should relate to political practices and whether, how and when to confront them. What are then the characteristics and criteria for re-engagement, how are they connected to sincerity and how are they different in the ideal of authenticity?

The work of Stanley Cavell is significant in additional ways, first in how it uniquely attends to the problem of political apathy among the relatively privileged: “those in positions for which social injustice or natural misfortune (to themselves) is not an unpostponable issue”.⁹ Significantly, the publics interested in irony and sincerity are predominantly middle-class, white, and educated, part of what is now called the ‘creative class’ and that condition is key. This demographic is important because it has historically been a supporter of progressive politics and because North-American socio-cultural changes have a strong influence on Anglosphere countries such as the Netherlands.¹⁰ I concentrate on how irony and sincerity take on specific ethico-political meaning as a cultural phenomenon among progressive (liberal, social-democratic) audiences.¹¹

Secondly, I adopt Cavell’s method of philosophical investigation of a particular problem by looking closely at the knowledge contained by films. His film-philosophical method recasts the term *genre* as a body of films that together are a study of the conditions of a particular problem or question.¹² In that light, I explore how two prominent genres of American Independent Cinema embody

⁹ Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1990), xix.

¹⁰ For a recent study of the U.S.A. as The Netherlands’s reference culture see Melvin Wevers, “Consuming America: A Data-Driven Analysis of the United States as a Reference Culture in Dutch Public Discourse on Consumer Goods, 1890-1990” (Utrecht University, 2017)..

¹¹ Thus differs from more recent, post-Trump popular debates on irony and new forms of extremism such as the alt-right, which are slowly changing the association and connotations of irony.

¹² The two genre books are: Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

and *reflect upon* political apathy and re-engagement. Respectively, in the ironic slacker films of the 1990s I find the question ‘Is withdrawing in disgust the same as apathy?’ and in the sincere mumblecore films of the 2000s ‘How is political re-engagement possible?’. Both these genres are plagued by a similar form of inconsistency: on the one hand being something that appears overly self-involved and withdrawn from traditional politics (apolitical) and critical and committed on the other (political). By reading these genres it will become possible to disentangle the central frustration in public debates over irony and sincerity and identify the relevant political dynamics they are used to signal *indirectly*.

These two genres become central guides through hermeneutic interpretation, but I read these films alongside, and in relation to, theoretical debates of the relevant periods as well as works in cultural studies and sociology. In doing so, I adapt Cavell’s film-philosophical method into a historically situated one focused on social practices, a more politically oriented ‘ordinary language philosophy’ that brings the political and film-philosophical works of Cavell into dialogue.¹³ In my interpretation of works of cinema and literature, I also draw on the work of Linda Hutcheon on the poetics and politics of irony as well as Linda Williams’s work on 1990s cinema. The meta-hermeneutic methodology of Liesbeth Korthals Altes directs my attention to how the interpretation of ethos in a narrative work (the attribution of irony or sincerity’s normative values) takes place in pragmatic relation to socio-cultural discourse. Understanding culture as “socially distributed cognition” stresses how narrative works create “occasions for joining attention of such articulation and negotiation of values and worldviews”.¹⁴ Overall, this thesis will argue that

¹³ Cavell’s connection to ordinary language philosophy stems from both Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin, experiencing Austin’s 1955 lecture series later published as: John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

¹⁴ Liesbeth Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*, *Frontiers of Narrative Series* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 221.

cinema and literature's broader aesthetic possibilities are able attend to something that people are not yet able to put into words. Appreciating culture in this way unites the theoretical approaches under discussion: structures of feeling are conceived as *pre-formal* responses to social change, Stanley Cavell stresses how films allow us to transcend the limits of a current moral vocabulary, Charles Taylor champions the 'subtler languages' of art when moral articulation falls short and in the sociology of critique of Boltanski & Chiapello the concept of 'artistic critique' primarily ought to shed light on suffering that is still *diffuse*.¹⁵

This returns me to my primary ambition. Combining the philosophical exploration of sincerity with cultural and aesthetic investigation will open irony and sincerity to critical evaluation. Such evaluation is particularly important in times when social problems lack an adequate vocabulary for citizens to address them. What political obstacles to re-engagement do these terms draw attention to? If irony is connected to counter-culture and critique, why is deemed so apathic? If sincerity is associated with renewed engagement, why does it also represent a myopic 'navel gazing' that hardly seems political at all? What seems to be at stake is an important difference between 'apathy' as a conception of civic neglect, meaning the refusal of duties, and the emerging phenomenon of depoliticization where misdirected forms of engagement do not contribute to meaningful change. Engaging with the irony and sincerity phenomenon creates the opportunity to closely examine 'political apathy' and break it down into more relevant pieces

¹⁵ "If we are to see a revival of the artistic critique, it will be on the basis not only of an 'intellectual' analysis of the phenomena associated with capitalism's current state, but of its conjunction with suffering that is diffuse – in the sense that those who experience it have difficulty pinning it down or attributing it to a source which can be denounced – and also the persistence of an aspiration to put an end to it." Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition* (London: Verso, 2018), 420.

Political Imagination and Self-understanding

As it stands, political apathy is a phenomenon that is *extraordinarily* underdefined. Sometimes linked to the Post-War decline of the public sphere and the rise of private consumerism, it becomes a structural feature connected to social arrangements on the macro-meso-level.¹⁶ However, on the micro-level, political apathy encompasses a nebulous constellation of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours related to political engagement, ranging from ignorance (absent or misjudged knowledge) to resignation (deeming politics ineffective, defeatism) to indifference (lack of interest and care) and disenfranchisement (negation of rights or repression of certain social groups). This lack of clarity may serve to mobilise concern about political apathy but simultaneously suggests it to be simply “endemic to human nature”.¹⁷

Simultaneously, the lack of a solid understanding of political apathy is inherently connected to its counterpart: what is ‘political engagement’ supposed to mean? While everyday language allows using the terms *political engagement*, *participation* and *citizenship* interchangeably, academic research has roughly divided them across the three respective disciplines of cultural theory/aesthetics, sociology and political theory/philosophy. Engagement, participation, and citizenship may have formal and legal differences, but all three terms signal ‘positive’ mental and behavioural properties.¹⁸ However, such properties can

¹⁶ For example in the (contested) analyses of Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, see Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 280–83.

¹⁷ Tom DeLuca, *The Two Faces of Political Apathy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 95.

¹⁸ For example the five measurements of a ‘political engagement’ 2018 study: 1) Voted in an election, 2) Attended a campaign event, 3) posted comments on political issues online, 4) Participated in an organized protest, 5) Donated money to social/political organisation from the Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey of Pew Research Center Richard Wike and Alexandra Castillo, “Many Around the World Are Disengaged From Politics,” Pew Research Center, October 17, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/10/17/international-political-engagement/>. Furthermore, conceptions of citizenship have evolved differently across countries, with some more active (U.S.A., the Netherlands) and others more passive (UK, Germany). These authors draw on work by Bryan Turner ‘Outline of a theory of citizenship’ (1994); Siniša Malešević and John A. Hall, “Citizenship, Ethnicity and Nation-States,” in *The Sage Handbook of Sociology*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Chris Rojek, and Bryan Turner (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 563. For evolution of Dutch citizenship ideals see Ido de Haan, *Zelfbestuur En Staatsbeheer. Het Politieke Debat over Burgerschap En Rechtsstaat in de Twintigste Eeuw* (Amsterdam:

range from caring to voting and create conflicting interpretations of the same phenomenon. For example, abstention from voting can be an expression of anarchist engagement, making one marker of engagement contradict the other. So, in addition to positivistic indicators of activity, engagement expresses a person's self-understanding and political imagination. It is this dimension of apathy and engagement that I am interested in.

I use the term *self-understanding* to refer to a particular idea of the self and how it interrelates and interacts with the social world. Here, my case studies will show the impact of the view of having an inner self that is separate, not part of a transcending whole that is spiritual or natural, and how that inner separateness then informs responses to political questions. *Political imagination* refers to how the steering of the common good is conceived and *by whom*. Operating as a bridge between individual and collective practices, popular culture is a vital space for political imagination. As Benedict Anderson described, the democratic nation is an imagined political community upheld by mediated social practices.¹⁹ Equally, political change is enacted by repertoires of collective action that themselves are shaped by the stories and language of culture and aesthetics.²⁰ How the political is imagined matters, imagination shapes the way we expect political change to unfold over the future as either short or long-term in scope. Imagination influences what pathways become viable for citizen's interaction with larger institutions and collective practices.

The choice of terms, namely self-understanding and political imagination, is motivated by both historical and descriptive considerations. The terms reflect the *historical* shifts that have unsettled the conventional

Amsterdam University Press, 1993); Imrat Verhoeven and Evelien Tonkens, "Talking Active Citizenship: Framing Welfare State Reform in England and the Netherlands," *Social Policy and Society* 12, no. 3 (2013): 415–26.

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

²⁰ Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

understanding of engagement and citizenship in the 21st century. Historical change primarily driven by, but of course not limited to: individualisation hollowing out traditional party politics and collective belonging, economic globalisation's depression of the competences of national democracies and digitisation's disruptive, asymmetrical expansion of self-mediatisation and media-conglomeration.²¹ My project argues that irony and sincerity emerge as embodiments of the political in response to a lack of vocabulary for citizenship that is created by a rapidly changing society. This new uncertainty at the turn of the millennium is not only reflected in the cultural practices that will be explored, but also in academic work. The 1990s saw "an explosion of interest in the concept of citizenship among political theorists" in response to dynamics such as multi-culturalism, Thatcherite welfare state dismantlement and rising apathy.²² Crucially, the term citizenship traditionally involved *legal, formal* and *procedural* dimensions but in the 1990s the accent shifted towards *moral, cognitive* and *affective* dimensions.²³ It thus moved close to the term political subjectivity, a Foucauldian term popularised by Frederic Jameson that stands for how the *becoming* and *being* of a subject – always within a culture – is inherently political.²⁴ The term 'self-understanding' sidesteps the problem of formal-citizenship versus informal-subjectivity, allowing more description 'from within' and can accommodate the accent shift in the 2000s towards the understanding of the self as an affective, embodied eco-social being.

²¹ Peter Mair, *Ruling The Void: The Hollowing Of Western Democracy* (London: Verso Books, 2013); Seyla Benhabib, *Transformations of Citizenship: Dilemma's of the Nation-State in the Era of Globalization* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001); Henry Jenkins and Sanita Shresthova, "It's Called Giving a Shit!: What Counts as 'Politics'?", in *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*, ed. Henry Jenkins et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 253–89.

²² Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, "Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory," *Ethics* 104, no. 2 (1994): 352.

²³ Friso Van Houdt and Willem Schinkel, "Aspecten van Burgerschap: Een Historische Analyse van de Transformaties van Het Burgerschapconcept in Nederland," *Beleid En Maatschappij* 36, no. 1 (2009): 50–58. Willem Schinkel, "The Virtualization of Citizenship," *Critical Sociology* 36, no. 2 (2010): 265–83.

²⁴ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: London Methuen, 1981).

Of course, the 1990s also correspond with major changes in economic and political governmental practices.²⁵ Alongside novel economic possibilities for the privatisation of public resources (infrastructure, land, institutions etc.), political governance techniques turned their public-facing efforts from the collective to the individual.²⁶ The entanglement of governmental policies with changes in cultural practices is both too obvious and too complex. Instead, I want to give a brief example to illustrate this entanglement. From 1989 to 1995, the Dutch government ran an environmental ad-campaign of the slogan that translates as “A better climate starts with yourself”. It ran across a variety of media, always accompanied by a photograph of two hands cradling an earth sphere, small enough to fit between the hands. While created by a Dutch ad-executive, it is full of American culture: the language is a play on Michael Jackson’s “If you wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and then make the change” (from *Man in the Mirror*, 1987) and its iconography repurposes the American spiritual “He's Got the Whole World in His Hands” also used in the U.S.A.’s Earth Day campaign iconography.²⁷ Even though most Dutch people until this day know this slogan, it is nevertheless impossible to call it a success. It embodies a paradox of contemporary politics, being simultaneously a *success* as a vast majority had ‘awareness’ of the campaign, while being a *failure* in terms of enticing ecological practices and internalised ecological values. More recently it has become a noted example of a *relevance fallacy* that distracts from effective prevention of ecological harm (coinciding with the

²⁵ Marked by leftist and even socialist parties embrace of market-driven policy, at the time called ‘The Third Way’ or ‘purple’ (red and blue) in the Netherlands by administrations such as Clinton (USA), Blair (UK) and Kok (NL).

²⁶ Foucault’s concept of governmentality expresses both governance, ‘mentality’ of those governed and the governance via mentality.

²⁷ “Een beter milieu begint bij jezelf” was written by Jaap Toorenaar and the campaign was run by a VROM (ministry of housing, spatial planning and environment) civil servant turned consultant Hans Elsendoorn, Accessed 10 June 2022 <http://www.elsendoornmc2.nl/uncategorized/campagne-een-beter-milieu-begint-bij-jezelf/>

shielding of major polluters).²⁸ The campaign illustrates the 1990s vertiginous shift towards the citizen and away from the democratic power of collective steering via deliberation, legislation, and economic regulation.

A number of terms have tried to conceptualise the detrimental consequences of this change for democracy, citizenship and engagement: post-democracy, post-politics and neoliberalism.²⁹ Nevertheless, I will not centralise these concepts, nor classic ones such as ideology and hegemony in order to avoid the presumption of causal hierarchies in the relationships between cultural change and political-economic change. The Western post-1960s cultural revolution of individualism, tellingly called “the age of authenticity” by Charles Taylor, *coincides* with the historical ascent of governmental and economic policies now known as neoliberalism.³⁰ There is an important under-attention to the role of American Romanticism *within responses* to the social change and democratic impasse of the neoliberal period. Here, a renewed focus on everyday life, creative expression and autobiographic reflection is mobilised as a critical reflection on this sense of being at an impasse – the Romantic strategy of ‘turning inward to turn outward’.³¹ As the term structure of feeling invokes, a period of change provokes a number of different understandings of political engagement, including the revitalised Romantic one that is too often neglected and that I want to bring to the forefront.

²⁸ Review of studies measuring the relevant gap between awareness and moral and behavioural change: Huib Pellikaan, “Speltheorie En Milieubeleid,” *Beleid En Maatschappij* 3 (1996): 121–33.

For revisionist attention to the campaign, see Jaap Tielbeke, *Een Beter Milieu Begint Niet Bij Jezelf* (Amsterdam: Das Mag Uitgevers, 2020).

²⁹ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2004). For an overview of the post-political and depoliticisation literature see Jim Buller et al., “Depoliticisation, Post-Politics and the Problem of Change,” in *Comparing Strategies of (De)Politicisation in Europe: Governance, Resistance and Anti-Politics*, ed. Jim Buller et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 1–24. For neoliberalism (a later, posterior term) and Foucault’s thought see Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter, *The Government of Life: Foucault, Biopolitics, and Neoliberalism* (London: Fordham University Press, 2014).

³⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Gifford Lectures (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018), 473.

³¹ For an overview of the pervasiveness of Romanticism across philosophy and literature see Richard Eldridge, *The Persistence of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

My second motivation for centring the terms self-understanding and political imagination is therefore grounded in their neutral, *descriptive* possibilities. To start by describing these cultural phenomena as neoliberal subjectivity runs the risk of being used as an affliction that only applies to ‘other people’ and the label is systematically disavowed and thus external. As with concepts such as bad faith and false consciousness, there is a risk of providing a foregone diagnosis of willingness or unwitting compliance.³² Similarly, I decided to avoid Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* until completing the first four chapters, because its proposition seemed to provide such a strong explanatory device that it risked obscuring the elements I was seeking to find that provide ‘internal coherence’, such as the valuation of autobiography and everydayness.³³

In order to see the specific (Anglo-American) Romantic dimensions of the millennial culture of irony and sincerity requires ‘bracketing’ the term neoliberalism that coincides with the turn to the individual citizen-subject. Crucially, Romanticism always ‘begins with yourself’ through its traditional focus on human *agency*, creativity, invention, and self-expression – a tradition in parallel if you will. It may seem from a distance that the socially atomising problems of individualism are responded to by an even more intense ‘privatisation’. Closer attention will reveal how, instead, a valuation of the everyday and the autobiographic are mobilised as common sources for alternative values and for

³² Neoliberalism can signify both 1) a set of governmental techniques *enabling* market forces, and 2) a view of ‘homo economicus’ subjectivity focused on self-interest, competition, and creative bio-power. Respectively addressed by writers such as: Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso Books, 2014); Ulrich Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject* (London: SAGE Publications, 2015).

³³ Berlant describes it as “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. [...] These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. [...] doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.” Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 1–2.

critique of the status-quo. Then, the Romantic ideas that shape ironic and sincere political imagination can subsequently be better described as well as critically evaluated. A contemporary need to *evaluate citizenship* is what gives irony and sincerity their societal relevance. Is sincerity actually conducive to political re-engagement and if so, how? Is irony indeed a form of political apathy and if not, why have these terms become synonymous? What can the socio-cultural formations around irony and sincerity tell us about specific contemporary obstacles to democratic citizenship?

Citizens turning away from the state is not only a danger to democracy but also to the future itself. Individually, we do not hold the world in our hands, the ad-campaign's image represents a rather grandiose inflation of human agency, in the American spiritual "He" is of course the Christian God Almighty. Yet, what is so interesting is how the *over-focus* on the personal is refracted differently through the irony and sincerity phenomenon – self-reflexive about the individualistic principles of Western society. So, how does that happen and is that effective? It is uncertain how, or if, the neo-Romantic culture of irony in the 1990s and sincerity in the 2000s offers better alternatives but they do offer us clearer visions of what is needed for it. For this reason, I leave a philosophical conception of 'the political' as open-ended as possible, bypassing the dominant approaches in contemporary theoretical debates.³⁴ By asking the question "what do we mean by irony and sincerity?" it becomes possible to describe different processes. What happens when politics becomes personalised? Is any form of political engagement desirable or can it create distorted views of political processes and create relevance fallacies? How can we criticise the citizenship ideal of sincerity more effectively and constructively?

³⁴ For an overview of recent theoretical debates see for example James Wiley, *Politics and the Concept of the Political: The Political Imagination* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016).

Overview of Chapters

In Chapter 1, I analyse the 2012-2015 debate across opinion pieces such as *The New York Times* and *Gawker* in order to show how irony and sincerity function as ways to deliberate the state of political engagement. What causes the disagreements and confusions in this debate? How does a term for an aesthetic style such as irony and sincerity take on political meaning? The chapter explains the buried problem that irony can signal three very different things: 1) any use of irony as aesthetic speech act, 2) a philosophy of subjectivity and 3) a specific set of cultural-historic values. The chapter then provides theoretical frameworks for analysing these three different functions.

If the desire for sincerity is motivated by alleviating political apathy, the question in Chapter 2 becomes why and how it should do so. For this, the work of philosophers Stanley Cavell, Lionel Trilling and Charles Taylor provides answers. All share a reasoning of why the ideal of sincerity can restore democratic citizenship and alleviate political inarticulacy. The chapter will also explain why sincerity and authenticity contain different (more inward-oriented or outward-oriented) political imaginations, but paradoxically also share the same dangers of overly *personalising* the political domains of life. Then, what are the ideal of sincerity's 'internal' criteria for political engagement? How can we formulate a critique of sincerity in terms of its capacity to be politically enabling or obstructive? These characteristics and criteria will then provide an evaluative framework for the subsequent two chapters on 1990s irony and 2000s sincerity. Do the structures of feeling and their political imagination and self-understanding meet these criteria and if not, why?

Chapter 3 explores the connection between irony and political apathy, why did the terms become synonymous for proponents of sincerity? I begin by making a productive distinction between the very broad – often maligned – category of postmodern irony and the structure of feeling of ironic authenticity. I trace this structure via the 'Cavellian' genre of slacker films, characterised by

postmodern ironic aesthetics and a thematic preoccupation with apathy. I will argue that contrary to popular opinion, ironic authenticity is not apathic but rather highly critical, preoccupied with how counter-culture and ‘artistic critique’ itself has become a ubiquitous commodity in the 1990s.

In Chapter 4, I connect the loss of confidence in collective politics that concluded Chapter 3 with the revaluation of sincerity. Here, I take a critical perspective towards claims that New Sincerity as an artistic movement represents models of revitalised engagement and propose looking at a smaller subset and structure of feeling for more productive examples. The strong anchoring of political engagement in autobiographical registers can inadvertently confine and curtail possibilities of political engagement. At the same time, the attention towards the everyday and the other-directed – that I find in the Cavellian genre of mumblecore cinema – presents a more open-ended imagination of the political. The question nevertheless will remain, is sincerity is a fruitful ideal for citizenship under current, post-2000 social conditions?

In the conclusion, I return to the social practice of debating citizenship with the specific insights gleaned. Instead of an opposition between apathy and engagement, the problems irony and sincerity represent have to with severed links to the collective and temporally unfolding dimension of politics, as well as the increasing demand of mobilising one’s autobiography in the political imagination. The question is not so much *if* sincerity is a fruitful ideal for citizenship, but *when?*

Chapter 1: What Do We Want from Irony and Sincerity?

“we no longer know what is and is not a political act,
what may or may not have recognizable political consequences”
*Stanley Cavell, The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear*³⁵

A decade into the new millennium, the idea began to solidify that postmodern irony had ceded prominence to a new culture of ‘sincerity’. The consensus appeared simultaneously in different but interconnected cultural fields: cultural critics of mass media newspapers and online magazines, as well as academic research on contemporary literature and cinema. The aim of this chapter is to first introduce and analyse the arrival of New Sincerity as a specific artistic movement (hence capitalised) within popular media writing, in order to make clear how it prompted novel forms of debating the state of ethico-political commitment. Secondly, the chapter aims to create a framework of philosophy and theory that can further the investigation of New Sincerity’s ethico-political imagination and self-understanding.

One question that drives this research is why it is precisely *irony and sincerity* that emerge as ways of deliberating publicly the state of ethico-political commitment. Why is that these concepts – which also ‘lead a life’ as linguistic tropes and are unlikely candidates for this role – emerge here now? The hypothesis is that it embodies a more profound crisis –as a lack of consensus for common vocabulary – in deliberating the political and ethical conditions of modern subjectivity, which coincides with a cessation of ideological language at the end of the 20th century. Here, the latter is explicitly meant as a complex

³⁵ Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 347.

change in the practices of deliberation and not a claim that ideology itself has ended, in the style of the Fukuyama-esque popular opinion.³⁶ As ideology scholar Michael Freeden points out, the millenarian notion of a post-ideological age is itself a masking device, requiring a methodological refocus towards decentralised ideological semantic fields. One of these fields is a debate over artistic practices, taken as representative for the state of citizenship and engagement. This chapter will first introduce the often-paradoxical popular debate and then outline theoretical and philosophical approaches that help articulate these paradoxes more constructively as questions for further research.

1.1 Sincerity Wars and Millennial Concerns in Cultural Commentary

When an opinion piece in *The New York Times* declared that our Western culture of ‘Deep Irony’ made young people uncommitted and cowardly, the widely read piece caused a stir for reasons it did not foresee.³⁷ Written in 2012 by Princeton professor in French Christy Wampole, it repeated the same worries critics had been voicing about irony since the 1990s, a critique exemplified by Jedidiah Purdy’s attention grabbing book *For Common Things: Irony, Trust and Commitment in America Today* in 1999. However, one vital thing had changed in the thirteen years between both publications, because many of the articles published in reaction to Wampole’s piece disagreed with its central premise: that we lived in an age where irony is the dominant cultural sensibility. Pieces such as “Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age’s Ethos” argued that the early 2000’s had already shown a change in the dominant sensibility in Western popular culture: a movement labelled *New Sincerity* was perceivable from pop-music and literature to television

³⁶ See Michael Freeden, “Confronting the Chimera of a ‘Post-Ideological’ Age,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (June 2005): 247–62.

³⁷ Wampole’s piece *How To Live Without Irony* (as of 1 June 2015) invoked 741 online comments, mostly written shortly after its publication on 17 November 2012 and often disagreeing with its statements. By comparison, a piece on the controversial All Lives Matter campaign by Judith Butler in 2015 invoked only 368 comments. Christy Wampole, “How to Live Without Irony?” *The New York Times*, November 17, 2012.

and film.³⁸ Wampole had apparently missed that the age of ‘Deep Irony’ had been displaced by the rise of a less ironic culture of ‘sincerity’.

Secondly, while many of these articles implicitly upheld Wampole’s irony-as-disengagement thesis, underscoring how New Sincerity had “a strong sense of morality”, there was another important point of disagreement.³⁹ One voice – a particularly loud one – argued that the new, sincere forms of expression were actually even more detrimental to healthy political citizenship than irony had ever been. The editor of the influential online publication *Gawker*, Tom Scocca, took offence to how New Sincerity, or ‘smarm’ as he named “the defining feature of our time”, smothered any form of meaningful speech or political critique through its enforcement of empty, conformist niceness.⁴⁰ His central target was the writer Dave Eggers, a public figure known for his social conscience and novels such as *The Circle* (about the rise of tech corporations) and film scripts such as *Promised Land* (about energy fracking). Scocca called the most successful author within New Sincerity literature, Eggers “the true prophetic voice of anti-negativity” and the model of smarm: “a kind of moral and ethical misdirection. Its genuine purposes lie beneath the greased-over surface”.⁴¹ Scocca’s article at the same time struggled to formulate his exact problem with sincerity, but centres on how the primary focus on *cultural power*

³⁸ Jonathan D. Fitzgerald, “Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age’s Ethos,” *The Atlantic*, November 20, 2018, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/sincerity-not-irony-is-our-ages-ethos/265466/>; Angela Watercutter, “Sincerely Ours: Glee’s Success Cements Age of Geeky ‘New Sincerity,’” *Wired*, 2010, <http://www.wired.com/2010/09/new-sincerity/>; Josh Kopin, “The Irony of Sincerity,” [hannaharendtcenter.org](http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org) (Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities - Bard College), 2012, <http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=8512>; Ryan Chapin Mach, “Irony, Hipsters and Why Sincerity Isn’t Literally the Worst | Ryan Chapin Mach,” *Huffington Post - College*, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ryan-chapin-mach/irony-hipsters-and-why-si_b_5507914.html.

³⁹ Fitzgerald, “Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age’s Ethos.”

⁴⁰ Tom Scocca, “On Smarm,” *Gawker*, 2015, <http://gawker.com/on-smarm-1476594977>.

N.B. in 2016 *Gawker* was forced to close down after a landmark case that raised concerns as a possible precedent against freedom of the press, a legal case funded by right-wing Trump-financier and Facebook board member Peter Thiel.

⁴¹ Scocca, 2015.

(mediated cultural production) masks real a dynamic where political critique is *smothered* by constant redirection towards positivity.

The heated debate within articles of cultural commentary between 2012 and 2015 all share a wish to identify a cultural style, tone or ethos that can give coherence to Western popular culture after the millennium.⁴² Behind the disagreement on whether it is irony or sincerity that constitutes the dominant ‘cultural sensibility’, their critiques are all driven by the same concern: a waning state of political citizenship. It is not only important to take a closer look at how such conflicting views of contemporary culture – as either ironic or sincere – are possible, but also at *how* both these cultural forms are considered indicative of the state of political citizenship. The popular debates sketched above revolve around three connected, but distinct issues of disagreement: (1) on whether the 2000s are dominated by irony *or* sincerity; (2) whether irony equals apathy and moral relativism; (3) whether or not New Sincerity marks a return of engagement and ethico-political articulation. Clarifying these debates should also keep in the forefront how both sides in these disagreements have common concerns and seek to identify concepts that can provide coherence to a society they view as depoliticised and morally uncommitted. The first disagreement over the dominance of either irony or sincerity in the 2000s will be addressed shortly, but the second and third contain a more fundamental set of problems that will require much more exploration.

Irony in the New Sincerity Style

The first issue of disagreement; is irony or sincerity dominant, is relatively uncomplicated. Wampole indeed misjudges the rise and popularity of New Sincerity. The label was first given in the 1990s to popular culture with an

⁴² I place the debate cycle’s break-off point in the year 2015 as 2016 saw a refocus towards the upcoming U.S. presidential election, as well as an effect of more visible transatlantic social movements such as Black Lives Matter.

emphasis on sincere aesthetics (described below). Of course, no one cultural practice dominates a period of time, but the succession of ‘postmodern irony’ by ‘new sincerity’ becomes the preoccupation of a particular social group that is influential and visible. A bourgeois-intellectual group of cultural producers and consumers that appear in *The New York Times*, *New Yorker* and atop best-seller lists in the U.S.A. and European countries such as the Netherlands. James MacDowell writes how sincerity: “among many such producers and consumers, it is clearly imagined, or *felt*, to be a pervasive and formidable discursive practice - regarded, as the novelist Jonathan Franzen recently put it 'the tone of voice that pervades pretty much all speech by Americans between the ages of fourteen and twenty-eight and much of the speech of everybody else'”.⁴³ New Sincerity is centred young adulthood and artistic-bohemian tastes and therefore has to be differentiated from the calls after the 9/11-attacks for the ‘end of irony’ in *Vanity Fair* and *Time* that appealed to patriotic politics and family values.

In popular press, sincerity culture can reference a variety of media and tonal styles: music of profuse, arch emotionality *Bright Eyes* (called Mr. Sincerity by the *New York Times* in 2005 and the ‘voice of a generation’ in Franzen’s novel *Freedom*) or the 2011 Grammy-winners *Arcade Fire*’s euphoric swells, the earnest yet camp television series such as *Glee* and whimsical theatrical performances by creator Alex Timbers.⁴⁴ Contemporary visual art has also turned its attention to sincere aesthetics, for example in the 2014 Whitney Biennial’s celebration of David Foster Wallace or the award of the Venice Art Biennale 2015 Golden Lion to Adrian Piper’s immersive and participative ‘sincerity’ exploration *The Probable Trust Register*. In the academic context New Sincerity emerged first in

⁴³ James Macdowell, “Quirky: Buzzword or Sensibility?,” in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, ed. Geoff King, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis (London: Routledge, 2013), 53–64. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ See: Watercutter, “Sincerely Ours: Glee’s Success Cements Age of Geeky ‘New Sincerity.’”; Jerry Portwood, “The New Sincerity,” *Backstage*, March 2013. <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/new-sincerity-30969/>.

literary studies, used to describe post-2000 writers working in the legacy of author David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) and still remains a prolific research topic.⁴⁵ In cinema studies, the ‘quirky’ *auteur* Wes Anderson has been the paradigmatic New Sincerity case study.⁴⁶

The cause of the debate’s first point of disagreement and confusion, whether the 2000s is dominated by irony or sincerity, stems from the supposition that New Sincerity is devoid of ironic practices. In effect, New Sincerity is often characterised by a dialectic embrace of sincerity from within postmodern irony, more complex and diverse as Chapter 4 will explore. Warren Buckland describes how:

“The *new* of new sincerity signifies it is a response to postmodern irony and nihilism: not a rejection of it, not a nostalgic return to an idyllic, old sincerity. Instead, in a dialectical move, new sincerity incorporates postmodern irony and cynicism; it operates in conjunction with irony.”

⁴⁷

The popular culture associated New Sincerity is filled with a variety of ironic forms, such as camp, arch performativity or play with genre conventions, which explains why Wampole’s “How to Live without Irony?” *New York Times* piece took aim at irony-loving-hipsters. To make matters even more confusing, is the way New Sincerity as a movement along with many of its celebrated artists such as Dave Eggers and filmmakers like Wes Anderson are also ‘academically’ classified as late forms of postmodern irony – a notoriously diverse category

⁴⁵For a study of the existential philosophy and New Sincerity see: Allard den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014). To illustrate, per 13 January 2023, Google Scholar catalogues 2130 academic articles on New Sincerity. The concept of New Sincerity became an early object of research and debate in the context of Russian literature see Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism: A Cultural History*, (London: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁴⁶ Warren Buckland, “Wes Anderson: A ‘Smart’ Director of the New Sincerity?,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 10, no. 1 (March 2012): 1–5.

⁴⁷ Buckland, “Wes Anderson,” 2. Emphasis in original.

characterising much of post-1960s artistic practice. This is the relatively superficial reason for the first disagreement over what cultural style dominates the 2000s. We still need to understand why irony and sincerity are used to designate different kinds of political imagination and why the other points of disagreement have deeper roots: whether irony equals apathy and moral relativism, whether or not sincerity marks a return of engagement and ethico-political articulation.

These disagreements are knottier and caused firstly by a practice of talking past each other due to a lack of *specification for what irony means* and secondly, by the inability to verbalise what the *criteria* are for something to be political or not. The rest of this chapter will disentangle the first problem by explaining how different modalities of irony circulate, while this chapter's final section will launch the second problem of 'criteria for the political' and this will be analysed throughout the rest of the dissertation. It brings us back to the central question of this project, what does the cultural preoccupation with irony and sincerity tell us about the meaning of political engagement, apathy, and democratic citizenship under conditions of relative privilege?

The problem of specification runs throughout the debate that one journalist comically baptized the "Sincerity Wars".⁴⁸ It shows a strong commitment to vigorous citizenship but a simultaneous difficulty in finding words and reasons for its concerns. These articles give hardly any arguments for implicit associations between irony, sincerity, and a state of political (dis)-engagement, drawing instead on pre-existing mental associations and value judgements. The encoding, to use Stuart Hall's term, of irony in these pieces therefore depends on the writer's own *prior* ethico-political position towards these unstated connections. For example, Wampole's "How to Live without

⁴⁸ Emma Brockes, "No Ironic Spin Is Possible for SoulCycle Coming to Williamsburg," *The Guardian*, December 5, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/emma-brockes-blog/2012/dec/05/ironic-spin-soulcycle-williamsburg>.

Irony?” declares young peoples’ use of irony cowardly and evasive and thus contains a very different connotation than a reader or writer who connotes irony with politically subversive critique such as Scocca in “On Smarm”, or the writer Magill who understands irony in the form of satire to be an antidote to dangers of dogmatism:

“Irony as a form of engaged social critique became an effective weapon against the deadly earnestness that guided not only the new American seriousness but just as well the two planes that flew into the World Trade Center. “The worse vice of a fanatic,” wrote Oscar Wilde, “is his sincerity.””⁴⁹

These examples are illustrative of the way irony can take on three very different modalities across the debate: 1) irony as specific kind of aesthetic speech act, for example when irony is used as a satirical ‘weapon’, 2) irony as a particular kind of subjectivity or ‘mode of living’ (as both Wampole and Magill do but with radically different judgements) and 3) irony as shorthand for a specific set of cultural-historical beliefs, as in Scocca’s connection between irony and counter-culture that would have been fostered by familiarity with the sarcastic tone of anti-corporate activism, such as *Adbusters*. These three different kinds of irony all require theoretical clarification.

1.2 The Three Kinds of Irony: Aesthetic Act, Subjectivity, Cultural-Historic Values

The term irony has a remarkable versatility: it can signify a formal quality of a speech act (in any medium) but has also been used to describe a philosophy of subjectivity (for example by Richard Rorty) or the worldviews and values in

⁴⁹ R. Jay Magill Jr., “We’ve Been Arguing About Irony vs. Sincerity for Millennia — The Atlantic,” *The Atlantic*, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/weve-been-arguing-about-irony-vs-sincerity-for-millennia/265601/>. Magill also published two books with specific American-Emersonian-Romantic interpretations of irony and sincerity in 2007 and 2013.

society at particular place and time, ranging from short to vast periods (Kundera places the advent of ironic age in the birth of Modernity in *Don Quixote*).⁵⁰

A persistent trap that plagues the 2012-2015 debates is the assumption that any use of irony automatically signals a particular politics. Generally, this assumption can take two directions where one connects the use of irony to ‘resistance’ and the other to ‘amoral’ lack of commitment. There are historical reasons for the popular assumption that irony is connected to ‘resistance’ which will be explored in detail in Chapter 3 that stem from how youth culture has been framed since the 1960s. Halberstam points out how academic researchers of cultural studies since the 1970s turn to subcultures as sites of political mobilisation but “trapped in the oedipal framework that pits the subculture against the parent culture”.⁵¹ The specific assumption about irony as ‘subversive resistance’ became so entrenched in the 1990s that they drove Linda Hutcheon to caution that: “Irony has often been used to reinforce rather than to question established attitudes [...] as the history of satire illustrates so well.”⁵² Hutcheon’s careful analysis of the workings of irony in aesthetics makes clear how the politics of irony *cannot be assumed* without considering the specific ideological relationships set up by an ‘ironic act’. The trap of ignoring how the mechanics of irony are *trans-ideological* – neither automatically progressive or conservative – will return in Chapter 3, here I want to attend to another aspect of Hutcheon’s insightful analysis.

I find the strong link between irony and politics as a result of its formal quality of *indirectly* engaging with social norms. Hutcheon reminds us of that irony requires supplemental knowledge, even in its most simple usage (known as *anti-phrasis*, saying the opposite of what one intends). For example, the anti-

⁵⁰ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Perennial, 1986).

⁵¹ J Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 160.

⁵² Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), 10.

corporate magazine *Adbusters* created a cover photo that mocked McDonalds by taping the mouth of its mascot with the words ‘Grease’. The meaning of this picture requires some prior knowledge necessary for the image to ‘work’: how the food of McDonalds damages one’s health or how its business practices are destructive and exploitative. Hutcheon discovers in the role of evaluation the distinctiveness of irony:

“Unlike metaphor or allegory, which demand similar supplementing of meaning, irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who “get” it and those who don’t, as well as in its targets and in what some people call its “victims.” This is where the politics of irony get heated.”⁵³

The form of irony that requires *an evaluative attitude* mobilises all sorts of socio-political norms, such as the destructiveness of giant fast-food corporations or even capitalism in general, as McDonalds is a symbol of American capitalism’s globalisation. Irony can often indirectly engage with *doxa* (commonly held opinions that are taken for granted) and Hutcheon points out how irony can be used to draw attention to these tacit beliefs, for example “McDonalds does not harm anybody”. Sometimes, if the conditions are in favour, irony can function as a way to de-doxify (a term she takes from Barthes). I propose therefore that the indirect yet intimate relationship between irony and doxa (implicit norms) drives the attention on irony in discussions of contemporary culture.

In “Is Irony Good for America?” cultural sociologist Jeffrey Guhin argues that cultural forms – narratives, myths, genres and codes – are an often-ignored ground for participating and speaking out in the public sphere. Too often, conceptions of the public sphere (Rawls, Habermas) tend to focus on

⁵³ Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, 2.

actors use of reason instead.⁵⁴ In speaking out and debating the role of irony in contemporary culture, the actors in Guhin's analysis use culture as a *lingua franca* to debate the state of the American nation.⁵⁵ Its narrative of progress, rooted in myths of the American frontier, is another powerful cultural form that reveals to Guhin – building explicitly on the work of Martha Nussbaum and Frederic Jameson – how moral and political debates are impossible without shared narrative and symbolic forms. Guhin's study aimed to show how rationality in the public sphere is encased in narrative and symbolic forms common to American social life.⁵⁶ It is important to note that Guhin's study predates Christy Wampole's opinion piece published in December 2012 and its many responses, providing a detailed analysis of these debates in American magazines and newspapers explaining three previous 'ironic crises': the reactions to Purdy's 1999 book against irony *For Common Things*, the 'death of irony' after the attacks on September 11, 2001 and criticisms of John Stewart's *The Daily Show* which in its early days was deemed too ironic.⁵⁷ The 'sincerity wars' would count as a 'fourth crisis' that marks how in 2012 the success of the cultural movement of New Sincerity becomes established.

1.3 Irony as Transcendental Subjectivity: The Jena Romantic Anchor

We have seen how particular assumptions are connected to the *use* of irony in aesthetics and communication. Equally, there has been a long-standing appreciation of irony as a way of life, which is even more varied and variable; from Wampole's claim that irony equals cowardice in 2012 to the ancient definition by Quintilian where a 'whole life of a man may wear the appearance

⁵⁴ Jay Guhin, "Is Irony Good for America? The Threat of Nihilism, the Importance of Romance, and the Power of Cultural Forms," *Cultural Sociology* 7, no. 1 (August 30, 2012): 23–38.

⁵⁵ Guhin, "Is Irony Good for America?" 11.

⁵⁶ Guhin, "Is Irony Good for America?" 3.

⁵⁷ Guhin, "Is Irony Good for America?" 4.

of a continued irony', exemplified by Socrates.⁵⁸ However, one very specific tradition of ironic subjectivity has had much more influence on 1990s irony and 2000s sincerity and that is Jena Romanticism (also known as Early Romanticism) and particularly Friedrich Schlegel's philosophy of irony. For example, Dave Eggers's 2000 novel *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is perhaps the novel that inaugurates the dominance of sincere aesthetics by mixing meta-textual play with emotional expressiveness in autobiographic form.⁵⁹ Through the emphasis on *feeling, inward-oriented experience, self-expression* and *the creative arts* the inheritance of Romanticism appears within the New Sincerity culture that emerges from the United States and travels back across the Atlantic.

I will give a concise overview outlining the key tenets and principles of the Jena Romantic movement, so that the Romantic aspects become more recognisable in subsequent chapters. However, in their reappearance, these ideas have been reconfigured within a secular, de-transcendentalised (worldly) contemporary culture. I want to draw attention to the difference between transcendental and non-transcendental versions of ideas as *this difference will have political consequences* that are not obvious. The transcendental philosophy of Friedrich Schlegel constituted a proposal for an ironic subjectivity that contains a metaphysical scope difficult to imagine from the vantage point of the present-day discussions. The following gives a short historical overview so that the connection and differences can appear in this and subsequent chapters.

The Jena Circle united at the end of the 18th century through a commitment to Kantian critical philosophy and their divergence from Fichte's inheritance of Kant, particularly his development of a unitary ground for consciousness. Fichte exemplifies the dominant philosophical direction at the

⁵⁸ Quintilian. *Institutes of Oratory*. Book 9, Chapter 2:45, Accessed 1 February 2016, <http://rhetoric.eserver.org/quintilian/9/chapter2.html>

⁵⁹ *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* has an emphasis on embodied wounds and suffering that Seltzer has described in a different context as a focalising object for American 'wound culture': Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

time that aimed to systematise the critical project, to ‘complete’ it by finding regulative bridging principles; it hoped to find foundational principles that could ground consciousness and experience via the employment of a Kantian systematic rigor. Roughly, the Fichtean ground can be described as an immediate and non-reflective form of self-awareness: a self-positing ‘I’. Fichte’s attempt at ‘foundationalism’ were opposed by Schlegel and fellow member of the circle Novalis for what Fred Rush describes as essentially Kantian reasons: “Kantian critique involves inter alia reason’s self-limitation and recognition of the abiding nature of dialectical illusion. This self-limitation dictates for Kant the form of systematicity that a properly critical philosophy can take.”⁶⁰ The Jena Circle becomes characterised by anti-foundationalism, even if Novalis was sympathetic to certain elements of Fichte’s project: he agreed that the most basic form of subjective activity was immediate self-awareness, but the problem was Fichte’s view that this was a cognitive faculty. If the ‘I’’s immediate self-awareness is not conceivable on the reflective model, then it is not something even implicitly conscious, as “we can only be conscious of what, tacitly or otherwise, can stand as *an object* for consciousness and this holds as well for the ‘I’. [...] One might experience such a ground at best indirectly, through feeling (*Gefühl*), to which Novalis assigns the epistemic status of “non-knowledge” (*Nicht-Wissen*) or “faith” (*Glauben*).”⁶¹ Consequentially, faith provides a way for Novalis to articulate the root of subjectivity as unknowable while still providing a coherent account of subjectivity that can defend this ‘unknowability’ within the standards of philosophy. As philosophy is the enterprise of reflective thought, it cannot grasp the primordial non-reflective basis of ‘feeling’. This leads to the limits of the activity of transcendental regression and the quest for the basis of the ‘I’ via critical reflection. Yet, if philosophy cannot encounter the ground of feeling and

⁶⁰ Fred Rush, “Irony and Romantic Subjectivity,” in *Philosophical Romanticism*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (London: Routledge, 2006), 176.

⁶¹ Rush, “Irony and Romantic Subjectivity,” 176–77.

what Novalis called the Absolute (*Unbedingte*, the un-conditioned, the un-thinged), *art* can.

Schlegel believed, like Novalis, that art and especially poetry is able to teach us to transcend the inability of grasping the *Absolute* via thought. Art is able to manifest the relationship to the *Absolute* precisely via its capacity for elusiveness, as art creates a surplus of meaning that exceeds the possibilities of what can be said in an interpretation. Every specifiable meaning at the same time also indicates that it is not an exhaustive expression of the *Absolute*, for example via poetry's ability to evocate via elliptical form, indeterminate content and metaphorical structure.⁶² Thus it can bring home the understanding of human existence as a discursive being in a relationship to the Absolute, to the fundamental, unbounded nature that cannot be known as such. Jena Romanticism reorients transcendental philosophy and *aestheticizes* the intelligible relationship between subject and world.

In other words, Fichte's quest for a first principle inspired the development of a philosophy of two mutually conditioning and conditioned principles. Schlegel and Novalis locate the key then to be: alternation (*Wechsel*) or interaction as 'oscillation between' (*Wechselwirkung*).⁶³ It is Schlegel who develops the philosophy into specific concepts that can account for the contradictory nature of an unsystematic systemacity.⁶⁴ The concepts of *fragments* and *irony* aim to advance understanding of philosophy's paradoxical core: 'a system of fragments' is the mould for a new progressive method that is to grow towards truly all-encompassing knowledge (*Allheit*).⁶⁵ Irony is then this progressive method, creatively inspired by the pedagogy of Socratic irony that

⁶² Rush, "Irony and Romantic Subjectivity," 180.

⁶³ Michael N. Forster and Kristin Gjesdal, *The Oxford Handbook of German Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 81.

⁶⁴ Arnold Heumakers, *De Esthetische Revolutie* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2015), 274 and 271.

⁶⁵ Heumakers, *De Esthetische Revolutie*, 274.

Schlegel found both in Plato and Quintillian.⁶⁶ Here, *irony is a mode of being* where every position that one takes (towards a work of art in particular) must also be broken down and replaced by its opposite, which is then also countered and replaced in an infinite and therefore open-ended process: a constant alternation between self-creation and self-destruction, not one form of creation of self or art possibly being the final adequate one. However, before one perceives a resonance between this and a 20th century sensibility that evokes the pragmatism of Rorty's 'ironist' or the synchronic approach of a post-structuralist, the foundational aim of this method must be held in view.

Too often, the form of Schlegelian irony is remembered (its figure of pendulum dynamics) but not the accompanying *wholistic* understanding of transcendence of the self through oscillation. A Jena Romantic ironic subjectivity is split into two components, one that affirms the perspective (appreciated via the work of art) towards the *Absolute* and the other that distances from it via a profound reflection that this perspective can never be a sufficient account of the *Absolute*. One is then to have a cognitive habit that oscillates between the 'sensing' and the 'exceeding' of the *Absolute*, thereby infinitely maintaining that oscillation as the tension can never collapse into one of the elements in tension.⁶⁷ In this Jena philosophy, art allows the subject to sense a vast, in-divisible wholeness via one part: a place where part and whole resonate in harmony. Aukje van Rooden points out how this is *forgotten* key to the individual paradigm, in it "the often employed notion of the "microcosm" to describe the poetic work does not so much stress its being independent and isolated from the world, but rather its being *un-divided*, one, and therefore a small reflection of the being-undivided of the world as such."⁶⁸ The contemplative

⁶⁶ Rush, "Irony and Romantic Subjectivity," 194.

⁶⁷ Rush, "Irony and Romantic Subjectivity," 181.

⁶⁸ Aukje Van Rooden; From an Individual towards a Relational Paradigm," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 76, no. 2 (2015): 174.

action that is cultivated by a subject's irony links to the well-known Romantic characteristic of inwardness, but this is often misunderstood as a mere cultivation of interiority – which we will see appear in Chapter 3's structure of feeling of ironic authenticity. A transcendental 'perspectivism' that views the immeasurable *Absolute* always partially does not equal subjectivism. Van Rooden stresses that the Jena philosophers's championing of expression in literature and art was not in service of that individual's expression of unique singularity. The temperament or vital power of poetic expression stood for the creative faculty that was shared by all individuals, the Romantic's searched for universal 'Man' or universal selfhood. In the writing of Schiller van Rooden finds a direct caution for the danger of 'subjectivism': ““even in poems of which it is said that love, friendship etc., itself guided the poet's brush, he had to begin by becoming a stranger to himself, *by disentangling the object of his enthusiasm from his own individuality.*”⁶⁹ Jena Romanticism's expansive motivations have over the course of history become 'naturalised' and the metaphysical dimension of Schlegel's irony is mostly lost in subsequent accounts, leading to what Van Rooden calls 'huge misunderstandings'.⁷⁰

The altered understanding of Romantic Irony will also be the subject of Chapter 3's investigation of the structure of feeling of ironic authenticity, focused the conception of political engagement. Here, I want to briefly give an example of the way Schlegelian irony has been appropriated in unhelpful forms that create a distorted picture of irony and sincerity. One example is the work in cultural criticism and academic theory of the metamodernists who declared the end of postmodernism in 2010 and the birth of the age of metamodernism: “characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a

⁶⁹ Van Rooden, “Reconsidering Literary Autonomy,” 175. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ Van Rooden, “Reconsidering Literary Autonomy,” 175. Early German Romanticism is often misremembered and grouped together with Moritz' view on the autonomy of art, which was a concept they largely avoided, as their aim was to unite the singular and the universal within the idea of the Absolute.

markedly postmodern detachment.”⁷¹ What is unhelpful, or even misleading, about the labelling of New Sincerity as metamodernism is firstly its tendency to escalate the scale of cultural change and secondly how it de-emphasizes the very Romantic elements within postmodernism itself (surprising as their mentor is Jos de Mul of *Romantic Desire in (Post)modern Art and Philosophy* from 1999). As the conventional understanding of postmodernism already contains the tension between modernism and ‘something other’, it is unclear how the Schlegelian oscillation would create a new paradigm. What it *does* enable is a curious hypothesis of oscillation between modernism that here means “commitment” and “desire” and postmodernism means “detachment” and “apathy”. However, it is unclear what the factors are that create affirmation and negation within these psychological-political terms.⁷² In an interview with Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* in 2011, they again equal postmodern irony to apathy and claim sincerity to be a sign of normative position-taking and political articulation.⁷³ Fatefully, such claims are recurrent, but we will see in subsequent chapters that in practice *political articulation is not a characteristic of New Sincerity*. The reason for that common misappraisal will turn out be complex, but it is precisely the Romantic dynamics that are influential factors and not a modernism-postmodernism opposition. Particularly important is the problem of selfhood as *unable* to transcend the boundaries of one’s first-person perspective. Unlike the Jena Romantics, the contemporary individual of the millennial culture under discussion is not *self-evidently* integrated in a transcending-united whole but must find ways to ‘overcome’ that modern, secular sense of separation.

⁷¹ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2 (2010): 2.

⁷² Vermeulen and Van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 2, 10.

⁷³ Ebele Wybenga, “Generatie Waxjas,” *NRC Handelsblad*, April 2, 2011.

1.4 Irony as Structure of Feeling

So far, I have explained why there are so many misunderstandings between the debaters of irony and sincerity in cultural criticism such as the *New York Times*, *Gawker* or Dutch liberal, prestige publications such as *NRC Handelsblad* or *De Groene Amsterdammer*.⁷⁴ Irony can be used to mean either a stylistic form, an idea of subjectivity or the cultural values of a specific period, and this lack of differentiation is compounded by *unspoken assumptions about the politics* of each kind of irony.

What makes the cultural debate about irony and sincerity so interesting is how it debates the current state of citizenship without being able to verbalise (put into words) what the criteria for the political are. To the participants of the debate irony and sincerity clearly signal different political ideas but the reliance on popular culture, film and literature as indicators and evidence of social change make them more oblique than previous public debates about individualism and citizenship.⁷⁵ In contrast, the post-1960s debates that Charles Taylor called ‘malaise of modernity’ debates the direct target is ‘young people’.⁷⁶ In the 21st century, the picture will become more clear by looking at *artistic practices themselves* than at the content of arguments of cultural critics who use irony and sincerity are ways to assertively appeal to the “ethos of our age” (Wampole 2012), “the defining feature of our time”.⁷⁷ (Scocca 2012) and “Lazy cynicism has replaced

⁷⁴ Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, “Een Verlangen Naar Oprechtheid,” *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 2013; Joost de Vries, “Waar Ben Je Bang Voor?,” *De Groene Amsterdammer*, March 2013.

⁷⁵ This paragraph illustrates how pop culture is seen as indicative of the state of society: “round the turn of the century, something began to shift. Today, vulnerability shows up in pop music where bravado and posturing once ruled—see artists across every genre, from Conor Oberst to Lady Gaga to Frank Ocean. Television sitcoms and “bromance” movies depict authentic characters determined to live good lives. And respected literary authors like Jonathan Franzen, Zadie Smith, and Michael Chabon write sincere, popular books with a strong sense of morality. All across the pop culture spectrum, the emphasis on sincerity and authenticity that has arisen has made it un-ironically cool to care about spirituality, family, neighbors, the environment, and the country.” Fitzgerald, “Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age’s Ethos.”

⁷⁶ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 14–16.

⁷⁷ Respectively: Wampole, “How to Live Without Irony”; Matt Ashby and Brendan Carroll, “David Foster Wallace Was Right: Irony Is Ruining Our Culture,” *Salon.com*, 2014, http://www.salon.com/2014/04/13/david_foster_wallace_was_right_irony_is_ruining_our_culture/; Scocca, “On Smarm.”

thoughtful conviction as the mark of an educated worldview. Indeed, cynicism saturates popular culture, and it has afflicted contemporary art by way of postmodernism and irony.” (Ashby & Carroll) ⁷⁸ To get to how irony and sincerity relate to a different *political imagination and self-understanding* requires looking at the interrelations between aesthetic use, a view of subjectivity and a cultural-historic period.

My methodological approach will look at how irony and sincerity function as shorthand for a historically situated ‘structure of feeling’ with specific cultural-aesthetic characteristics emerging in a specific context. Raymond Williams developed the concept of structures of feeling in 1964 in order to transcend a problematic habit of describing the social as fixed and explicit (‘structure’) and the individual as fluid. This habit is also visible in the 2012-2015 debate about political apathy that emphasizes ‘agency’, whereas Williams’s focus is on the inherent interrelation between self and world. The concept is to signal something diverse yet recognisable, individual but simultaneously shared, a firm pattern that appeared in “the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity”.⁷⁹

Williams developed the term structure of feeling out of his historical research, where changes in literary works – style, impulses, restraints, tones – were found to be a precursor of historical change. The arts are central to the descriptive work a structure of feeling can do: “not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as *social formation of a specific kind* which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced.”⁸⁰ It may be tempting to envision these structures as the ‘signs of

⁷⁸ Ashby and Carroll. 2014

http://www.salon.com/2014/04/13/david_foster_wallace_was_right_irony_is_ruining_our_culture/

⁷⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto, 1961), 65.

⁸⁰ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Marxist Introductions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 133.

the times' of culturally dominant characteristics but the concept aims to describe something else: a contradiction between consciously held ideology and emergent experience, the "embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex."⁸¹

I want to stress in my approach to 'structure of feeling' how the concept is a way of describing a pattern in *response to change*. It is prompted by societal change and while it can be connected to generational experience – more on that shortly – they are primarily linked to experience rather than age. What makes Williams' work so suited for the contradictory and frustrated-but-persistent discussions surrounding irony and sincerity, is that a structure of feeling attends to precisely such moments when meanings shift, realign and cause mutual misunderstanding. Response to change appears as disturbance, tension, blockage and emotional trouble that become sources for major changes in the relation between signifier and signified, both in literary language and conventions.⁸² As Sean Matthews describes: "[T]he structure of feeling is commonly apparent in the experience of deadlock, obstruction and failure (as in the 'tight place' motif in Ibsen which so seizes Williams in his Ibsen work), or in the struggle which attends them."⁸³

A structure of feeling emerges out of a condition where the means of acting in and respond to the world have fallen short, with obvious *ethical and political stakes*. Yet the values of exemplary sensibilities as bourgeois realism or Augustan classicism are closer to a world-view than to an ideology.

⁸¹ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters. Interviews with New Left Review*. (London: Verso, 2015), 167; Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 131.

⁸² Williams, *Politics and Letters. Interviews with New Left Review*., 168.

⁸³ Sean Matthews, "Change and Theory in Raymond Williams's Structure of Feeling," *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 189.

The sociology of critique of Boltanski and Chiapello that is indebted to Williams, makes a distinction between two levels of critique:

“a primary level – the domain of the emotions – which can never be silenced, which is always ready to become inflamed whenever new situations provoking indignation emerge; and a secondary level – reflexive, theoretical and argumentative – that makes it possible to sustain ideological struggle, but assumes a supply of concepts and schemas making it possible to connect the historical situations people intend to criticize with values that can be universalized.”⁸⁴

A structure of feeling is closer to the primary and the emergent but shapes the secondary level. Because the principal mode of expression is style and aesthetic strategies reliant on interpretation, it shows changes in the possibilities of expressing the world and also conditions how it is subsequently articulated by *interpretative vocabulary* on a secondary level. For example, if Literary Modernism is taken as expressing questions of alienation within the Industrialising World through a heightened individual consciousness, it shifts the grounds of political imagination towards the individual and away from the material social world linked to ‘realism’. So these works also will leave room for conflicting interpretations of a structure’s ‘social critique’ as these are dependent on the hermeneutic claims – their interpretative vocabulary – of works identified as key because of their innovative, emergent qualities. My attention to structures of feeling will concentrate on how these emerge as moments of breakdown and tension, a response to change when a new style reconfigures the priorities of expression.

By exploring how the debate on irony and sincerity represents different structures of feeling allows for a more detailed and diverse picture to emerge. It avoids the short cut and “ordering process” known as stereotyping, which in

⁸⁴ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 36.

turn undermines the supply of reasons and arguments for a meaningful debate.⁸⁵ In the cultural commentary pieces, a rhetoric strategy has been to equate irony with Generation-X and sincerity with Generation-Y/Millennials (with the exception of Wampole, who sees Millennial hipsters as ironic) and endorsement for one side and objection to the other. An earlier study by Sharon Mazzarella on the construction of Gen-X versus Gen-Y in generational ‘frames’ points out how such mechanisms functioned as a scapegoating dynamic: it absolved older generations and obscured economic policy’s injustice towards young people. Generational stereotyping can also be found in young, peer-aged writers such as Wampole, Burnett and Ashby & Carroll.⁸⁶ So, what is a better way to make sense of the disagreements over irony and sincerity? What kind of structure of feeling do they represent?

1.5 Anchoring Irony in the 1990s and Sincerity in the 2000s

The way to make sense of the debate over irony and sincerity as representatives of political (dis)engagement is by looking at how their political connotations are organised. Instead of reproducing the debate’s search for an essential meaning of either irony or sincerity, I situate each in the respective period when they take on dominant meaning and political connotation. My proposal is that they are connected to two different structures of feeling, ironic authenticity in the 1990s and avowed sincerity in the 2000s, that are more coherent and less broad than the ‘postmodern irony and ‘new sincerity’ movements used by debaters and cultural critics. Structures of feeling are coherent as responses to social change, respectively: ironic authenticity responds to the social dynamic of limitless commodification and avowed sincerity to social fragmentation. This will allow

⁸⁵ See: Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London: Routledge, 1999), 11; Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 223–85.

⁸⁶ Sharon R. Mazzarella, “Media, Youth, and the Politics of Representation,” in *A Companion to Media Studies*, 2003, 227–46.

us to find a way to move beyond the third obstacle within the debate: the inability to verbalise what the *criteria* are for something to be political or not.

I will first explain how ironic authenticity and avowed sincerity can disentangle and make sense of the different positions toward with political engagement. We have to begin by replacing the popular claim that ‘postmodern irony equals apathy’ with the structure of feeling of ironic authenticity rooted in the events of the 1990s. As stated earlier, debaters in cultural commentary give few particulars and reasons for their assessments but rather use cultural works such as literature and film as indicators of a ‘status quo’. The pro-sincerity debaters (Wampole, Ashby & Carroll, Burnett, Fitzgerald) see irony-as-apaty primarily as a mental attitude that is easy to change, asking readers to “determine whether the ashes of irony have settled on you as well. It takes little effort to dust them away.”⁸⁷ There is an emphasis on volition and attitude – and not on social conditions and communal practices – and this perspective is carried through in the way they enlist the writer David Foster Wallace as the ‘godfather’ of sincerity via his 1993 essay ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction’. Wallace is undoubtedly the inspiration for many New Sincerity artists, however his work was full of irony as well as social critique. He never argued in that essay what for example commentator Philip Burnett states: “David Foster Wallace thought that returning to simple sincerity would undo the effects of irony on our culture.”⁸⁸ Here, what is glossed over is that Wallace’s essay on postmodern irony can only be understood as work of historically positioned cultural criticism and not a thesis on irony as a subjectivity (where irony functions as a normative

⁸⁷ Wampole, “How to Live Without Irony.” As Ellen Rutten noted in her study of the sincerity discourse in post-Soviet Russia: “propagators of a new sincerity object against what one could call an imagined postmodernism.” Ellen Rutten, “Strategic Sentiments. Pleas for A New Sincerity in Post-Soviet Literature.” in *Dutch Contributions to the Fourteenth International Congress of Slavists, Obrid, September 10-16, 2008: Literature*, ed. S. Brouwer, Studies in Slavic Literature (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 203.

⁸⁸ Burnett, Philip 2014 Salon.com, “Are millennials too cool for sincerity? The truth about our love affair with irony” Salon.com http://www.salon.com/2014/05/11/are_millennials_too_cool_for_sincerity_the_truth_about_our_love_af_fair_with_irony/

assessment of human character as well as conduct). One passage from the essay, which has become famous, suggests postmodern irony would perhaps be succeeded by another sensibility:

“The next real literary “rebels” in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Dead on the page. Too sincere.”⁸⁹

It is a long, nuanced essay in which Wallace placed himself within the same culture he critiqued, doubting if his assessment was valid. Key is that Wallace argues that sincerity could be an antidote to how postmodern irony in the 1990s *no longer* serves the function of social critique because it has been appropriated as the language of the television, advertising and the culture industry.⁹⁰ Here, irony is connected to a critique of commodification by mass culture and the entertainment industry, a process denounced as a form of alienation and inauthenticity.⁹¹ The structure of feeling dominant in the 1990s called ‘ironic

⁸⁹ David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 193.

⁹⁰ There is a precedent in seeing an ironic age being followed by a ‘sincere’ one in the cyclical conception of Hayden White’s *Metahistory* who describes how: “The first phase of nineteenth-century historical consciousness took shape within the context of a crisis in late Enlightenment historical thinking. Thinkers such as Voltaire, Gibbon, Hume, Kant, and Robertson had finally come to view history in essentially Ironic terms. The *pre-Romantics* Rousseau, Justus Möser, Edmund Burke, the Swiss nature poets, the Stürmer und Dränger, and especially Herder— *opposed to this Ironic conception of history a self-consciously “naive” counterpart*. The principles of this conception of history were not consistently worked out, nor —were they uniformly adhered to by the different critics of the Enlightenment, but all of them shared a common antipathy for its rationalism. They believed in “empathy” as a method of historical inquiry, and they cultivated a sympathy for those aspects of both history and humanity which the Enlighteners had viewed with scorn or condescension.” My emphasis in Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 38–39.

⁹¹ Chapter 3’s section ‘Artistic Critique of Capitalism’ will set out the connection between the ideal of authenticity and the critique of capitalism’s falsehood and exploitation through a reading of Boltanski and Chiapello.

authenticity’ emerges as a response to the social change of limitless commodification. In the 1993 essay, David Foster Wallace puts into question if irony is still effective against that social dynamic.

The connection between irony and the dynamic of limitless commodification – that is *not* politically apathetic – is what unites cultural debaters that criticise mass culture and consumer capitalism and therefore take offense with the claim that sincerity equals engagement. These ‘pro-irony’ debaters that oppose New Sincerity point out how it lacks political articulation – in spite of the assertions we heard that argued the contrary – and seems to only value sentimental affirmation over real engagement with issues such as commodification and consumerism. By 2004, the journal *n+1* used its inaugural editorial to denounce New Sincerity’s and the cohort of Dave Eggers it called ‘Eggersards’. As the title “A Regressive Avant-Garde” captures, it denounces New Sincerity for being ethically regressive for its return to childhood as moral ideal, for its valuing enthusiasm over expertise and how it secretly values the same manufactured emotions of *Oprah* and *The Real World* but “refused the class decline and loss of leadership that participation in open confession, or popular entertainment, would bring them.”⁹² Similarly, Tom Scocca the editor of *Gawker*’s 2013 tirade against New Sincerity’s rise into a dominant sensibility, denounced its empty positivity and emphasis on affirmation as a smothering blanket for political critique and struggle over difficult issues. In the UK, a 2012 piece by critic Joe Kennedy “Against The New Naive”, called the rise of ‘twee art’, a propagation of a logics of self-soothing: incorporating into art and culture the anti-anxiety messages of modern advertising that, to Kennedy, define our post-9/11 age.⁹³ The telling difference between the structure of feeling of ‘ironic authenticity’ and most of the cultural practices associated with New Sincerity is

⁹³ Joe Kennedy, “Against The New Naive: ‘Innocence’, Branding, & Michel Houellebecq,” *The Quietus*, February 28, 2012, <https://thequietus.com/articles/08111-michel-houellebecq-robert-montgomery-opinion>.

how the latter are no longer dominated – or characterised – by the response to limitless commodification but instead to social fragmentation.

In the year 2000 the book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* by Robert Putnam successfully spotlighted the loss of ‘the social’ and atomised individualism.⁹⁴ Appearing in the same year, Dave Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is similarly preoccupied with the value of community. Liesbeth Korthals Altes analyses the work in detail for the way its meta-textual playful form sets up various authorial voices, which together present a complex game for the reader to work out the ethos of the novel:

“While sincerity has been contrasted with various other notions, ranging from prudence and irony to dissimulation or lying, it does not necessarily stand in a relation of full opposition to these postures, as literature often illustrates. Irony, like prudence, can be perceived as a complex form of sincerity, which might be the case for Eggers’s tone.”⁹⁵

In Eggers’s *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, the formal play with irony is used to satirise the ways of life (such as the faux-intellectual posturing of him and his colleagues at *Might* magazine) that Eggers equates with the way postmodern irony has ‘gone bad’. Korthals Altes points out how readers construct the sincere ethos through the novel’s many layers of meta-textual play, aided by extratextual ethos clues of Eggers’s real autobiography as an orphan taking care of his younger brother, his essays on social issues and his charity work. A straightforward example of the connection between social atomisation and avowed sincerity is novel’s central motif of ‘the lattice’. Through that motif, the hyperbolic-ironic use of language weaves the fictional protagonist, Eggers and the reader back into the social fabric. At the same time, we still have few

⁹⁴ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

⁹⁵ Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*, 207.

reasons to equate sincerity with the supposed engagement and political articulation that cultural critics claim it to contain. Korthals Altes points out how the novel itself seems to propose a problematic “call for emphatic co-narration” (from author to reader and back) as an end in itself:

“The pathos- laden appeal to the reader seems to be grounded in a stereotypical “Dr. Phil” psychology: “[y]our life is worth documenting” as well; I’m okay, you’re okay. Is this, then, a programmatic conception of living and self- writing, captured in the idea of the lattice? By *mise en abyme*, reinforced by the apparent autobiographic pact, the value and social legitimization of Eggers’s own book would similarly reside in the example it affords for socially bonding self- expression.”⁹⁶

Are the cultural critics of the 2012-2015 debate that advocate for sincerity then simply wrong? Is sincerity merely a proposal of self-expression as method of social bonding? The practice of self-expression, a practice so vastly expanded since the mobile internet, is not necessarily a vehicle for stronger social cohesion. So why is sincerity then so valued as anti-dote to disengaged citizenship? There are valid reasons for such claims, as Chapter 2 will set out.

Concluding this chapter, exploring the commentary debate on irony and sincerity showed how both camps were partly wrong and partly right. Irony does not equal moral relativism nor other popular equations of postmodernism with political apathy, lazy cynicism or amoral nihilism. However, irony has taken on the ‘placeholder’ meaning of a particular political problem of disengagement with traditional politics, compounded by historical changes in the political power that cultural practices themselves can have. Chapter 3 will explore the structure of feeling of ironic authenticity as a response to the dynamics of limitless commodification. In particular through the Cavellian genre of slacker films that ask the question: “Is withdrawing in disgust the same as apathy?”

⁹⁶ Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation*, 244.

Chapter 4 will try to make sense of the valuation of sincerity as a form of citizenship, describing also its pitfalls. I will focus my research on the aspects of sincerity culture that give new insights in how political engagement is imagined. The Cavellian mumblecore genre illuminates possibilities as well as obstacles. For that reason, I concentrate on this smaller formation within New Sincerity that I label 'avowed sincerity' as a structure of feeling that responds to a sense of social atomisation and fragmentation.

Chapter 2: Cavell, Taylor and Trilling on the Politics of Sincerity

“Once participation declines, once the lateral associations that were its vehicles wither away, the individual is left alone, in the face of the vast bureaucratic state and feels, correctly, powerless.”

Charles Taylor, The Ethics of Authenticity, 9-10

“You may or may not take an explicit side in some particular conflict, but unless you find some way to show that this society is not yours, it is; your being compromised by its actions expresses the necessity of your being implicated in them. That you nevertheless avoid express participation or express disavowal is what creates that ghost-state of conformity”

Stanley Cavell, What Is the Emersonian Event? A Comment on Kateb's Emerson, 957

2.1 Introduction

As the previous chapter described, the enthusiasm surrounding the New Sincerity phenomenon is founded on expectations of a return of articulate political engagement it does not actually meet, prompting simultaneous dismissals of the phenomenon as being another instance of cultural narcissism. Yet, it is precisely the unknown causes for misalignments between receptive expectations and aesthetic expressions that make this phenomenon such a rich subject for investigation. My aim is thus to understand the valuation of sincerity as an ethical-political corrective of social ills and to investigate its self-understanding as an *internal critique*.

To understand the valuation of sincerity, I will draw on two philosophers who have explored the conditions for how sincerity can be a route back to vigorous citizenship as an antidote to political apathy. Stanley Cavell and Charles Taylor both aim for a pragmatic and corrective reformulation of Romantic ideas at the end of the 20th century. Both are, probably not

coincidentally, North American philosophers. Their work has strong affinities with the New Sincerity phenomenon and will make the ethico-political dimensions at stake more concrete. The work of Lionel Trilling will add historical context to the evolution from sincerity to authenticity and he, surprisingly, also diagnoses some dangers to citizenship. As Chapter 1 described, sincerity (like irony) does *not* emerge in social debates in the form of a substantive virtue; none give an account of sincerity's properties or a sincere characterology. In this rhetorical practice, sincerity is implicitly imagined as an ethos, similar to Amanda Anderson's definition of ethos, that is able to migrate "between two different meanings: on the one hand, the word will denote individual manner, attitude, or stance, and, on the other hand, it will indicate forms of collective ethical life".⁹⁷ The desire for sincerity at the beginning of the 21st century is motivated by the desire that it alleviate or cure a state of political apathy in democratic citizenship.⁹⁸ The ethos has political dimensions but it is unclear how it leads to political engagement and democratic renewal.

Cavell and Taylor's work will provide *qualities of* and *criteria for* the valuation of sincerity as an antidote to political apathy as it emerges in the New Sincerity phenomenon. I have added two assumed dimensions of citizenship to the analysis: the ability to interrelate with others and the ability for a practice to unfold over time. Democratic citizenship hardly flourishes by conceptualising it as isolate or instantaneous, for this reason I propose that the democratic valuation of sincerity must necessarily contain *im-personal* and *future-oriented* aspects. This differentiates a valuation of sincerity from one which could still be strictly personal or focused on the 'here and now'.

⁹⁷ Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 171.

⁹⁸ The claim that sincerity is an antidote to apathy is made explicitly in the debates of Chapter 1 and implicitly within the artistic practices discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

In the first part of the chapter, I unite separate elements of Cavell's body of work into a theory of 'overcoming' political apathy, giving us ways to think about experiments with sincerity as forms of political engagement (2.2). Bringing Cavell and Taylor together in this chapter is motivated by how they can become complimentary: Cavell's Wittgensteinian ethics provides a way around the post-structuralist critiques of authenticity that Taylor would be vulnerable to (critiques formulated post-Foucault-and-Derrida).⁹⁹ Taylor's work on articulation, on the other hand, helps mitigate the elusiveness of Cavellian 'politics of the ordinary' that has been recently explored by remarkably different traditions of political theorists.¹⁰⁰ However, the aim of is not to evaluate what is the correct or best conception of sincerity-as-citizenship, instead I want to connect Cavell and Taylor's ideas to the recent cultural re-valuation of sincerity by finding the internal criteria for citizenship. So first, I will try to single out the elements that characterise Cavell's work on overcoming political apathy: *incessance of the ordinary, responsiveness, acknowledging the risk of conversation, and transcending the limitations of a current moral vocabulary*. These are the characteristics

⁹⁹ Mieke Bal and Ernst van Alphen in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* precisely oppose sincerity as a problematically 'traditional' view of subjectivity: "[Sincerity] assumes that we, as individuals, have an 'inner self' responsible for our conduct, performances, and speeches-in effect, all the ways in which we manifest ourselves for others. This notion of subjectivity -bound up, in turn, with a dichotomy of mind and body--has been severely deconstructed in past decades. [...] Though many no longer believe in the traditional notion of subjectivity, sincerity, it appears, has been more difficult to relinquish". Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal, "Introduction," in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, ed. Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel E. Smith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009), 3.

¹⁰⁰ The appreciation of Cavell in political philosophy can range from (1) Foucauldian, (2) Deleuzian to (3) traditional Liberal. For (1) see as Aletta J. Norval, "Moral Perfectionism and Democratic Responsiveness: Reading Cavell with Foucault," *Ethics & Global Politics* 4, no. 4 (December 23, 2011): 207–29; Aletta J. Norval, "Making Claims: The Demands of Democratic Subjectivity," 2007; Aletta J. Norval, "Passionate Subjectivity, Contestation and Acknowledgement: Rereading Austin and Cavell," in *Law and Agonistic Politics*, ed. Andrew Schaap (Farnham : Ashgate Pub. Co., 2009). David Owen and Claire Woodward, "Foucault, Cavell and the Government of Self and Others- On Truth-Telling, Friendship and an Ethics of Democracy," *Iride*, no. 66 (2012); David Owen, "The Expressive Agon : On Political Agency in a Constitutional Democratic Polity," in *Law and Agonistic Politics*, ed. Andrew Schaap (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), 71–85. For (2) see Thomas Dumm, *A Politics of The Ordinary, A Politics of the Ordinary* (New York: NYU Press, 1999). For (3) see Andrew Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). And parts of Andrew Norris, ed., *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006).

that connect sincerity to re-invigorated citizenship and will thus return in Chapter 4's exploration of the New Sincerity phenomenon.

In the second part of the chapter, I present a summary of the ideal of sincerity and the later emerging ideal of authenticity, based on Lionel Trilling's historical account up until his time, the tumultuous late 1960s and early 1970s (2.3). I will focus on how Trilling makes a qualitative difference between the two ideals and gives an early – careful and non-dismissive – cautioning of the detrimental consequences of authenticity. The next section (2.4) describes how Charles Taylor, twenty years later, in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, takes up Trilling's project and presents a vision of authenticity that tries to address the detrimental, egotistic, and short-sighted understanding of authenticity by presenting a 'correct' version. A true authenticity for Taylor emerges when your ideals, aspirations and values are in dialogue with the values of your community. Such a practice leads to a 'responsabilisation' for the common good, anchored in your 'authentic' difference. Taylor's work is important because it addresses what the criteria would be for the ethos as a form of good citizenship, but at the same time I will reject his unconventional definition of authenticity that I will classify under sincerity (and which has also been called 'social authenticity'). I will focus on how Taylor makes clear that ideal of sincerity-authenticity involves the practice of *articulation*, the (linguistic or more 'subtle' artistic) expression of values: what persons value in their cares and commitments. In addition, Taylor makes the case that articulation requires non-selfish or *civic matters* and the self-referential manners of the post-Romantic age should not become self-immuring. Both Taylor and Cavell make expressiveness, dialogue and (artistic) language central to democratic practice.¹⁰¹ Reading these philosophers in a complementary form will draw out specific reasons for the valuation of sincerity.

¹⁰¹ In Cavell, this task is the ongoing work of acknowledging our relationships, yet with Taylor those relations are already more 'given' and we require the self-recognition that we need moral deliberation on our conceptions of the common good.

2.2 Stanley Cavell on Apathy and its Overcoming

How can sincerity be an antidote to political apathy? Stanley Cavell's philosophical work provides a unique conception of political apathy and its *overcoming*. There are several reasons to examine the implications and contradictions of the New Sincerity phenomenon more closely in relation to Stanley Cavell's philosophy. Firstly, his political philosophy explicitly confronts the problematic, 'debased' legacy of American Romanticism and seeks to *reorient* it through what he calls 'Emersonian moral perfectionism'. This line of his philosophy emphasises the relationship established between an individual and the political within the ordinary and everyday, specifically foregrounding the role of speech, conversation, exemplarity and sociability. Contemporary 'sincerity culture' and especially New Sincerity narrative artforms such as film and literature display close affinities with Cavell's moral perfectionism. This can be seen for instance in the narrative and thematic focus on the private, intimate, and everyday, or in the preoccupation with expressions 'beyond articulate language' that mark the 'mumblecore' cinema.

Even though Cavell never uses the term 'sincerity', his work pivots around it but he conceives of it in a radically pragmatic way that has no interest in 'intentions' and is compatible with the post-structuralist critiques of sincerity in Chapter 1.¹⁰² Another reason will receive the least attention in this chapter as it will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4: the privileged role Cavell assigns to narrative artforms, such as film, literature and theatre, within his work on the political as well as the epistemological; Art provides knowledge as well as exemplars that allow movement beyond the constraints of a current paradigm. His philosophy emphasises how art and popular culture contributes knowledge

¹⁰² This subject will return at the end Chapter 4.

on a different but 'equal par' with other kinds of knowledge, dependent on hermeneutic claims and readings of cultural works.

Education for Grown-Ups, Citizenship for the Privileged

Stanley Cavell's interest in political responsiveness is woven through his overall philosophical project and became more explicit in the second half of his career, in for example his treatise on moral perfectionism *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (1990).¹⁰³ At the same time, he is best known for his work on philosophical scepticism, founded on an ethical reading of the later Wittgenstein, which presents the inextricably moral dimensions of philosophical debates ever since his early essay "Must We Mean What We Say?" (1969) as well as his highly influential interpretation of Wittgenstein - *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (1979). In brief, Cavell shows how knowledge is always *preceded* by acknowledgement and that philosophical scepticism (representative of the Western Modern human) is marked by an avoidance of the world. At the same time, the truth of scepticism cannot be refuted but avoidance can be overcome, via attention to acknowledgement, never arriving but moving between the two poles of avoidance and acknowledgement. Cavell's work on epistemological scepticism mirrors and informs his ethico-political philosophy: it seeks to transcend the consequences of human finitude by transforming our responses to them, in what can be called a therapeutic philosophy.¹⁰⁴ What unifies the

¹⁰³ Cavell's philosophy of moral perfectionism is preceded and subsequently flanked by two other major thematic preoccupations in his work: the first one investigates the distinctly American experience and possibility of American philosophy via Thoreau in *The Senses of Walden* (1972/1981) and Emerson in *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (1988). The second is the key role 'the ordinary' has played in his philosophy: since his earliest work on J.L. Austin's ordinary language philosophy and the moral dimensions of Wittgenstein's forms of life, which is later compounded by a Romantic and psycho-analytic interest in the ordinary with *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (1988). His treatise on moral perfectionism as a dimension of all moral thought is formalised in *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (2004)

¹⁰⁴ Crary describes "an understanding of Wittgenstein as aspiring, not to advance metaphysical theories, but rather to help us work ourselves out of confusions we become entangled in when philosophizing. [...]"

different registers of Cavell's wide-ranging philosophy is a concern with finding ways to overcome living in a condition of disappointment, in his words: "to live out our skepticism."¹⁰⁵

For this reason, it may not be surprising that Cavell was rediscovered in the 21st century by political philosophers seeking to address the crisis of democratic subjectivity, finding ways to overcome urgent senses of disappointment in politics and deliberative democracy. Andrew Norris points out how Cavell shares Dewey's sense that above all democracy is a way of life, a demanding citizenship as sustained commitment. Cavell, however, differs from Dewey because of his "understanding of the *absence* of such commitment and engagement".¹⁰⁶ Even though Cavell's philosophy is unconventional in the context of political philosophy and political science, it has a unique contribution to make precisely via this *attention* to the pervasive incapacities and failures of democratic citizenship. Norris describes how for Cavell, democracy "does not accidentally and unfortunately fall into rigidity, thoughtlessness, and conformity; rather, its essence is to convert these."¹⁰⁷ If his philosophy sounds too much like American optimism, that is something Cavell himself is well-aware of and has defended as being no different than the ambition of the Romantic project itself.¹⁰⁸ Neither is Cavell's work close to the American tradition of self-help literature – even if his ideas can be reductively presented to sound similar. Cavell's work continually attends to the difficulty of such transformations and

tracing the sources of our philosophical confusions to our tendency, in the midst of philosophizing, to think that we need to survey language from an external point of view." Alice Crary, "Introduction," in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

¹⁰⁵ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 440.

¹⁰⁶ Norris, *Becoming Who We Are: Politics and Practical Philosophy in the Work of Stanley Cavell*, 222.

¹⁰⁷ Norris, *Becoming Who We Are*, 222.

¹⁰⁸ Stanley Cavell, "The Future of Possibility," in *Philosophical Romanticism*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 22.

shows how problems of knowledge-epistemology are as complicated as ethical-democratic ones.

Overcoming, renewal and human expansion are all terms that are often deemed to be too ‘psychologistic’ for philosophical discourse and it may be that Cavell was long ignored because of it. Yet, the idea that our ordinary language and everyday life are the fruitful terrain for democratic renewal is undoubtedly attractive as keeping “democratic hope alive in the face of disappointment with it”.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Irena Rosenthal’s work shows how the democratic resilience of citizens may be one of the most important demands of the 21st century.¹¹⁰ What sets Cavell apart is that his work addresses what we now call *the privileged*, being “those in positions for which social injustice or natural misfortune (to themselves) is not an unpostponable issue”.¹¹¹ His demand for politics *not* of necessity, but of those that have the relative privilege of a kind of freedom from politics, is a clear bearing Cavell’s work has towards to the concerns of New Sincerity – also characterised by relative advantage and an absence of unavoidable injustice, explored in Chapter 4.

The focus of this section will be to reconstruct Cavell’s work as a theory of the necessary correlation between social change and personal transformation, between the overcoming of personal apathy and societal justice. In this way, Cavell’s work provides a framework for further inquiry into the political imagination of New Sincerity. Within such a framework, the New Sincerity film and literature can more readily and meticulously be understood as working on the problem of political apathy and this is something the project will aim to develop, albeit in a critical light. Does it in fact connect personal transformation

¹⁰⁹ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, 56.

¹¹⁰ Irena Rosenthal, “Aggression and Play in the Face of Adversity: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Democratic Resilience,” *Political Theory*, August 14, 2014, 1–26.

¹¹¹ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, xix.

with conceptions of justice? Does Cavell omit or bracket out too much regarding the institutional requirements of justice?

In the following I will concentrate on making clear how the original treatise on perfectionism *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (1990) becomes more developed and detailed in his later work such as *Cities of Words* (2004) and *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (2005). Little has been written yet that connects Cavell's work on the conditions of conversion to the passionate utterance. Looking at these two areas of his work closely together should allow a more comprehensive view onto Cavell's 'theory on overcoming apathy'. Cavell is notoriously elusive to theorise due to his methodology of treating themes repeatedly – often in a tentative or explicitly provisory way - as well his tendency to synthesise a diverse array of philosophical debates. Hillary Putnam has once described Cavell's philosophy as education for grown-ups, it could also be called citizenship for the privileged.¹¹²

In my reading, Cavell is *not* an adherent of the strong (Transcendental) individualism of Emerson, in spite of his explicit inheritance of Emerson's language. Rather, Cavell views the self as reciprocal with society in a pragmatic manner, while sidestepping the liberalism-communitarianism debate deliberately.¹¹³ Cavell's answer to philosophical scepticism informs his readings

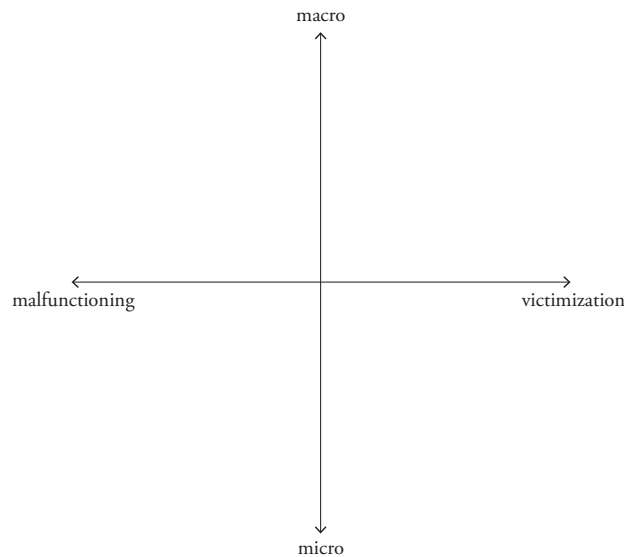
¹¹² This chapter thus treats with some scepticism Putnam's claim that Cavell is "not a founder of movements or a coiner of slogans or a trader in "isms" as well as the fact that Cavell himself claimed perfectionism to be "not a competing moral theory but a dimension of any moral thinking." Resp. Hilary Putnam, "Philosophy as the Education of Grownups," in *Reading Cavell*, ed. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 119. Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, 62.

¹¹³ Illustrative of this idiosyncratic approach is his essay "Being Odd, Getting Even: Threats to Individuality". Here, Cavell takes the William James quote "The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual, The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community." to point to the absence of substantive meaning this claim apparently has. In particular, he is interested in our avoidance to respond to the claim it makes on us through our own self-understanding and lived citizenship. His essay then explores the 'avoidance of this idea', comparing it to the actions of the Modern sceptic philosopher since Descartes, finding a response to both via attention to the ordinary. Stanley Cavell, "Being Odd , Getting Even: Threats To Individuality," *Salmagundi*, no. 67 (1985): 97–128. Stephen Mulhall, a careful interpreter of Cavell, has suggested that attempts to integrate him in the liberal versus communitarian debate miss how he explicitly avoids it, attempts such as the two cited books by Norris.

of the everyday consequences of political apathy and vice-versa, and similarly ‘great texts’ engage in conversation with ‘smaller’ ones such as films and plays. In the following, I try to single out four, non-chronological elements that characterise the overcoming of political apathy: *incessance of the ordinary*, *responsiveness*, *acknowledging the risk of conversation* and *transcending the limitations of a current moral vocabulary*.

A. Incessance of the Ordinary

Political apathy is one of the most persistent threats to the legitimacy of a democratic society and a constant source of concern in the post-war Western public sphere. Nevertheless, it has never become a concentrated or specific field of inquiry (see also General Introduction). A brief sketch of common approaches should illuminate the distinctiveness of Cavell’s approach and terminology. Political apathy is generally approached from one of two opposite directions that can be placed on a horizontal line (see figure 1).



On one side of this division, apathy is conceptualised as a form of *malfunctioning*

within a democratic practice that is otherwise acceptable. Taylor's intervention in the ethics of authenticity to be discussed shortly would fall into that category. Such a view also emerges in pragmatic approaches within political and social science, for instance aiming to alleviate 'shortfalls' via democratic innovation (e.g. see Fung) or to address the disintegration of the age of party democracy (see Mair).¹¹⁴ On the other end of the spectrum, apathy is conceptualised as a symptom of *victimisation* or inherent structural oppression, visible in more radical critiques of capitalist democracy and embodied by for instance Marcuse's work on alienation, Žižek's on interpassivity, or Baudrillard, who sees apathy as a marker of resistance.¹¹⁵

In addition, approaches to political apathy differentiate along the line of a vertical opposition: either on the micro-level, concentrating on the affective and cognitive dimensions of the human individual (see Rosenthal), or focusing on the (macro-meso) economic and institutional structures that can be a factor in political apathy (see Snell).¹¹⁶ In all these approaches, political apathy covers a variety of phenomena such as political indifference, ignorance, resignation, frustration, and disenfranchisement. What ties these terms together is a *lack* or negative amount of political engagement (mental and active), scholars here perceive a gap between a current and a desired sufficient state of subjectivity. Conventionally, *conformism* is seen as a condition where citizens *actively* accept the current state of societal affairs. Contemporary use thus presumes that a conformist feels or shows no 'lack' and acts out of agreement with the status

¹¹⁴ Archon Fung, "Continuous Institutional Innovation and the Pragmatic Conception of Democracy," *Polity* 44, no.4 (2012): 609–24.; Mair, *Ruling The Void: The Hollowing Of Western Democracy*.

¹¹⁵ "do the media neutralize meaning and produce unformed [informed] or informed [informed] masses, or is it the masses who victoriously resist the media by directing or absorbing all the messages that the media produce without responding to them?" Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 84.

¹¹⁶ Rosenthal, "Aggression and Play in the Face of Adversity: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Democratic Resilience."; Patricia Snell, "Emerging Adult Civic and Political Disengagement: A Longitudinal Analysis of Lack of Involvement With Politics," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 25, no. 2 (2010): 258–87.

quo. An example of this can be seen in this citation from a study in 2012: “Generation Y are often regarded as conformists who are committed to ‘making something of themselves’”.¹¹⁷ In the present day, conformism is thus not considered one of the forms of political apathy (negative) but associated with a kind of commitment (positive).

Crucially, Cavell’s philosophy gives a very different meaning to the term conformity. He makes conformity one of the central concepts within his ethical-political work, but this does *not* involve the present-day use of ‘conformism’. Through Cavell’s engagement with the 19th century writing of Emerson, the word ‘conformity’ reappears a century and half later in Cavell’s work to describe a condition similar to what we *today* talk about when we talk about ‘political apathy’. As a descriptive term, it helpfully conflates the characterisation of one individual with the portrayal of a widespread socio-political phenomenon. Perhaps counter-intuitively, these two dimensions should be kept intertwined to understand Cavell’s contribution and not placed in a schematisation that would try to for instance differentiate according to the two axes described above. Conformity, or political apathy, describes a kind of subjectivity as well as a kind of societal organisation. It is neither a malfunctioning of democracy nor a form of victimisation, but democracy’s infinite demand. What is unique to Cavell’s work is his focus on thinking through the conditions of overcoming - or transcending - conformity, and this is done precisely via engaging this interrelation.

Because of his emphasis on the ordinary, and one’s own relationship to language, Cavell is sometimes interpreted as focusing on the pre-political.¹¹⁸ However, I would argue that his work illuminates one’s uncannily intimate

¹¹⁷ Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel, “Social Change and Political Engagement Among Young People: Generation and the 2009/2010 British Election Survey,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 65, no. 1 (January 2012): 19.

¹¹⁸ Daniele Lorenzini, “Performative, Passionate, and Parrhesiastic Utterance: On Cavell, Foucault, and Truth as an Ethical Force,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 2 (2015): 254–68.

relationship to the political. This connects Cavell explicitly to the conundrum posed by the New Sincerity cultural phenomenon: How can such ‘political significance’ be given to films and works of literature that seem to focus on merely ‘moral’ quandaries of the everyday, thus omitting traditional political topics or questions of justice? By drawing our attention to other domains such as the everyday, ordinary language, scepticism and acknowledgment, it creates avenues beyond the boundaries set up by the private versus public, personal versus institutional, questions of the good life versus justice.¹¹⁹ It is precisely the boundary – or difference – between the ethical and the political that is so elusive and pertinent to today’s inability to effectively conceptualise political apathy (see also General Introduction).

Ordinary language and the everyday are crucial sites of moral repair and the overcoming of a kind of disappointment with the world. We are continually negligent of it, taking it for granted instead of being attuned to its power and importance. Cavell describes our *attunement* (or returning) to the ordinary as marked by uncanniness, a Freudian term for uneasy strangeness that for him expresses the instructions of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy:

“He speaks to us quite as if we have become unfamiliar with the world, as if our mechanism of anxiety, which should signal danger, has gone out of order, working too much and too little. The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny. That the familiar is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return means that what returns after skepticism is never (just) the same.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ The affinity between Cavell’s thought and feminism has been received both positively and negatively, it is worth pointing out how his resistance to notions of the private as ‘separate’ echoes feminist opposition to the ‘doctrine of separate spheres’. See also Wheatley’s discussion of feminist critique of Cavell in Catherine Wheatley, *Stanley Cavell and Film: Scepticism and Self-Reliance at the Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

¹²⁰ Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Scepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 166.

Here, the everyday reveals itself as stranger and richer, simultaneously the most intimate and most difficult area of knowledge. Returning to the world signifies the moments of overcoming sceptical avoidance, which can be prompted by pedagogical experiences such as that of particular films or conversations with others. Yet it is not something we can resolutely ‘pass through’ but instead has a repetitive cyclical structure moving between avoidance and acknowledgement, reminiscent of the Schlegelian Romantic oscillating structure of ‘irony’ we saw in Chapter 1. The threat of scepticism is always present, but is overcome in a practical and not theoretical way: via the ordinary.¹²¹ The philosophical instruction of the (Wittgensteinian) ordinary is not a simple revelation but structurally ongoing and radically open-ended, its “seriousness is dependent on disarming our sense of oddness and non-oddness, and there with seeing why it is with the trivial, or superficial, that this philosophy finds itself in oscillation”.¹²² Cavellian perfectionism makes the ordinary central for the counter-intuitive reason that it directs towards the unfamiliar, therefore potentially more dangerous and threatening to the status-quo.

B. Responsiveness

In Cavell’s work conformity is a state of subjectivity in which the vast majority of democratic citizens find themselves. It is not a partial malfunctioning or victimisation, but a structural individual and social misery portrayed “in terms of imprisonment, or voicelessness”.¹²³ It may now be tempting to think Cavell

¹²¹ Honneth describes how: “Cavell’s language theoretical discussion is intended primarily to defend against a false image of interpersonal communication. He maintains that the fabric of social interaction is not, as philosophers often assume, spun out of the material of cognitive acts, but instead out of that of recognitional stances. The reason that we don’t normally have any difficulty understanding the emotional statements of other subjects is that we have already taken up a stance in which the invitation to act contained in these statements appears to us as a self-evident given.” Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 50.

¹²² Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, 167.

¹²³ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, xxxi.

proposes a familiar opposition between the few that ‘speak out’ and a ‘silent’ majority, but this would be a misrepresentation of voice. The problem of voicelessness is metaphorical, akin to the metaphor of the conformist as ‘haunting’ their society.¹²⁴ When society constantly claims to speak for you, what is ignored is *your mutual claim to speak for your society and to do so in terms that are not pre-conditioned*. This thought is fundamental to Cavell’s philosophy: the myth of the social contract creates the suggestion that a conversation of consent has somehow already happened, yet the conversation of consent is one that one actually becomes achieved by having it, as it were, *again*. In doing so, the individual must acknowledge the reciprocal ways oneself and one’s political community can actually ‘speak for each other’. For Cavell, consent means that “I recognise the society and its government, thus constituted, as mine; which means that I am answerable not merely to it, but for it.”¹²⁵ In contrast, and thus locked in disappointment, conformity is a subjectivity that has never put into question the nature of reciprocity between themselves and their society:

“You may or may not take an explicit side in some particular conflict, but unless you find some way to show that this society is not yours, it is; your being compromised by its actions expresses the necessity of your being implicated in them. That you nevertheless avoid express participation or express disavowal is what creates that ghost-state of conformity Emerson articulates endlessly, as our being inane, timid, ashamed, skulkers, leaners, apologetic, noncommittal, a gag, a masquerade, pinched in a corner, cowed, cowards fleeing before a

¹²⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 68–69.

¹²⁵ Cavell, *The Claim of Reason Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, 23.

revolution. [...] Not thus to address the self is to harbor conformity; and I think Emerson invites us to see this as a political choice”¹²⁶

Since the myth of the social contract creates permanent doubt over the existence of consent, facing this doubt can too easily be avoided, aggravated by conformity famously being “the virtue in most request.”¹²⁷ Espen Hammer has described the conformist as follows: “Rather than seeking to define the extent to which he can conceive of himself as author of the social order, the conformist, by failing to estrange himself from prevailing opinion (as well as from himself), lets the community speak for him, yet without interrogating its right to do so.”¹²⁸ While Hammer describe conformity as a kind of unconsciousness, a repressing or forgetting of responsibility, I would argue that Cavell’s work casts conformism as a conscious subjectivity, an unhappy experience resulting in the same form of civic neglect. Cavell’s references to Emerson and Thoreau make conformism an experience of shame, skulking, quiet desperation and secret melancholy; his own words paint conformism as a perpetual pain that seems somehow preferable to the pain of conversion out of it.¹²⁹ It makes a difference if ‘political apathy’ is understood as civic indifference as it most commonly, or as a painfully unfulfilled life.

Cavell traces back his diagnosis from Emerson across to Mill, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud as “threats to individuality” – uncreated life hindering individuation and self-realisation.¹³⁰ This view shifts what is ordinarily described by political apathy – a lack of political engagement – into a lack of political existence, created within a societal structure where it has unfortunately

¹²⁶ Stanley Cavell, “What Is the Emersonian Event? A Comment on Kateb’s Emerson,” *New Literary History* 25, no. 4 (1994): 957.

¹²⁷ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, 37.

¹²⁸ Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (New York: Polity Press, 2002), 132.

¹²⁹ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, xxxi. i

¹³⁰ Cavell, “Being Odd , Getting Even: Threats To Individuality,” 105.

become adequate political engagement. Distinctive to Cavellian perfectionism is its view that overcoming conformity urges transformative social change inseparable from internal change of the self, as well as paying attention on the relatively advantaged, “those in positions for which social injustice or natural misfortune (to themselves) is not an unpostponable issue”.¹³¹ For Cavell, conformity (political apathy as civic neglect) is a dominant trait of modern democracies connected to the legacy of the social contract and the disavowal of consent.

So, how does conversion take place? Cavell’s relative optimism regarding its likelihood stems from his anti-essentialist understanding of the self as always in flux.¹³² Cavellian perfectionism proposes self-reliance as a specific capacity for self-hood that views the self as split between an attained and an unattained self. In brief: the self desires to move away from a present, disappointing self towards a future, unattained, morally desirable self. This unattained, desirable self is part of your imagination through encounters with friends, teachers or fictional worlds that are exemplars of alternate futures. The two halves are knotted together in an open-ended dynamic, where the future self is drawn into the present by the imagination and thus already in some sense attained – but always only partially and always in a state of ‘becoming’. Counter-intuitively, perfectionism represents a non-teleological, open ended dynamic because it does *not* entail thinking “there is one unattained/attainable self we repetitively never arrive at, but rather that “having” “a” self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts.”¹³³ Cavell’s view stems not from deconstruction, but surprisingly from Emerson who provides a negative ontology of the self: “the necessity of selfhood without specifying, in a reductive or absolutist way,

¹³¹ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, xix.

¹³² Rodowick, like Dumm, reads Cavell as compatible with Deleuze even though their views are quite contrary, both see the self as a ‘nonteleological expression of a desire for change or becoming.’ D.N. Rodowick, “Elegy for Theory,” in *Elegy for Theory* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 107.

¹³³ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, 12.

the *contents* of that selfhood” as Cary Wolfe put it.¹³⁴ Here, I also want to signal how Wolfe identifies a persistent danger of over-estimating mental activities at the expense of practical action, a danger I see repeated in other contemporary Romantic philosophies of intervention.¹³⁵ However, I want to concentrate for now on relating sincerity as a practice to the criteria for good citizenship.

The overcoming of apathy is a transformation that is prompted by a desire for change, taking seriously the possibility for the disappointing world to be different. Emphasising this desire, Cavell yields the prompts of these desires as being equal whether they stem from one’s interior life or exterior (from exemplars), arguing that it is in fact impossible to delineate the difference between what is ours and what we *uncannily* recognise in others as ours. What is made central is the importance of *responsiveness*, where either party of a sometimes literal and sometimes metaphorical conversation (through reading, the experience of film, theatre etc.) is of equal, inseparable importance.¹³⁶ For Cavell, possessing a self is not possessive “I have implied that in being an act of creation, it is the exercise not of power but of reception.”¹³⁷ Responsiveness then is the Levinas-esque cultivation of a capacity of openness towards affective, cognitive and aesthetic registers of practices of making claims and ‘manifesting’ something for another.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Cary Wolfe, “Alone with America: Cavell, Emerson, and the Politics of Individualism,” *New Literary History* 25, no. 1 (1994): 138.ts

¹³⁵ Such as Joseph Vogl, *On Tarrying* (London: Seagull Books, 2019).

¹³⁶ Cavell himself can be aloof defining responsiveness, connecting it “to the question of why we speak, as if to make us wonder at the fact of language, which by now we will take as creating wonder at the possibility and the necessity of the political.” Followed by “Philosophy’s first virtue [...] is responsiveness [...] speech is ineffective, is pointless, if someone refuses to listen. [*The Republic* does not say] what counts as listening. Responsiveness, perhaps.” Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, 323-324.

¹³⁷ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 135.

¹³⁸ Political theorist Aletta Norval has written extensively on Cavell’s responsiveness, see: Norval, “Moral Perfectionism and Democratic Responsiveness: Reading Cavell with Foucault.” Norval, “Passionate Subjectivity, Contestation and Acknowledgement: Rereading Austin and Cavell.” Aletta J. Norval, “Making Claims: The Demands of Democratic Subjectivity,” (unpublished) 2007.

In a different vein, Sandra Laugier has presented Cavellian perfectionism as an ethics of care: Sandra Laugier, “The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary,” *New Literary History* 46, no. 2 (2015): 217–40.

Responsiveness is the self's actions of self-interrogation in order to be able to clarify one's self to others, a task that is admittedly difficult, often "time or patience and talent or magnanimity and conscience or perception, in a word, our responsiveness, will run out on our efforts" to make harmonious living with others a practical reality.¹³⁹ That we avoid it nonetheless, is something that we can overcome by a therapeutic acknowledgement of the risk of conversation.

C. Acknowledging the Risk of Conversation

The myth of the social contract creates a demand for conformity, but it does not entirely or categorically determine an outcome of conformity either: the conversation of consent can be had. Cavell names events of life interrogating consent sometimes as adolescence, but like Romantic philosophy's conception of "youth" (meaning childhood), he conceives this not as a chronological phase of life but as an atemporal experience that is encountered through others and especially via narrative artforms.

Cavell's writing on adolescence differs in important ways from Emersonian endorsement of youth's self-indulging brashness. Rather, Cavell describes it as an experience of crisis and discovery, exemplified by Hamlet and Alceste (protagonist of Moliere's *The Misanthrope*) who experience a disgust that has "potential epistemological significance".¹⁴⁰ I will return to coming-of-age in Chapter 4, here I want to focus on the way Cavell stresses the overcoming of adolescent disgust and the desirability of growing up as the giving of consent to adulthood.

¹³⁹ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 185.

¹⁴⁰ "Evidently it must be understood as a mode of disgust, a repugnance at the idea that your life should partake of the world's, that what it does, you do; or is it at the idea that the world's life partakes of yours, that what you feel, it feels? [...] Like Hamlet before you (with his sensitivity to odor, to the rotting), and like the romantics and the existentialists after you, you represent the discovery of adolescence, of that moment at which the worth of adulthood is-except, I suppose, to deep old age-most clearly exposed; at which adulthood *is* the thing you are asked to choose, to consent to." Stanley Cavell, "A Cover Letter to Moliere's *Misanthrope*," in *Themes Out of School* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 99.

Explicitly, Cavell seeks to avoid the debased versions of Romantic authenticity that are ubiquitous in popular culture, such as the illusion of ‘inner exile’ (appearing in Chapter 3). He writes that consent cannot be bartered with as “psychological exile is not exile” and that “the aim of moral perfectionism is to recall the wish to participate, not to be an outsider critiquing”.¹⁴¹ Rather than celebrate ‘rebellious’ adolescence, he is concerned with how we can ‘grow up’ while paying attention to how far we go to avoid it. In a familiar pattern for Cavell’s philosophy, the self finds itself thrown into a condition – such as language, consent, or the marriages in the ‘re-marriage comedies’ – that has yet to be somehow achieved ‘again’ by a conversion away from avoidance.¹⁴² It means that the acknowledgement between the self and world needs to be achieved repeatedly because *there are no impersonal structures* to guarantee meaning absolutely.

Because of this guiding idea, Cavell is neither a communitarian nor an individualist. Espen Hammer describes Cavell’s political subjectivity as a reflexive response: “On the Rousseauian view he recommends, citizenship implies an obligation to seek a discovery of my own position, i.e. self-knowledge, so as to reveal with whom I am in community, that is, how far we can speak for each other.”¹⁴³ Hammer, however, makes Cavell sound too close to Taylor’s dialogical (communitarian) approach, even if it emphasises how political existence is achieved by the discovery of one’s community (or absence of community). Instead, for Cavell, membership of a community is inherently fragile and cannot be guaranteed by any external or physical standards. This parallels his work on philosophical scepticism, which traced the sources of

¹⁴¹ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*. 107 and 18 respectively.

¹⁴² The myth of the social contract means that we find ourselves under a false premise that consent has taken place, yet ‘the conversation’ (responsive, always with others) must take place ‘again’ to break out of a very normalised state of apathy.

¹⁴³ Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Scepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary*, 130.

disappointment in knowledge – as scepticism – stemming from a desire for impersonal structures to guarantee the meaning of our words. The conformist, like the epistemological sceptic, is one who refuses to be responsible for meaning what they say and lets impersonal structures, such as the myth of consent, go uninterrogated. In order to overcome this, the discovery of the meaning of one's words must make one's *everyday life and ordinary language* into the 'scene of instruction'. Cavell describes Romanticism as the inheritor of Luther's transformation of everyday life as replacing sacrament and ritual through art, "All our experience of life should be baptismal in character," and Thomas Dumm termed Cavell's philosophy a 'politics of the ordinary'.¹⁴⁴

The interrogation of everyday life and ordinary language happens with others, in *response* to demands, and most clearly in Cavell's examples, through art. Recent scholarship has devoted much attention to the compatibility between Cavell's perfectionism and later Foucault's care of the self, but this scholarship in some cases (see Lorenzini) casts Cavellian perfectionism as concerning the 'pre-political'.¹⁴⁵ Yet Cavell's overarching project has been to claim there to be no distinction. His 'Emersonian' perfectionism in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* connects moral despair to epistemological scepticism, proposing the same cure to their shared form of tragedy:

"the connection between the epistemological and the moral threat to human existence lies in companion ways in which we give over the little crossroads of perspective and freedom at our disposal - in morality through conformity [...] In epistemology through an apparently innate perverseness, stripping ourselves of our shared criteria, opting for false totalities [...] In the context of democracy [...]; and in the hands of perfectionist philosophers, among whom I count Wittgenstein and

¹⁴⁴ Stanley Cavell, "A Matter of Meaning It," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 229.

¹⁴⁵ Lorenzini, "Performative, Passionate, and Parrhesiastic Utterance: On Cavell, Foucault, and Truth as an Ethical Force."

Heidegger: -where ethics is present but is no longer a separate study-
the voicing of every word that arrives, as if replacing each by itself,
becomes a moral act.”¹⁴⁶

This discovery of our speaking always in position to others, and of our responses and judgments within a shared form of life, makes the political as intimate a use of language and is founded on his Wittgensteinian view of language. Late in his career, Cavell reformulated this in terms of Austinian ordinary language philosophy via his addition of the passionate utterance “in service of something I want from moral theory, namely a systematic recognition of speech as confrontation, as demanding, as owed [...] each instance of which directs, and risks, if not costs, blood.”¹⁴⁷ This recognition of the profound stakes in our *ordinary* conversation, of fragility and risk, is an important and unique element of *the Cavellian conversion*.

The passionate utterance is a concept Cavell has not explicitly linked with the overcoming of conformity, but it helpfully illuminates *and* expands the perfectionist conversion from an apathy that centres on responsiveness – but which is often avoided, as it is painful. A conversion from apathy is similar to a passionate utterance, as “an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire”.¹⁴⁸ A passionate utterance is “a view of expression, of recognizing language as everywhere revealing desire” and in exchanges others also a very risky one.¹⁴⁹ Whereas, in a performative utterance, failures are correctable via a more adequate use of socially and legally organised conventions, a failure in a passionate address puts the future of a relationship “as part of my sense of my

¹⁴⁶ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, 124.

¹⁴⁷ In the “Performative and Passionate Utterance” text Cavell expands Austin’s ‘performative utterances’ in speech act theory, which analyses ‘words as deeds’ by dividing them into locutions (utterances), illocutions (intended actions) and perlocutions (effects on listeners). The passionate utterance considers the perlocutionary effects of utterances (what is done *by* saying something) in the same spirit as Austin’s work on performative utterance. Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 187.

¹⁴⁸ Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 185.

¹⁴⁹ Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 187.

identity, or my existence, radically at stake”.¹⁵⁰ A passionate address transforms desire into consequence:

“In acknowledging a mode of speech in or through which, by acknowledging my desire in confronting you, I declare my standing with you and single you out, demanding a response in kind from you, and a response now, so making myself vulnerable to your rebuke, thus staking our future”.¹⁵¹

Retrospectively, Cavell’s work on the passionate utterance reveals why the perpetual pain of conformity is sometimes preferred to the pain of conversion. In a contemporary world of fragile social bonds, sometimes described as liquid modernity or risk-society,¹⁵² our bonds with each other can be identified as too fragile for such scrutiny. The American anthropologist Nina Eliasoph describes a similar pattern in her book *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life*, finding in her (pre-social media age) research that only very strong interpersonal bonds were deemed ‘safe’ to speak about politics.¹⁵³ In public life, the topic of politics seemed best to be avoided out of risk of losing these ‘liquid’ social bonds.

Yet from the Cavellian perspective, belonging to a community was neither secure nor pre-given, not now ‘lost’. Each person can become able to carry the burden of this fragility within the robustness of our ordinary language, the very place able to return to us our own meaning in a shared ‘form of life’ – not a meaning returned in terms of eloquent articulation but as an embedded, expressive practice of responsiveness. The fear of the political – call it

¹⁵⁰ Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 184.

¹⁵¹ Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, 185.

¹⁵² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); Barbara Adam, Ulrich Beck, and Joost Van Loon, *The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000).

¹⁵³ Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

N.B this is a book that predates the arrival of mass Internet and social media communication.

conformity or apathy – relocates to the beginning of the political within in our own language use. In learning to embrace the ordinary, the fear of the political becomes an issue that can be overcome. This acknowledgment happens perhaps too quickly in this presentation, but is detailed in his readings of artistic works that enact these kinds of therapeutic conversions.

D. Overcoming the Limits of Current Moral Vocabulary

Cavell considers these encounters or ‘conversations’ in detail in their various forms, from a conversation that discloses the meaning of one’s words, to aesthetic encounters with narrative forms of art such as film, literature or theatre, to exchanges of utterances that do not merely involve spoken language. What they share is, again, how the terms for encounters in a community cannot be given or pre-conditioned. What if the moral failures of a society cannot be expressed in the moral terms made available by this society? What if a refusal to use those words becomes precisely that which is able to express society’s shortcomings? The latter has been the guiding idea of Cavell’s analysis of the role of Nora – her exemplar enactments of change and departure – in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* within “The Conversation of Justice: Rawls and the Drama of Consent” in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*. Here, Nora is able to ‘manifest’ the moral failures of her world even though the moral vocabulary of her time does not make it possible to articulate reasons for its shortcomings.¹⁵⁴ She is thus able to transcend limitations by demonstrating a particular knowledge about the need for change. The perfectionist intervention lies in developing ways to let our desires, exemplified by Nora, lead us to become representative for one another. Here, instead of deliberating for the purpose of winning an argument, it aims to ‘manifest’ to the other another way. Disappointment is overcome

¹⁵⁴ Aletta Norval uses the term ‘manifesting for another’ in Norval, “Moral Perfectionism and Democratic Responsiveness: Reading Cavell with Foucault.”

through this experiential practice, disclosing its importance - the meaning of our words - through the discovery of our shared criteria within the realm of the ordinary and everyday.

The fourth and final Cavellian element of transformation is then finding ways to transcend the limitations of a current moral vocabulary. The aforementioned Cavellian practice of discovery is neither peaceful nor permanent, stemming from “the instability of, finding and maintaining a communal life.”¹⁵⁵ As he is neither an individualist nor a communitarian, the idea is that scepticism is something that can be overcome via acknowledgement:

“The fantasy of aloneness in the world may be read to say that the step out of aloneness, say out of self-absorption, has to come without the assurance of others. (Not, perhaps, without help.) "No one comes" is a tragedy for a child. For a grown-up it means the time has come to be the one who goes first. To this way of thinking, politics ought to have provided conditions for companionship, call this fraternity; but its price has been the suppression, not the affirmation, of otherness, that is to say, of difference and of sameness, call these liberty and equality. A mission of this thinking is never to let politics forget this.”¹⁵⁶

However, the emphasis in Cavellian perfectionism lies in an ethos of forgiveness towards such disappointments and setbacks, recognising in these disappointed positions the human, yet undemocratic, desire for impersonal structures. Despite this more optimistic, forgiving orientation, Cavellian perfectionism has found resonance in agonistic and Foucauldian schools of political philosophy, contributing to thinking a democratic ethos that can accommodate previously excluded manifestations of democratic claims. Both share an aversion to moral prescription (normative prescriptions and deliberation). In tandem, the Taylorian ethics of authenticity, which emphasises the capacity for articulation

¹⁵⁵ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, 123. 3

¹⁵⁶ Cavell, “Being Odd , Getting Even: Threats To Individuality,” 114.

of moral matters, lies closer to the Habermasian deliberative school of democracy that does not want to avoid taking normative positions.

The affinity of Stanley Cavell's philosophy with New Sincerity emerges in how responsiveness to the ordinary is central to a rediscovery of the political and in how it foregrounds the use of language against a backdrop of a fragile democratic culture. In Chapter 4, however, the ability to transcend the limits of a current moral vocabulary will turn out to be much more difficult. New Sincerity struggles with what Charles Taylor termed 'articulation' and made a central criterium for the ethos of sincerity, as well as with the limited possibilities for conversation in 'liquid' modern societies. Before turning to Taylor, I will introduce the insights of Lionel Trilling on sincerity's evolution.

2.3 Lionel Trilling's Differentiation of Sincerity and Authenticity

What is the difference between sincerity and authenticity and why are these ideals so important? In his influential work *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), Lionel Trilling describes how the ideal of sincerity has formed the centre of moral life in Western culture since the advent of the Modern world. The question of sincerity is tied to the rise of Modernity and its human-centred revolutions of knowledge, society and religion. Simply put, you cannot ask of Abraham 'if he is sincere' the way you can of Hamlet. Originating in the 16th century, the word first described the purity of objects such as gold (*sine cera*, without wax) but soon referred to humans with "absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretence."¹⁵⁷ Trilling links the new fascination with sincerity – an element of moral life itself – to the period's historical context: the advent of social mobility and leaving one's role assigned by birth and (feudal) rank. Trilling's recounts the centuries-

¹⁵⁷ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), 13.

spanning evolution of sincerity against an implied but unmentioned background of fundamental change: the rise of cities, the revolution of the Reformation, industrialisation, colonialism, disenchantment and so on. All is absorbed into this ever-evolving Modern ideal.¹⁵⁸

Clearly, sincerity involves much more than the absence of pretence. One example of a chapter in the evolving life of sincerity is Trilling's description of how it became the pride talent of English Calvinists in order to speak plainly, meaning "telling the offensive truth to those who had no wish to hear it."¹⁵⁹ This is of course nothing like the present-day custom of speaking 'personal truth' in order to justify one's disagreeable self-expression. The Calvinists made sincerity central to a radical reinvention of politics where "partisanship is based not upon discrete practical issues but upon a formulated conception of what society is and a prophecy of what it is to be."¹⁶⁰ Within the example of the English Calvinists, you can see one root of sincerity's connotation with normative speech and ideological declaration, and this dimension of sincerity re-emerges in unacknowledged form in cultural criticism debate in the 2010s. Because this example is just *one modulation* of ideas regarding sincerity traced by Trilling within intellectual history, it makes sense to describe his steps through history as identifications of different *structures of feeling*.¹⁶¹ Each is expressed differently within literature and philosophy, each structure of feeling has slightly different (metaphysical) conceptions of selfhood, inter-personal ethics and

¹⁵⁸ It is important to note that Trilling does not present a singular teleology, he describes how sincerity has fallen out of favor in the middle 20th century, superseded by authenticity. Amanda Anderson points out his favoring a "dialectic between the movement of social and political critique (underwritten by the informing ideal of sincerity) and a transgressive authenticity (which seeks to go beyond sincerity and insincerity)" in Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*, 166. As Charles Taylor emphasises in the conclusion of *Sources of the Self*, multiple historical ideals endure in present time in a heterogenous culture.

¹⁵⁹ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 22.

¹⁶⁰ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 21.

¹⁶¹ Trilling does not use the term 'structure of feeling', although he references another work by Raymond Williams. Trilling describes many modulations of the ideal and gives a few instances a label such as the 'disintegrated consciousness' role of sincerity for Hegel, and the 'honest soul' conception exemplified by Jane Austen's literary era. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 73-81.

political principles. Sincerity is both an ideal and a Modern human ‘quality’ that shaped self-conception and self-understanding. As conceptions of sincerity and conceptions of the self are entangled, when one changes so does the other.

Trilling traced the evolution of the ideal from Early Modernity to its present in 1970, a highpoint in the Western cultural revolution of individualism or ‘the age of authenticity’ (Taylor). As mentioned earlier, I want to highlight the differentiation Trilling makes between sincerity in authenticity as modes of self-understanding and orientation of action in a shared world. The historical changes Trilling describes in the book also present a very moderately phrased work of intervention. Beginning as lectures, the book is an objection to the way the ideal has transformed since the late 19th century into the omnipresent ideal of authenticity that still saturates our popular culture.

The Invention of Sincerity, Individual and Society

Characteristic for sincerity is its emergences *alongside* two other 16th century concepts: the individual (protagonist of autobiographical writing) and ‘society’. Society came to be radically different from kingdom, realm or commonwealth, understood as something other than human but having a life of its own. The historical changes in human understanding of selfhood is intertwined with Modernity’s vast and fundamental revisions of communal organisation.¹⁶² Within the Modern conception of society, sincerity takes on a role that can anachronistically be called the *intermediate* and third entity between individual and society:

¹⁶² “An aggregate of individual human beings, 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. Society is a kind of entity different from a kingdom or realm; and even ‘commonwealth’, as Hobbes uses that word, seems archaic to denote what he has in mind. Historians of European culture are in substantial agreement that, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, something like a mutation in human nature took place.” Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 19.

“A salient trait of society [...], is that it is available to critical examination by individual persons, especially by those who make it their business to scrutinize the polity, the class of men we now call intellectuals. The purpose of their examination is not understanding alone but understanding as it may lead to action: the idea of society includes the assumption that a given society can be changed if the judgement passed upon it is adverse.”¹⁶³

I want to argue that the significance of sincerity – the source for its millennial reevaluation – lies in its possibility to imply moral and political ideals; A pragmatic and everyday theory of ‘the middle-range’ of the social. It signifies a *practice of action* linking individual and society but is also, surprisingly, a rather *blank canvas* to think about their mutual obligations.¹⁶⁴

What, however, does concept of sincerity entail? As the reputation of Hamlet’s troubled life may suggest, it is not as simple as “congruence between avowal and actual feeling” because social conventions shape what we can avow, say, and do.¹⁶⁵ In the Modern world, conduct becomes as much guided by social conventions as by personal intentions, with particular emphasis on ‘sincere’ self-presentation. Yet sincerity is often in conflict with other social codes, such as demanded respect for hierarchies, rules, powerful uncles, and so on, it is thus governed by increasingly complex and dynamic power relations. This makes the ‘fulfilment’ of sincerity more difficult to judge, even to the actor themselves speaking and acting in the world.

Sincerity is almost a paradox, nearly impossible to achieve. Once it becomes an external societal ‘obligation’ of conduct, it can become a conventionally influenced performance and therefore pretence; To pretend to

¹⁶³ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 26–27.

¹⁶⁴ It is a colloquial ancestor to the more juridically grounded concept of autonomy. Honneth, *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*.

¹⁶⁵ From Trilling’s description of convention: “The word as we now use it refers primarily to a congruence between avowal and actual feeling.” Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 2.

be without pretence is of course not sincerity, but conventional self-presentation. In addition, the freedom and autonomy that the ideal of sincerity requires has always been downplayed. Sincerity as ‘the ethos of modernity’ is plagued by its *relationality*, the sting appears in the last part of the earnest speech delivered by Polonius to Hamlet: “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.”¹⁶⁶ This famous speech is however, as Trilling saliently points out, delivered by the play’s most obsequious character: only Polonius could claim things to be this simple. Sincerity as an impossible demand drives the changing, evolving history of sincerity; one that includes structures of feeling that stress how society is a source of corruption of the individual (Rousseau being an exemplary figure, but also Marx) and others that see the individual as the source of corruption of society (Robespierre). Sincerity represents a third term, together with self and society, in a historically evolving tri-part model that changes after the advent of authenticity into a self-society binary model. So, what are the differences for citizenship?

When the ideal of sincerity was superseded by the post-Romantic ideal of authenticity at the end of the 19th century, sincerity fell out of fashion. After Romanticism, the artwork and the artist become the model for revitalising the ‘sentiment of being’ within an oppressive, highly developed culture. Authenticity is therefore not as burdened by relational-conventional demands as sincerity. The work of art’s newly privileged status is to give spiritual substance to life and that substance is centred on its singular power of autonomy.¹⁶⁷ Authenticity has

¹⁶⁶ Quoted in Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 3.

¹⁶⁷ Notice Trilling’s evocation of the Joan Didion counterculture-describing phrase of a ‘centre not holding’ during 1960s rise of self-involved culture, later called the ‘Me generation’. Trilling describes the Romantic understanding of sentiment of being as different from this new ideal of authenticity: “The sentiment of being is the sentiment of being strong. Which is not to say powerful: Rousseau, Schiller, and Wordsworth are not concerned with energy directed outward upon the world in aggression and dominance, but, rather, with such energy as contrives that *the centre shall hold*, that the circumference of the self-keep unbroken, that the person be an integer, impenetrable, perdurable, and autonomous in being if not in action.” My emphasis in Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 99.

some elements of being modelled on the artist (such as creative expression) but it is above all a more thing-like conception, more in danger of reification, although this is not a word Trilling uses. Crucially, there is the qualitative difference between approaching something as a thing or as a process. Where sincerity represents veracity of one's behaviour only achievable in *practice*, authenticity is an understanding of selfhood modelled on the uniqueness of art as *object*:

“The work of art is itself authentic by reason of its entire self-definition: it is understood *to exist wholly by the laws of its own being*, which include the right to embody painful ignoble, or socially unacceptable subject-matters. Similarly, the artist seeks his personal authenticity in his entire autonomousness-his goal is to be as self-defining as the art-object he creates. As for the audience, its expectation is that through its communication with the work of art, which may be resistant, unpleasant, even hostile, it acquires the authenticity of which *the object itself is the model* and the artist the personal example.”¹⁶⁸

It is a radical change of dynamic towards society, even though Trilling finds authenticity “a more strenuous moral experience than ‘sincerity’” and “a more exigent conception of the self and what being true to it consists in.”¹⁶⁹ Former dogmas that “once thought to make up the very fabric of culture has come to seem of little account, mere fantasy or ritual or downright falsification.”¹⁷⁰ Trilling nods to how life became more permissive, materialistic and secular over the 20th century, acknowledging that authenticity has given moral authority to aspects of society that had been excluded, such as “disorder, violence, unreason.”¹⁷¹ Yet intrinsically, authenticity undermines the reciprocity with

¹⁶⁸ My emphasis in Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 99–100.

¹⁶⁹ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 11.

¹⁷⁰ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 11.

¹⁷¹ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 11.

society so characteristic for sincerity: for example in Jane Austen's dialectical (and ironic) literature, characters are only completed in society, never in themselves.¹⁷² Milnes and Sinanan's later study of English language Romanticism *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity* (2010) re-affirms Trilling's assessment of authenticity, describing how:

“the allusion to an external source as authority disappears into its obverse, so that ‘authenticity now signifies a moral strength not based primarily on formal or institutional authority’. As modern subjectivity assumes an increasingly commanding position, authority moves indoors”.¹⁷³

Within the ideal of authenticity, inwardness gains a *new form* of moral authority, one that can become isolated (de-transcendentalised) and isolating (not dialogical).

What creates this change, why is authenticity less reciprocal with society? The new importance of interiorisation came out of the 19th century Romantic aesthetic revolution that made art the model for new doxa of self-creation and self-definition. It may not appear so from the ‘self-celebrating’ connotations authenticity has in today's popular culture, but authenticity is a polemical ideal: a demand to scrutinise received opinion, habits, tastes and social consensus.¹⁷⁴ Trilling reminds us of the forgotten violent meaning of the Greek word within the Romantic revolution:

“Authenteo: to have full power over; also, to commit a murder. Authentēs: not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer, even a self-murderer, a suicide. These ancient and forgotten denotations bear upon the nature and intention of the artistic culture of

¹⁷² Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 81.

¹⁷³ Tim Milnes and Kerry Sinanan, “Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity,” in *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity*, ed. Tim Milnes and Kerry Sinanan (Routledge, 2010), 5.

¹⁷⁴ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 94.

the period [...] Sometimes we are a little puzzled to understand why this art was greeted upon its first appearance with so violent a resistance, forgetting how much violence there was in its creative will, how ruthless an act was required to assert autonomy in a culture schooled *in duty and in obedience to peremptory and absolute law*,”¹⁷⁵

Such ruthlessness in asserting one’s autonomy does not sit well with the present-day valuation of Romantic self-creation that has become a socially approved framework for living (“I did it *my way*”). Yet the danger of authenticity appears immediately in Trilling’s paradigmatic example of the new ideal: the character Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* marks the historical turning point in 1899 when authenticity eclipses sincerity. Kurtz’s authenticity impresses the novel’s protagonist in spite and *because* of his monstrousness – an allure nowadays best remembered via Marlon Brando’s star turn among Vietnam atrocities in *Apocalypse Now*. Trilling writes of the novel: “the evil of Kurtz is authentic because it is a triumph of ‘being’ over the inauthenticity of life, which has become a different relational context for it.”¹⁷⁶ Trilling admires many aspects of authenticity; it can be admired as ‘evil’ in the context of triumph of the human self against the inauthenticity of the world. But what are his concerns regarding the effects of this ideal to the idea of political engagement and civic belonging?

While Trilling’s post-1968 work was not a pessimistic denouncement for the era’s authentic structure of feeling, his work already picks up two important factors that will indeed be undermining to citizenship in the ‘age of authenticity’. These are the belief in an unconditioned or *original self* and the loss of the *story-function* of life. The first quality Trilling describes a deeply mistaken

¹⁷⁵My emphasis in Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 131. Trilling uses the LSJ dictionary definition. I find it interesting that a recent American biblical dictionary gives us a description that evokes gun culture, see “*authentēō* (from 846 / *autós*, “self” and *entea*, “arms, armor”) – properly, to *unilaterally take up arms*, i.e. acting as an *autocrat* – literally, *self-appointed* (acting without submission)” Accessed 2 August 202, <https://biblehub.com/greek/831.htm>

¹⁷⁶ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 133.

affirmation “not by the young alone” of the unconditioned nature of the self¹⁷⁷, also called the view of an “antecedent personality core”.¹⁷⁸ Trilling’s argument against authenticity is an intricate, searching one, which only touches 20th century secularisation and its new weightless (meaning secular) conception of the self, as he grapples with the difficult legacy of Freud for the view of the self as culturally conditioned. What is key for my argument, is that the post-1960s ideal of living in accordance with one’s uniqueness *alters* Romantic ideas into a belief that strips away what is central to the evolution of sincerity: the self as reciprocal with society through *practical* sincerity. Milnes and Sinanan write how the idea of authenticity brought with it a belief in an authoritative *origin* or essence, an originating intention and volition. This view of authenticity as ‘unique core’ explains the re-valuation of sincerity in the 21st century, emerging after authenticity’s ‘triumph’:

“In the period with which we are concerned, an authentic thing is becoming less a prototypical or original thing, and more a genuine thing, that is, something that really proceeds from its origin – in the case of writing, the intending consciousness of the writer. This in turn touches on the concern that forms the core of this volume, for it is an important consequence of the realignment of authenticity that sincerity’s role in discourse acquires a newly privileged status. As the idea of the authentic hardens around a core, internal self, and the social is increasingly experienced as ‘other’, so sincerity takes on the burden of maintaining and reinforcing intersubjective norms.”¹⁷⁹

It may be obvious to see the devolved versions of authenticity in 21st century language of ‘personal branding’, our DNA and ‘unique selling point’ that stress a reified *uniqueness* and distinction in self-presentation. But the sources of this

¹⁷⁷ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 56.

¹⁷⁸ Honneth, *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, 36.

¹⁷⁹ Milnes and Sinanan, “Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity,” 6.

transformation are more complicated than 'Romanticism gone bad'. The ideal of authenticity as self-constituted, monological, and autonomous is older and more archaic. Counter-intuitively, Trilling confessed to finding the archaic view of an unchanging self to be appealing and comforting.¹⁸⁰ Whether or not one subscribes to the archaic, almost essentialist metaphysics of the self or to a more dynamic one, the ethos of authenticity that Trilling describes is the same; as is his account of the meaning that authenticity as *original self* has taken on in the post-war Western world, which can be detrimental to citizenship.

The difference between this authenticity and 'old' sincerity is the absence of the reciprocal dynamic between self and society occupied by sincerity's "maintaining and reinforcing intersubjective norms"¹⁸¹ that so drives its millennial re-valuation as antidote to political apathy and civic neglect. The sting in old sincerity is that the ultimately deciding party is *external* and not merely internal, or as Hamlet is told: "Thou canst not then be false *to* any man." Irreconcilably different is the modern ethos of authenticity, built solely on the component "to thine own self be true".

Trilling's second concern is the loss of *story-based* reflexive ideas of individuation, the Jungian term he uses that means self-realisation as a process of increasing wholeness via integration with *the world*. When culture loses sight of individuation and the story function of life, the "generic atom" directly becomes a "social atom"¹⁸² – a view of the human as only very superficially 'social', discarding any difficulty or endurance. When Trilling considers the loss

¹⁸⁰ "I think that what I've been calling the categorical mode of judgment - that this is the way we are, that we stand fixed and unchanging and not to be excused - applies very properly to oneself. This is a very old-fashioned view - I call it archaic in the passage I cited - but it's one I find I do respond to. [...] But if I confront myself in my dark hours, or possibly my bright hours, I find that I am an essence, I am there, I am as it were a completed thing, for good or bad - not a completed thing really, but I am as I am. And I find that a comfort" Lionel Trilling et al., "Sincerity and Authenticity: A Symposium," *Salmagundi* Spring, no. 41 (1978): 89. See also the 'honest soul' discussion in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 79-90.

¹⁸¹ Milnes and Sinanan, "Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity," 6.

¹⁸² Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 165.

of the story function of life created by fetishising isolation, his carefully worded concern suddenly escalates in the book's final words:

“no expression of disaffection from the social existence was ever so desperate as this eagerness to say that authenticity of personal being is achieved through an ultimate isolateness and through the power that this is presumed to bring. The falsities of an alienated social reality are rejected in favour of an upward psychopathic mobility to the point of divinity, each one of us a Christ but with none of the inconveniences of undertaking to intercede, of being a sacrifice, of reasoning with rabbis, of making sermons, of having disciples, of going to weddings and to funerals, of beginning something and at a certain point remarking that it is finished.”¹⁸³

What Trilling appears to be lamenting through the disappearing ‘story function of life’ in post-1960s authenticity is the loss of narrativisation as *future exposition*. Storytelling is as necessary for a democratic public as it is for a citizen, the absence of a collective practice of narrativisation compounds the inability of the citizen being able to project one’s life into the future – that extends beyond it. Trilling writes, drawing on Benjamin, that “the impulse to impart instruction [is] a defining characteristic of storytelling and [is] a condition of its vitality”.¹⁸⁴ In other words, narrativisation is constitutive of the possibility of critique and in particular the formation of secondary level critique that “makes it possible to sustain ideological struggle, but assumes a supply of concepts and schemas making it possible to connect the historical situations people intend to criticise with values that can be universalised.”¹⁸⁵ The loss of such ‘scripts’ for individuation undermines the ability to tell stories of a common future with, to and for others.

¹⁸³ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 171–72.

¹⁸⁴ “Walter Benjamin speaks of the impulse to impart instruction as a defining characteristic of storytelling and as a condition of its vitality. Storytelling, he says, is oriented towards ‘practical interests’; it seeks to be ‘useful’; it ‘has counsel’ to give; the end it has in view is ‘wisdom!’” Trilling, 84,

¹⁸⁵ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 36.

Authenticity is an ideal that in its temporal dimension is presentist. However, the loss of narrativisation of an integrated social life, and thus the diminishment of unfolding story-templates for our self-understanding, can deteriorate *within all sincere forms* of democratic citizenship. Against a backdrop of accelerating social change – made possible by capitalism’s global restructuration and the retreat of welfare government – life for most citizens in the late 20th century is marked by the increase of uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety. In what Bauman calls ‘liquid modernity’ the ability of projecting one’s life into the future becomes almost impossible.¹⁸⁶ Life-stories based on sincerity can no longer modelled on the post-war year’s relative stability of place, work relations, and social conventions. In contrast, ritual culture with its emphasis on action over ‘mental meanings’ and “formalism, reiteration, and externally dictated obligations”¹⁸⁷ is less vulnerable to the loss of common scripts for the future that so undermines sincerity as an ideal for citizenship. Even if the problem is most obvious in the presentist ideal of authenticity (modelled on post-Romantic art) the more intersubjective or social conceptions of sincerity also will struggle to find solutions for this aspect of individualistic societies. We will see shortly how Taylor’s work tries to reconstruct a vigorous citizenship that is actively in dialogue about its values to shape a story of a collective future. Yet, the question will remain if sincere ‘future exposition’ is likely in 21st century ‘liquid’ Western societies.

2.4 Charles Taylor’s Redemptive Reading

As announced, Taylor’s recasting of authenticity is unusual and contradicts the dominant emphasis on inwardly located moral authority. He does so through a

¹⁸⁶ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*. Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

¹⁸⁷ Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2008), 9.

rational reminder of the way norms are held in common through the practice of valuing (what matters to someone) and expressive communication. First, I will explain why Taylor has a divergent view of authenticity and why I believe it unconvincing to ‘those in the culture’, whose understanding he explicitly seeks to improve. Then, I want to present the nonetheless vital criteria he gives for how ‘sincerity’ can become a route back to vigorous citizenship from a state of apathy (as democratic neglect). These elements stress, on the one hand, the concept of *articulation*, which signifies the way people can put into words (or other forms of communication) what matters to them and what would contribute to the realisation of their claims. On the other hand, the prominence of non-self-referential ideals and values, understood as communitarian or *civic matters*, are of equal importance

First, however, is the question why Taylor presents such a different label than Trilling in *The Ethics of Authenticity*. He sidesteps Trilling’s objections that authenticity is a devolution of sincerity and simply uses authenticity as the term for both ideals but that does not mean he simply remakes ‘old sincerity’.¹⁸⁸ In contradiction to Trilling’s project regarding the crucial change from Sincerity (since the 16th century) to Authenticity (end of 19th century), Taylor sees a single ‘powerful moral ideal’.¹⁸⁹ One explanation for his departure could be that while Trilling sees authenticity emerge from Romanticist practices, as is the dominant view, but Taylor sees ‘sincerity’s’ origins in late 18th century Enlightenment, thus drawing it closer to the rational-analytical tradition.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Where Trilling traces sincerity’s origins in the 16th century (cf) and literature, Taylor sees it born later, at the end of the 18th century, building on earlier forms of individualism in philosophy (Descartes, Locke). Taylor argues that the ideal is a child of the Romantic period and critical of disengaged rationality and the atomism that misrecognises the ties of community. See Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 25.

¹⁸⁹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 15.

¹⁹⁰ Taylor sees the ethic of authenticity emerging in the 18th century as a counter-position to a rival (Lockean) calculatory view, drawing from the work of Francis Hutcheson. See Taylor, 26. And Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 248–65. While Trilling saw authenticity as an unintended outcome of the 19th century’s aesthetic revolution, see Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 99.

Taylor builds his own version of authenticity, beginning with an 18th century view that human moral sense is anchored in feelings - an intuitive feeling of right and wrong, which combated a rival view of morality as a cold calculus of consequences. Morality thus becomes – the proposal goes – experienced as a voice within. This re-orientation forms part of a much older “massive subjective turn of modern culture”¹⁹¹ towards the notion of a source within, inwardness or having inner depths.¹⁹² In stark contrast to authenticity’s Greek etymology of individual unilateral violence, Taylor sees it as “a continuation and intensification of the development inaugurated by Saint Augustine, who saw the road to God as passing through our own reflexive awareness of ourselves.”¹⁹³ Authenticity is simply the continuation of inwardness as a ‘moral source’ instead of being a post-Romantic approach to selfhood that is *separate* and *self-generating* as in Trilling’s definition.

Taylor simply sees authenticity developing from a displacement in the moral accent of inwardness, when listening to a voice within is no longer a means to an end (listening to a voice within to know ‘what is right’) but becomes *an end in itself*. “Being in touch with our moral feelings [...] comes to be something we have to attain to be true and full human beings.”¹⁹⁴ Two further developments bring him to the present-day. The first is exemplified by Rousseau’s ‘sentiment of being’, where morality is the practice of following a voice of nature within us, which is often drowned out by others and society.¹⁹⁵ The Rousseauian view of inwardness is still in continuation with the theistic and transcendental Augustinian road. Going inward was thus assured its ‘way out’ again via our spiritual wholeness as *in-dividuals* (like the Early Romantic in-

¹⁹¹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 26.

¹⁹² *The Ethics of Authenticity* presents a concise, accessible version of the arguments of *Sources of the Self* which is a genealogy of three major moral sources.

¹⁹³ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 26–27.

¹⁹⁴ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 26.

¹⁹⁵ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 27.

dividual, see van Rooden in C. 1). But the second development, associated with Herder, makes the inward road more fractured. Taylor will then try to mend these fractures via the emphasis on dialogism.

The second variant Taylor identifies is the Herderian idea of originality or uniqueness where every human possesses their own unique *measure*. An idea that may be relatively new but has become deeply engrained in modern consciousness.¹⁹⁶ It has created the popular credo of going inward to find *yourself* – where individuality means distinctiveness. However, Taylor differs again from Trilling’s opposition to consequences of modelling ourselves on the qualities of a unique work of art. Where Trilling saw destructive, wrong views of the self that divorced humans from the ‘story function of life’ and becoming thus more object-like¹⁹⁷, Taylor redraws it under the umbrella of the right to difference. He sees it as a vital moral ideal in Modernity that can oppose instrumental reason, similar to Marshall Berman’s proposal in 1971.¹⁹⁸ Instead of finding a model to live outside yourself (as social conformity and imitation) you must find it within via *expressive* practices, inevitably in dialogue because of the inextricable role of language for autonomy: “Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realising a potentiality that is properly my own.”¹⁹⁹ Even if Taylor readily and often admits that this belief fuels mostly degraded, absurd and trivial forms of authenticity that are pervasive today. He wants to repair authenticity by drawing attention to the correct foundations of the ideal, which presumes the giving of reasons and justifications, bringing it closer to deliberativism. In the following, I explain why Taylor’s

¹⁹⁶ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 28.

¹⁹⁷ I am using Taylor’s both subject and object terminology from *A Secular Age*. Trilling also used the Jungian term ‘individuation’ as well as the story function.

¹⁹⁸ Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971).

¹⁹⁹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 29.

definition of authenticity is unhelpful. While perhaps a normatively better and thus more desirable view, it is Trilling's definition that is closer to how authenticity is commonly understood as a form of 'unique' self-hood, which I will also return to in Chapter 3.

Authenticity or Dialogism?

Again, it is important to note that this is aimed to be work of persuasion to those 'in the culture'. Taylor builds his case on an anthropological description of life as fundamentally dialogical:

“The general feature of human life that I want to evoke is its fundamentally *dialogical* character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through [...] modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the "languages" of art, of gesture, of love, and the like. But we are inducted into these in exchange with others. No one acquires the languages needed for self-definition on their own.”²⁰⁰

Taylor describes this, not only as the genesis of the human mind, but as continuing throughout life. Immediately, there is a tension between claiming human beings are not monological in practice – appealing to anthropological realism – and the monological aspiration that is so characteristic for those in the culture of the post-1960s ideal of authenticity. This shifted the idea of originality from genuineness to uniqueness, modelled on the original creation, *poiesis*, and the presentism of an unchanging object as “The work of art is itself authentic by reason of its entire self-definition: it is understood to exist wholly by the laws of its own being”.²⁰¹ Contrarily, Taylor's conviction in the compatibility of authenticity with dialogism is fuelled by his specific anthropology that centralises

²⁰⁰ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 32–33.

²⁰¹ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 99–100.

the role of moral values for self-understanding and meaning making.²⁰² It is beyond the scope of this research to engage Taylor's philosophical anthropology and his important contribution to philosophical ethics (for example the genealogy of the three main Western 'moral sources' *The Sources of the Self* presents of the constitutive role of strong normative evaluation for the modern self).²⁰³ In his view, the practice of justification and giving reasons in dialogue with others creates a meaningful life. The practice of living your life authentically 'drives' you to the interrogation and articulation (more on articulation later) of *shared* frames of reference that provide meaning and – inextricably – values:

“Things take on importance against a background of intelligibility. Let us call this a horizon. It follows that one of the things we can't do, if we are to define ourselves significantly, is suppress or deny the horizons against which things take on significance for us. This is the kind of self-defeating move frequently being carried out in our subjectivist civilization”²⁰⁴

However, the problem is not solved that the self-defeating move of a subjectivist is *not in contradiction* with the ideal of authenticity. Subsequently, the hope for persuasiveness of dialogical authenticity seems misplaced. By inviting you to see how 'doing it my way' is not 'my way' until it achieves a socially *recognised*, coherent meaning within *community*, Taylor asks the adherents of authenticity to be swayed by a version of authenticity that contradicts the ideal. However frustrating, the ideal of authenticity is still able to give license to trivial and

²⁰² “Authenticity can't be defended in ways that collapse horizons of significance” (38-39) horizon of significance is “the background of intelligibility”, in giving and deliberating reasons in dialogical relationships (human or otherwise) (37) and “depends on the understanding that independent of my will there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life. There is a picture here of what human beings are like, placed between this option for self-creation, and easier modes of copping out, going with the flow, conforming with the masses, and so on, which picture is seen as true, discovered, not decided. Horizons are given” (38-39) All from Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*.

²⁰³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. See also, Daniel Chernilo, “Strong Evaluations - Charles Taylor,” in *Debating Humanity: Towards a Philosophical Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²⁰⁴ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 36–37.

deviant forms of self-understanding.²⁰⁵ As we will see in Chapter 3, authenticity-as-separateness provides a refuge for those who reject the severe instrumentalist views of society (shuttering out the capitalist horizon as it were) yet gives them no ‘way back’.

In the end, the dialogism that forms part of Taylor’s anthropology is consonant with the ‘old’ sincerity, a model of the self that is reciprocal with that other entity called ‘society’. While Taylor’s proposal of ‘dialogical authenticity’ is normatively better than the account of authenticity Trilling presents, the latter offers the better historical description and warning of its detrimental possibilities. Taylor proposes a post-Romantic view of authenticity that does *not* collapse into an atomistic individualism driven by self-fulfilment, which may well stem from his yet undiscussed *in*-dividual view of the human. While Taylor aims his book towards a secular contemporary reader, his appreciation of Romanticism is closer to the Jena Romantics *transcendental* view of the undivided human. Similar to the discussion in Chapter 1 of the Early Romantic valuation of inwardness and expressivism, this goes hand in hand with an undivided, individual human self ‘going inward to go outward’. Here, our interior experience can – fleetingly through art – become in touch with the Absolute. Taylor’s inwardness, the ethic of getting in touch with ourselves, leads to discovering common values and even more, to goodness. Although fully open regarding his own Catholicism, Taylor’s work is directed at and interested in secular society.²⁰⁶ Because Taylor emphasises a view of moral valuing as central to human life, as well as a ‘moral realism’ that stresses the constitutive role of goodness in the world across religious *and* secular practices. To give an example, Taylor’s

²⁰⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism: Second Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). A publication of a 1966-76 lecture series, Berlin argued that the basis for liberal pluralism, the pseudo-neutrality Taylor opposes, was made possible by the Romantic Age’s new respect for (what we now call) authentic beliefs. Any belief could be respected however absurd because the person’s own conviction in it became morally admirable.

²⁰⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

discussion of Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche as representing a secular 20th century view of the self describes how the moral source of inwardness goes hand in hand with a *creative* form of affirmation:

“the idea of changed stance towards self and world, which doesn't simply recognize a hitherto occluded good, but rather helps to bring this about. [...] unlike previous conceptions of moral sources in nature and God, these modern views give a crucial place to our own inner powers of constructing or transfiguring or interpreting the world, as essential to the efficacy of the external sources. Our powers must be deployed if these are to empower us.”²⁰⁷

Overall, Taylor's work foregrounds the practical dynamic of *expressivism*, which can be linguistic or artistic; it centralises the role of creative-aesthetic practice in the post-Romantic age. This “crucial place to our own inner powers of constructing or transfiguring or interpreting the world” becomes the most salient part for democratic citizenship of the ideal of sincerity (or Taylorian social authenticity). I want to now move to the two vital criteria Taylor gives for how sincerity leads to citizenship and the account of the centrality of articulation and non-self-referential civic matters that *The Ethics of Authenticity* provides. Here, I will also draw attention to potentially undermining aspects by the *dangers* of ‘Wordsworthian or egotistical’ creative affirmation and personal vision. This danger of *personalising* politics in stultifying forms runs the risk of divorcing sincerity from the civic and *proceduralist* dimensions of political engagement.

Because of this particular focus on sincerity as citizenship, and my doubts regarding Taylor's hope of a dialogically understood authenticity, I will subsequently ignore some important criticisms of the ideal of authenticity.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, 454–55.

²⁰⁸ Such as Axel Honneth's assessment that it is indifferent to conceptions of justice “On the whole, however, this conception of authenticity is not comprehensive enough to produce an independent idea of justice. Therefore, we are probably justified in stating that this conception of freedom is neutral, or rather, indifferent to matters of justice” Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, 39–40.

However, one central problem of the concept of authenticity will return in Chapter 3: the way authenticity has been co-opted and transformed by the culture of consumerism. Where it was once strictly art as “crucial terrain for the ideal of authenticity”, authenticity is now popularly realised via both language and cultural-symbolic expression.²⁰⁹ Often, unfortunately so, via the consumer-citizen’s ‘life journey as accumulation’ that has transformed the post-Romantic ideal Taylor describes here:

“Fulfilling my nature means espousing the inner élan, the voice or impulse. And this makes what was hidden manifest both for myself and others. But this manifestation also helps to define what is to be realized. The direction of this élan wasn’t and couldn’t be clear prior to this manifestation. In realizing my nature, I have to define it in the sense of giving it some formulation [. . .] A human life is seen as manifesting a potential which is also being shaped by this manifestation.”²¹⁰

In sum, the problems of authenticity (e.g. ideals of being impervious and independent) are left aside for now to return to how Taylor’s work illuminates helpful criteria for sincerity as citizenship.

For decolonial critiques of authenticity see for example: Sonia Kruks, “Fanon, Sartre, and Identity Politics,” in *Fanon: A Critical Reader*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon, T. Dene an Sharpley-Whiting, and Renee T. White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 122–33; Aleida Assmann, “Authenticity – The Signature of Western Exceptionalism?,” in *Paradoxes of Authenticity: Studies on a Critical Concept*, ed. Julia Straub (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2012), 33–50. With thanks to Divya Nadkarni for decolonial critique references.

Authenticity’s monological emphasis also risks glamorising dangerous asociality and “forms of negative freedom that are ultimately impotent to answer to “the most brazen political insincerities”” as Amanda Anderson pointed out in 2006, which has been substantiated by 21st century research on the rise of the ‘authentically lying’ populist parties in Europe (Fieschi). Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*; Catherine Fieschi, *Populocracy: The Tyranny of Authenticity and the Rise of Populism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

Authenticity is also inadvertently compatible with an identarian conception of community that mobilises a discreditation of society’s imposition of norms. Nadia Urbinati, *The Tyranny of the Moderns* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 129.

²⁰⁹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 82.

²¹⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, 374–75.

Taylor's Criteria: Articulation and Civic Matters

Driving *The Ethics of Authenticity* is the proposal that 'those in the culture' of authenticity can be persuaded out of apathy, relativism, and quietism by nurturing a better understanding of the ideal they already subscribe to.²¹¹ The strongest and most important part of Taylor's book is his argument regarding the *inarticulacy problem* of contemporary liberalism since the 1980s. His hope is that authenticity 'done right' (his dialogical, more sincere version) would break the taboo on moral deliberation characterising "today's educated youth". He argues that this results from the "acceptance of a rather facile relativism. Everybody has his or her own "values," and about these it is impossible to argue."²¹² Against famous denunciations of narcissism, hedonism and self-fulfilment by Christopher Lasch, Daniel Bell and Harold Bloom respectively, Taylor sees this problem 'trickling down' from the technocratic, pseudo-neutral turn in liberal culture, rather than emerging 'bottom up' through young people's beliefs in authenticity. Whatever culprit one prefers, the dominance of political inarticulacy is still visible in the 2000s. In Chapter 4, I will discuss how experiments with sincerity are able to make this consensus visible as well as the particular difficulties and obstacles to articulation.

Taylor believes in an expressive individualism that is at the same time communitarian. Arguing against authenticity used as maximisation of self-fulfilment, power of choice, instrumental reason and social atomism that he sees as deviant versions of the ideal: "those appeals to authenticity that justify ignoring whatever transcends the self: for rejecting our past as irrelevant, or denying the demands of citizenship, or the duties of solidarity, or the needs of the natural environment."²¹³ In other words, if authenticity leads too often to view ourselves as an independent object, the proper version means seeing

²¹¹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 21.

²¹² Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 13–14.

²¹³ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 22.

ourselves as communitarian subjects. This ‘deeper’ version of dialogism as the foundation of moral life means that authenticity moves closer to a practice of disclosure *as* deliberation:

“As so often is the case, the mechanisms of inevitability work only when people are divided and fragmented. The predicament alters when there comes to be a common consciousness. We don't want to exaggerate our degrees of freedom. But they are not zero. And that means that *coming to understand the moral sources of our civilization* can make a difference, in so far as it can contribute to a new common understanding.”²¹⁴

Common understanding as a result of dialogue over common values would supposedly be inevitable because of his dialogism principle, which unfortunately is not robust enough. It contradicts the authenticity-as-monological-consensus, as I tried to argue above.

Nevertheless, *The Ethics of Authenticity* describes a vital second criterium for how sincerity leads to vigorous citizenship. The practice of articulation must differentiate between the self-referentiality of *manner* and the self-referentiality of *matter*; the articulation of matters gives the critical difference between trivial and non-trivial forms of the ideal. For Taylor, expressive articulation must include moral demands that are non-selfish, originating beyond the self. He repeats the same list of examples that ‘matter’ three times in the book: the demands of *history, environment, citizenship, needs of others and God*.²¹⁵ In the following, I will set out why Taylor defends the Romantic route of self-referential manner and why it would lead to non-selfish matters. However, I will also describe the dangers and pitfalls of this route. While authenticity and sincerity can certainly lead to

²¹⁴ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 100–101. My emphasis.

²¹⁵ “to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.” Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 40–41.

the articulation of matters, the self-referential manner is more treacherous than Taylor allows in his confidence in *civic* non-self-referential content.²¹⁶

The danger inherent in authenticity – and sincerity – is its emphasis on what I from now describe as *personalisation*, the practice of mobilising exclusively the personal, autobiographic registers of experience as part of your dialogue with the external world – and what counts as valid justification. In his redemptive reading, Taylor sees ‘self-referentiality of manner’ continuing the Romantic response to Modernity’s loss of common registers of meaning (such as Renaissance doctrines of correspondence and divine order). While we live in a culture saturated with subjectivism, this is not automatically solipsistic. Taylor describes the emergence of ‘communicative subjectivity’ as a response to Modernity: “for a couple of centuries now we have been living in a world in which these [common, ESR] points of reference no longer hold for us” meaning that poetic language “now has to consist in a language of articulated sensibility [...] the poet must articulate his own world of references, and make them believable.”²¹⁷ This makes the poet’s work *not* mere self-referentiality or subjectivism, but instead great and epistemic in scope. Notice how the verb ‘triangulate’ points to how Taylor sees intersubjective communication mobilising a third element of ‘common reality’:

“He is getting at something different, some personal vision he is trying to triangulate to through this historical reference, the "forest of symbols" that he sees in the world around him. But to grasp this forest, we need to understand not so much the erstwhile public doctrine (about

²¹⁶ “Authenticity is clearly self-referential: this has to be *my* orientation. But this doesn't mean that on another level the *content* must be self-referential: that my goals must express or fulfil my desires or aspirations, *as against* something that stands beyond these. I can find fulfilment in God, or a political cause, or tending the earth. Indeed, the argument above suggests that we will find genuine fulfilment only in something like this, which has significance independent of us or our desires.” Taylor, 82. Emphasis in original.

²¹⁷ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 84.

which no one remembers any details anyway) but, as we might put it, the way it resonates in the poet's sensibility."²¹⁸

When done correctly, the Romantic project is one of 'going inward to go outward', creating im-personal truth that transcends subjective experience. Take for example how the Romantic 'paradigmatic painting' by Caspar David Friedrich 'Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog' represents the triangulated personal experience of nature. Taylor writes that Friedrich's work *was* "an attempt to articulate more than a subjective reaction. "Feeling can never be contrary to nature, is always consistent with nature."²¹⁹ This is implicitly an Early Romantic understanding, an example of the *in*-dividual (of Chapter 1) where the male figure should be seen *as one* with the peak it stands on. The dark clothing of the wanderer blends the human body into the dark rocks beneath, forming a single shape that contrasts against white sky and fog-covered view. However, what happens when the strongly felt "personal vision" that the artist models for us *overtakes* and severs the unity between that sole human figure and the peak it stands on?

To counter Taylor's ideal reading of 'Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog' as triangulation (and sidestepping its afterlife in Hollywood adverts for war films), I want to describe the dynamic of personalisation. The paradigmatic example of the danger of totalising subjectivity is the English poet Wordsworth, countering Taylor's view that such deeply personal language achieves to articulate what yet has no "adequate words" and is "finding the words for us" through the subtle language of art.²²⁰ Being wary of this dynamic for sincerity-as-citizenship, I want

²¹⁸ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 83–84.

²¹⁹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 86.

²²⁰ "When Wordsworth and Holderlin describe the natural world around us, in *The Prelude*, *The Rhine*, or *Home coming*, they no longer play on an established gamut of references, as Pope could still do in *Windsor Forest*. They make us aware of something in nature for which there are as yet no adequate words. The poems are finding the words for us. In this "subtler language" - the term is borrowed from Shelley - something is defined and created as well as manifested. A watershed has been passed in the history of literature." Taylor, 85.

to draw attention to how the term ‘Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime’ has functioned as a warning of the collapse into subjectivism. It was coined by the poet Keats, in 1817-1818, in a series of letters describing his ambivalence towards Wordsworth’s distinctive genius, which he saw lacking ‘negative capability’ – meaning the ability to imagine and express experiences other than one’s own.²²¹ The dynamic of personalisation is in effect when self-referentiality of manner forecloses the expression of common matters (e.g. solidarity, society, nature, history and God) and we will see the personalisation dynamic operate across ironic and sincere experiments with political engagement in Chapters 3 and 4. What Taylor so rightly draws attention to, but underestimates in feasibility is the possibility making of a ‘productive’ distinction between the self-referentiality of *manner* and the self-referentiality of *matter*: how articulation contains civic matters, questions of justice and “a common sense of purpose”.²²²

It is one thing for each of us to have our own measure, but another *to have to* make yourself the measure of everything. To personalise the social world and “call on individual intuitions to map a public domain of references”²²³ in the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime will put such weight on how the world *resonates within* interior, personal, subjective experience that it eclipses the world in importance. We will see that what then *conventionally* carries weight – urgency, credibility, relevance – in personalisation is the personal articulation of subjective experience itself.²²⁴ Which in turn threatens to turn the articulation of values into an end in itself, uncoupling it from a multifaceted and temporally

²²¹ Keats saw Shakespeare as exemplar of negative capability, identifying completely with his characters. Keats is quoted by Drabble: “Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—.” Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 714.

²²² Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 112.

²²³ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 87.

²²⁴ This problem will return in Chapter 4 and its discussion of van Zoonen’s work on truth claims in popular and political discourse: Liesbet van Zoonen, “I-Pistemology: Changing Truth Claims in Popular and Political Culture,” *European Journal of Communication* 27, no. 1 (2012): 56–67.

unfolding process of social change (in Chapter 4 discussed as a problematic over-focus on ‘awareness’).

Taylor identifies vital criteria for the practice of sincerity-as-citizenship, articulation, and civic matters, although presented in a redemptive assessment of the post-Romantic need for ‘self-referential manners’ of expression. Taylor’s hopeful assessments are too implicitly underpinned by a communitarian and proceduralist understanding. Even though Taylor writes often on possibilities for individual epiphanic experience (for example, through Modernist literature), his is not a liberal-individualistic position, always adjoining an ‘im-personal’ counterpart.²²⁵ He tends to see the focus on inward-subjectivity as a “stronger, more inner sense of linkage” compensating for “the loss of a sense of belonging” thus connecting to a wider whole.²²⁶ This makes personalisation the opposite of his communitarian ethos.

Yet, the dangers of ‘egotistical’ personalisation happen when sincerity unseats the proceduralist and Habermasian dimensions of the ethos that Taylor leaves so much implied in *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Amanda Anderson describes the proceduralist ethos as “the transpersonal dimensions of the sincerity paradigm, those forms of transparency and moral integrity that undergird critique and inter-articulate with *larger social and political practices and institutions*.”²²⁷ This is from a work trying to correct the under-attention to these Habermasian dimensions within Anglo-American adoption of European post-structuralism and Critical Theory in cultural theory and aesthetics (so only applicable to Taylor

²²⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, 420–30.

²²⁶ In the post-Romantic world, more intense inwardness, subjectivism has taken the place of nature exemplified by the literary modernism of Pound or Eliott, still, Taylor remains hopeful: “If authenticity is being true to ourselves, is recovering our own “sentiment de l’existence,” then perhaps we can only achieve it integrally achieve it if we recognize that this sentiment connects us to a wider whole. It was perhaps not an accident that in the Romantic period the self-feeling and the feeling of belonging to nature were linked. Perhaps the loss of a sense of belonging through a publicly defined order needs to be compensated by a stronger, more inner sense of linkage. Perhaps this is what a great deal of modern poetry has been trying to articulate; and perhaps we need few things more today than such articulation.” Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 91.

²²⁷ Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*, 167. My emphasis.

in this context).²²⁸ According to Josef Früchtl, Taylor occupies the mediating position between Habermas's acknowledgement of a neo-Kantian "primacy of justice-oriented self-determination" and more post-structuralist and Romantic ideals of artistic self-creation.²²⁹ In other words, Taylor's expressivism does not foreclose proceduralism, but my concern is that contemporary emphasis on articulation-as-identification-of-values risks *obscuring* social and procedural practices and institutions, because they are so difficult to express in the self-referential 'manners' of the post-Romantic age.

In addition, my understanding of proceduralism differs from Anderson's in an important way. I understand the inter-articulation *between an individual and larger socio-political practices* to contain ritualised dimensions. In the interdisciplinary work *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, the authors argue that the post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment dominance of the ideal of sincerity has obscured from us that it is only one of two major 'ideal typical' forms of mental orientation to action and understanding: sincerity and ritual.²³⁰ Ritual practices contain ways of doing something *in such a way that the doing itself* gives the act – and action itself – a privileged status which is not connected to internal, subjective mental states. Seligman et al point to how a post-Augustinian sincerity framework *wrongly* sees rituals as expressions of inner states and that the dominance of sincerity creates obstacles for seeing the importance of ritualised practices (that are not confined to the sacred but pervasive in human practices). Crucially, I would argue that rituals co-shape the proceduralist dimensions of the political imagination and

²²⁸ Anderson also tries to combine the post-structuralist 'authenticity' ethos with the Habermasian 'sincerity' ethos into a proceduralist one: "accountability to social forms and practices that, from the authenticity perspective, maybe seen as merely constraining, but from the sincerity perspective have been granted legitimacy through consent, accreted custom, and/or reflective endorsement." Anderson, 165.

²²⁹ Josef Früchtl, *The Impertinent Self: A Heroic History of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 7, 6.

²³⁰ The book is informed by anthropology, religious studies, philosophy and psychiatry and concentrates on Western and Asian traditions: Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*.

thus an individual's interaction with socio-political, institutional practices. Precisely because ritual:

“precises ambiguities, it neither overcomes them nor relaxes them.” This is a function of its peculiar way of mediating difference and parsing boundaries, rather than seeking to overcome and absolutize them (which, we shall claim, is a common trait of sincere modes of framing action and understanding). [...] ritual teaches us how to live within and between different boundaries rather than seeking to absolutize them—which is, sadly, often the result of deritualized frames of understanding and action.”²³¹

The difference between the two sincerity-ritual ‘ideal types’ is that ritual creates a framework of orientation towards the world of shared “as if” situations, while sincerity creates “as is” modes. Both sincerity and ritual are present in a specific balance one another across all societies, the authors claim, a notion caught for example in the idea that interact within a social ‘role’. I draw from their work the proposal that the personalised exists *in tension* with the procedural (externally given) repertoires and registers we use. In this perspective, the post-Romantic importance of aesthetic and artistic practices (performances that are shaped by established, material conventions of action) illustrates how an “as if” (subjunctive) space can be central to the sincerity paradigm and provide a shared framework to live with ambiguities. In ritualised practices the action is more important than one ‘meaning framework’ of sincerity. For example, in another form of ritual, adhering to the formal procedures of voting is the determinant factor and not the voter’s personal sincerity. While sincerity is an important ideal for citizenship it does not encompass all of citizenship’s frameworks of action and understanding. The danger for the ideal of sincerity is when the scales of

²³¹ Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 7.

balance are tipped into ‘Wordsworthian’ personalisation and *the procedural disappears*, and these questions will return in detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.5 Necessary Elements: Conversion, Articulation and Future Exposition

Synthesising the insights from Cavell, Trilling and Taylor points to three necessary elements for citizenship: a *conversion* as described by Cavell, *articulation* of civic matters described by Taylor, and narrative *future exposition* meaning the mode of critique or mobilisation that can be imagined as unfolding over time (after Trilling). In the revaluation of sincerity, sincerity is understood to be able to transcend personal practice towards social improvement. The aim of this chapter has been to draw on the philosophy of Cavell, Trilling and Taylor in order to make clear what the criteria are for sincerity as a route to reinvigorated citizenship. These criteria provide a more critical and evaluative perspective on the explorations of irony and sincerity within the two structures of feeling. Why does authenticity lead to self-isolation in the ‘ironic authenticity’ structure of feeling? Why is the language for questions of justice so self-curtailed in the ‘avowed sincerity’ artworks? Answering these questions requires looking both at the specific qualities, criteria and obstacles of sincerity as well as considering how they interact with specific socio-historic conditions. Is the ideal of sincerity suitable for meeting the challenges of its time and environment?

Chapter 3: Political Apathy and Ironic Authenticity

“So I came down here, to breathe dust and walk with the dogs – to look at a rock
or a cactus and know that I am the first to see that cactus and that rock.

And to try and read the letter inside me.”

*Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*²³²

“Withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy”

*Slacker*²³³

3.1 Introduction

The commentary debate in Chapter 1 showed how two opposing assessments of irony dominate the early 21st century. Irony and postmodern irony signify political apathy or, contrariwise, a critical engaged stance. Where do these inconsistent assessments come from? How did ‘postmodern irony’ gain enough of a reputation that it became shorthand for moral relativism and complacency? To understand this, I will revisit the 1990s, when both postmodernism and ironic culture were at a peak. I want to look beyond the well-known accounts of irony as the face of postmodernism and focus on how postmodern irony can articulate a distinct ethico-political imagination and self-understanding – how the political is imagined within the realm of everyday individuals.²³⁴ Saliently, cultural-aesthetic practices not only express ideas of the political through artistic forms but the very language, concepts and schemas of aesthetic-cultural *theory* –

²³² Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (London: Abacus, 1991), 66.

²³³ *Slacker*, directed by Richard Linklater, (Orion Classics, 1991), 100 mins.

²³⁴ For the connection between irony and postmodernism see: Jencks, Charles. 1987. “Postmodern and Late Modern: The Essential Definitions.” *Chicago Review* 35 (4): 31–58; Jencks, Charles. 2012. *The Story of Post-Modernism: Five Decades of the Ironic, Iconic and Critical in Architecture*. Wiley; Sim, Stuart. 2002. *Irony and Crisis: A Critical History of Postmodern Culture*. Icon.

For an overview of canon texts on postmodernism see: Linda Hutcheon, “Epilogue: The Postmodern... In Retrospect,” in *The Politics of Postmodernism (Revised Edition)* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2002).

such as the term postmodern irony – became part of the vocabulary to debate and reflect upon the political dimension of life.

First, I will set out my approach of investigating a particular ‘structure of feeling’, the concept that identifies subtle, pre-formal change. I want to use this concept to draw out what coheres in a particular conception of a political self and centralise this against a series of conflicting interpretations of irony and its political meaning. This structure of feeling is expressed in postmodern-ironic popular culture and centres on a Romantic conception of authentic selfhood, hereafter labelled *ironic authenticity* – postmodern culture’s re-articulation of the 19th century ideal of authenticity. Second, I will describe the stylistic features of postmodern irony through the genre of ‘slacker films’, a kind of Cavellian genre that is explicitly concerned with political apathy. Placed within its historical context, its generative strategies will become clear and this will help clarify the later confusing and self-contradicting debates of the 2010s.

Thirdly, this method will allow me to argue against the common claim that irony is an exhausted form of critique. Instead, I will set out how irony articulates the *unavailability* of critique through a self-reflexive understanding of the (external) circumstances that cause it. I want to critically explore the persistent claims that irony and postmodernism are interchangeable bywords for complacency, supposedly indifferent to socio-economic and political problems. Instead, irony in postmodern culture is much closer to a complicit, self-critical acknowledgment of the new difficulties of political contestation. Instead of being exhausted, ironic practices show the continuation of critique under very undermining circumstances.

These circumstances are the subject of the fourth section of this chapter, that deals with how concern over ‘co-option’ is central to the politics of ironic authenticity. I propose an alternative model that includes the legacy effect of previous historical cycles of critique. This way, the emphasis on ‘interiorised’ political subjectivity will become more understandable, but

nevertheless also questionable. While not apathetic, these new ideas of political engagement are vulnerable to insularity and to un-intentional self-curtailment: offering the false refuge of an 'inner exile'. In the fifth and final section, I discuss how ironic authenticity can be viewed more formally and how its dynamic of *personalisation* transforms ideas of the political.

By analysing films as exemplars of a structure of feeling, this chapter looks at political breakdown within the realm of the everyday, simultaneously bringing into view the place where the persistence of Romanticism is most alive and influential. While much attention has been devoted to the theoretical conflicts of the postmodern period, analysing 'ironic authenticity' in cinematic and literary practices nevertheless offers new perspectives: how are ideas of political engagement shaped by Romantic ideas and what are the consequences?

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Structure of Feeling

A structure of feeling is a *response to change* that is first noticeable in art and popular culture before becoming more formalised in language. Raymond Williams developed this concept to analyse how social change in present-day experiences is expressed through changes in aesthetic style's semantic forms and their connected meanings and values. A structure of feeling is both prescient and subtle: "a way of defining forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process: not by derivation from other social forms and pre-forms, but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely

²³⁵ For studies of the Romantic dimensions of postmodern aesthetics see for example: Jos De Mul, *Romantic Desire in (Post)Modern Art and Philosophy*, SUNY Series in Postmodern Culture (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999); Susan B. Rosenbaum, *Professing Sincerity: Modern Lyric Poetry, Commercial Culture, and the Crisis in Reading* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

experienced.”²³⁶ The concept may have some intuitive difficulties, being deliberately contradictory: “firm and definite as “structure” suggests, yet operating in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity”.²³⁷ Nevertheless, the case for any structure of feeling-hypothesis is built by its descriptive abilities, when it can identify “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt”²³⁸ expressed in cultural works *before* they become more articulated in other domains of social thought. William’s method of cultural analysis emphasises historical change: human response to evolving socio-economic and political circumstances. As Sean Matthews writes: “[t]he structure of feeling is commonly apparent in the experience of deadlock, obstruction and failure (as in the ‘tight place’ motif in Ibsen which so seizes Williams in his Ibsen work), or in the struggle which attends them.”²³⁹

What is important to understand is that *postmodern irony* and *new sincerity* are in themselves not ‘structures of feeling’ but much broader and diverse aesthetic categories that each encompass a variety of structures of feeling. Via this distinction we can avoid the misunderstanding that characterises discussions about irony, sincerity, and political engagement. Each critic makes use of an aesthetic style to describe a political imagination and self-understanding that may be shared by some – but not all – members of one aesthetic style. For example, the postmodern irony of the work of Jeff Koons, a tongue-in-cheek embrace of materialistic decadence, embodies a very different structure of feeling than the postmodern irony of Mike Kelley, where ‘ironic authenticity’ features irony in service of a cutting exploration of subversion against commercial culture. The obvious difference between these structures of feeling is the role that socio-

²³⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 133.

²³⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto, 1961), 64.

²³⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

²³⁹ Sean Matthews, “Change and Theory in Raymond Williams’s Structure of Feeling,” *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001), 189.

political critique plays within the creation of their meaning. But how does that difference emerge? While moral evaluations and political judgements are key, they are not simply 'readable' from a work on its own. A structure of feeling is shaped by the full lifespan of a cultural work within social reality (beyond artistic intent), its circulation (para-texts of distribution and exhibition practices) and reception practices: forming a set of "perceptions, preoccupations and styles".²⁴⁰ Sometimes, a structure of feeling coincides with a defined subcultural group sensibility that unites producers and audiences (as we see with 'alternative culture', the 'smart set' and 'hipsters') but not necessarily so, being more subtle than the social category of subculture.²⁴¹

Aesthetic styles like 'postmodern irony' or New Sincerity are categories that can lump together very different cultural phenomena (and can also overlap adding to the confusion). By turning to the specific structures of feeling that coherently unite objects, practices, and ideas, it becomes possible to engage with the desired question of political engagement. In Chapter 1, I have argued that irony and sincerity have become prominent themes in contemporary public debates because they embody a crisis in vocabulary to describe what political engagement and citizenship ought to be. In particular, I am interested in the kind of work irony does – as placeholder in articulation – for problems that are more difficult to articulate and thus remain out of sight. Now, by analysing *ironic authenticity* and *avowed sincerity* we can be much more precise about these problems as well as the strategies to overcome them.

²⁴⁰ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters. Interviews with New Left Review*. (London: Verso, 2015), 161.

²⁴¹ Jeffrey Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'smart' Film," *Screen* 43, no. 4 (2002): 350; Michael Z. Newman, "Movies for Hipsters," in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, ed. Yannis Tzioumakis Geoff King, Claire Molloy (London: Routledge, 2013), 71.

Genre as Investigation

As we saw in Chapter 1, debate about irony, sincerity and ‘ironic youth’ have become a way to argue over the state of democratic citizenship in the early 21st century. Irony functions as a placeholder that can gesture toward an underlying, unarticulated set of problems: lack of political engagement, uncertainty over the actual shape of political commitment, inarticulacy in ideological deliberation, and a frustratingly absent direction for possible change. Generally, the term ‘political apathy’ has such an extensive range of meaning – from disinterest to hatred, complacency to repression, or from alienation to refusal – that the term has been rendered almost useless while also signalling one of the major threats to democratic life. The irony-sincerity debate and the aesthetic practices that propelled it presented new ways to ask, “what do we mean when we say *political apathy*?” Here, a method of ordinary language philosophy aims to uncover the ethico-political stakes within everyday practices, not through ethnography but through hermeneutic analysis of artistic works – with special attention to language and its meaning.

A genre of films in the early 1990s called ‘slacker films’ are characterised by explorations of apathy: both in the political sense as well as apathy in general. What makes them interesting is that they embody their cultural-historic times, but also represent how films open up new ways of understanding. The work of Stanley Cavell modelled how to think about a group of films being ‘in conversation’ with each other about a particular problem. If conventionally a genre is defined by a series of properties shared, Cavell reinvents it as a group of films with a shared concern and investigation.²⁴² In his genre books on remarriage comedies in *Pursuits of Happiness* and melodramas of the unknown woman in *Contesting Tears*, Cavell describes how *the films themselves taught him ways*

²⁴² “The idea is that the members of a genre share the inheritance of certain conditions, procedures and subjects and goals of composition, and that in primary art each member of such a genre represents a study of these conditions, something I think of as bearing the responsibility of the inheritance.” Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, 28.

to think about the philosophical problem of scepticism (in particular, the films are read as inheritors of the tradition of American Transcendentalism's Kantian Idealism). Cavell's proposal, scandalous at the time but presently well-accepted, is that films have their own kind of knowledge to contribute. Films are works of aesthetic self-reflection and continue to have 'the last say' in the process of interpretation because of their abilities as films to provoke new insights (to paraphrase Andrew Klevan).²⁴³ They 'return' to us a way of overcoming conceptual limitations via the work *and words* of interpretation. Cavell found in a series of comedies a way to elucidate how scepticism is transformed through the movement from avoidance back to acknowledgement. He did so by experiencing and interpreting their cinematic narratives of marriage, comedic struggle, and re-marriage.²⁴⁴

“Our films may be understood as parables of a phase of the development of consciousness at which the struggle is for the reciprocity or equality of consciousness...” between a woman and a man, a study of the conditions under which this fight for recognition (as Hegel put it) or demand for acknowledgment (as I have put it) is a struggle for mutual freedom, especially of the views each holds of the other. They harbor a vision which they know cannot fully be domesticated, inhabited, in the world we know.”²⁴⁵

I want to bypass the intricacies of Cavell's philosophical work on scepticism with film, and the phenomenological method of ordinary language philosophy, in order to concentrate on his method of engaging a problem through

²⁴³ Andrew Klevan, “Guessing the Unseen from the Seen: Stanley Cavell and Film Interpretation,” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 119.

²⁴⁴ “The conversation of what I call the genre of remarriage is, judging from the films I take to define it, of a sort that leads to acknowledgment; to the reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness; a reconciliation so profound as to require the metamorphosis of death and revival; the achievement of a new perspective on existence; a perspective that presents itself as a place, one removed from the city of confusion and divorce.” (Cavell, “Pursuits of Happiness” 19)

²⁴⁵ Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, 17–18.

‘discovering’ a genre that is a study of its conditions.²⁴⁶ The genre method creates new opportunities – the kind of things that can be said – for approaching a problem.

So, what is the parable of slacker films? What unites them is a struggle to legitimate a particular kind of *withdrawal from traditional politics*.²⁴⁷ While the post-1960s cycle of counterculture contained so many social movements that fought structural injustice (racism, sexism, etc.) within institutions of government, education, media and business, this cycle of protest culture is characterised by its lack of interest in institutions. Slacker culture, or Generation-X culture, is anchored in popular memory by a stereotypical figure: the slacker leads a certain – underperforming, alienated, apathetic – kind of life that both reflects and supposedly creates the meaning of the cultural present. They function as stereotypes of youth and as more spiritual archetypes of ‘zeitgeist’. As their names will suggest, the 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* by Douglas Coupland and the film *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, 1991) became emblems and propelled a new version of the authenticity-driven, Romantic-Rousseauian ‘drop-out’. Contrary to previous versions like the bohemian, the beatnik or the 1960s-protest figure, who were defined by alternative normative desires to the status quo, the slacker is shaped by negative desire: the slacker slacks, takes a dead-end job, has no ambition, and sees no purpose.²⁴⁸ Embodying a response to the ferocious materialism of the 1980s, the slacker ‘sees through’ the meaninglessness of ambition and consumerism as false promises of happiness. Instead of glossy, sleek, and aspirational images of

²⁴⁶ See for a discussion of Cavell, cinema and scepticism: Philipp Schmerheim, *Skepticism Films: Knowing and Doubting the World in Contemporary Cinema* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

²⁴⁷ A list of slacker films and description from the 1990s can be found under Appendix A.

²⁴⁸ Originally, slackers signified the celebration of being a ‘loser’, read as resistance to success-obsessed culture. The counter-cultural slacker label later took on much broader meaning: one typology is the comedy ‘doofus’ character in the lineage from *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventures* to *The Big Lebowski*. A second, later slacker stereotype is the perpetually adolescent man-child, suddenly ubiquitous in 2006-2013 via the films of Judd Apatow, Hollywood comedies such as *Failure to Launch* as well as post-mumblecore films by the Duplass Brothers.

happy people drinking Coca-Cola, the slacker films presented grainy, low-tech, punk-*ish* images of bored people drinking Coca-Cola. This way, slacker cinema became a way of mapping the failures of the consumerist American Dream, creating new images.²⁴⁹

By approaching political apathy through the richness of these films and as part of the wider structure of feeling *ironic authenticity*, it becomes possible to discuss under-theorised problems and aspects of political engagement. Generally, political apathy is described as an absence (of action, of knowledge etc.) but the films as cultural objects reverse that situation, generating its presence. As we will see, the struggle to legitimise a particular kind of withdrawal is more implicitly demonstrated than conventionally argued. The films have their own knowledge to contribute, which I can only claim and argue through the work of interpretation. Now, we can ask: what elements drove irony and political frustration together?

I must make one final introductory caveat on the aim to merge structures of feeling with Cavellian genre, focusing on the political imagination present in them. My methodology is different from Cavell's philosophical work, I am interested in how films can shed light on difficult questions by including – rather than abstracting – their historical, social, and ethnographic knowledge. Cavell had a particular approach to the comedies of remarriage that ignored their embodiment of 1930-40s economic depression and feminism, an approach legitimate as a philosophical endeavour but nonetheless vulnerable to criticism.²⁵⁰ To understand slacker films' knowledge of 'ironic' ethico-political imagination and self-understanding requires the inclusion of their socio-cultural embeddedness: drawing in cultural criticism from the period (Thomas Frank,

²⁴⁹ These attitudes and beliefs refer to the discourse surrounding a section of American culture that is popular amongst educated, predominantly white younger adults, here understood to be influential due to the large symbolic capital this demographic group has had since in the postwar period and the later 20th century.

²⁵⁰ For analysis and overview of feminist critiques of Cavell see Wheatley, *Stanley Cavell and Film: Scepticism and Self-Reliance at the Cinema*.

David Foster Wallace) that forms a vital companion to this structure of feeling, as well as research in cultural studies on this period's other (sub)cultural social practices, for example 'zines'.

Ironic Authenticity

Slacker was filmed in 1989, four years after President Reagan inaugurated "the age of the entrepreneur".²⁵¹ This new American narrative of the individual's triumph on the free market reframed the era's fundamental socio-economic changes: the accelerated digitisation and globalisation of markets and labour, powered by multinational corporations. Within the popular Romantic imagination, this narrative created new heroes such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs whose dominance in the personal-computer revolution stemmed from unique gifts as men who "come from nowhere and needed no outside support".²⁵² In contrast, no individual in *Slacker* remains on screen for more than a few minutes. The film's narrative conceit is a seemingly wandering camera that briefly follows and then abandons characters street-walking the concrete landscape of Austin, Texas. Its narrative form and style create a cinematic simulation of a day-long *dérive*, the revolutionary technique of city-walking developed by Debord and the Situationist International.²⁵³ A portrait of the city's vibrant counter-culture filled with nods to radical thought, it stitches together short scenes filled with eccentrics, collegiate types, artists, criminals, and outcasts. *Slacker* showcases these elements rather matter-of-factly, its stylistic tone is observational and phlegmatic, yet the worldview presented via the utterances of its many characters

²⁵¹ "We have lived through the age of big industry and the age of the giant corporation. But I believe that this is the age of the entrepreneur." Ronald Reagan quoted in Streeter, Thomas. *The Net Effect: Romanticism, Capitalism, and the Internet* (New York:NYU Press, 2010) 69.

²⁵² Thomas Streeter, *The Net Effect: Romanticism, Capitalism, and the Internet*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 69–70.

²⁵³ A form of urban drift as deliberate experimental behaviour, closely tied to the dynamics of urban life. It entails a rapid and unplanned exploration of diverse environments. It is a technique characterised by traversing a cityscape together with others, so liberating oneself from the constraints of daily routines and allowing new allegiances and ideas to emerge.

is one of chaos and disorientation: references to Blanchot's bid for passivity, characters dissociated, or paranoid, an anarchist's call to violence or a manic street preacher discussing wide-spread nihilism.

Slacker balances formal distance with thematic coherence, an overall tone of ambivalence contrasted with moments of proclamation. In this played-down style, the film introduces its famous aphorism "Withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy".²⁵⁴ The line is read out as a card of *Oblique Strategies*, an existing card-deck of prompts for artists to break creativity blocks.²⁵⁵ It is, however, a fictional card added by the film. The way the line is introduced is telling, as part of a sequence towards the end that begins with a cowboy-hatted man walking into a parking lot. The film had casually 'picked up' this character earlier during a robbery and accompanied his visit to someone who shares his interests in theft, conspiracies, and pirate media. In his third and final scene, the cowboy-hatted man strolls into the frame and then onto a parking lot where a sun-glassed woman, watching another work on her art installation, asks him: "Hey man, you want a card? They're oblique strategies." He accepts and she asks him to read out his pull: "It says 'Withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy'". Both listlessly chuckle for a moment, she says "yeah" almost with a shrug and folds the card back into the deck.

Slacker tells us that everybody already knows withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy. It is a natural situation, something that does not need to be explained, a consensus in self-understanding. However, do we know what that means? Is the claim convincing, defensible, even true?

The slacker film genre's philosophical parable tells of the struggle to legitimate a withdrawal that is *not* apathy, so we can now ask what this genre can teach us about the difference. As mentioned earlier, the structure of feeling

²⁵⁴ It even became part of the lyrics of the R.E.M. single "What's the Frequency Kenneth?" in 1994.

²⁵⁵ Created by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt in 1975.

conceived by Raymond Williams emerges when one's response of change is *experienced as deadlock*, obstruction, and failure. Specifically, it foregrounds the contribution to knowledge that is contained by art, be it popular culture, novels, or cinema. Similarly, Cavell's interest in 'overcoming scepticism' through acknowledgement takes his therapeutic, late-Wittgensteinian philosophy in the direction of art or aesthetic disclosure.

In this way, the genre offers opportunity to investigate *ironic authenticity*, the ethico-political ideal described by Trilling in its postmodern cultural expression. I propose that if Trilling had written his book thirty years later, it would have included the impact of the postmodern, post-structuralist and deconstructive 'philosopheme'. Here, I aim to show how postmodern ideas are refracted through American popular culture and its de-transcendentalised Romantic foundations. What will become visible in this chapter is the continuation of the old ideal, reconfigured by new (postmodern) ideas as well as in response to specific social-historical change.

Ironic authenticity 'takes on board' the post-structuralist and postmodern critique of self but rather than the end of authentic subjectivity, as some have argued, it instead transforms it.²⁵⁶ As we will see, it incorporates postmodern ideas into a kind of post-authenticity alive to its debunked status after the arrival of Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, or Rorty. The primary function of designators such as 'post-' or 'ironic ...' that proliferated in the 1980s-90s is demonstrating responsiveness – and not repudiation – and so ironic authenticity stands for the continuation of authenticity within popular culture, narrative arts, and cultural criticism. Even though ironic authenticity is a structure of feeling suffused with postmodern ideas, its anthropological subject

²⁵⁶ Bal & van Alphen in Alphen, Ernst van, Bal, Mieke & Smith, Carel E. eds. (2009), *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press: 3 "[Sincerity] assumes that we, as individuals, have an "inner self" responsible for our conduct, performances, and speeches-in effect, all the ways in which we manifest ourselves for others. This notion of subjectivity -bound up, in turn, with a dichotomy of mind and body--has been severely deconstructed in past decades. [...] Though many no longer believe in the traditional notion of subjectivity, sincerity, it appears, has been more difficult to relinquish".²⁵⁶

remains Romantic, an urgent reminder of the centrality of Romantic ideas to cultural life. A strong Romanticism and the more Herderian ideas of unique selfhood provide justification to resist an unjust world instead of pragmatic flexibility. This emerges most clearly in moments under duress, such as the crisis related by the protagonist of *Generation-X*, a drop-out who decided to move to the Palm Springs desert and work a dead-end, low-wage ‘McJob’. He recounts the moment he abruptly quit his media career when his contempt for it became too much of a ‘tight place’:

“And then I had an uncontrollable reaction. Blood rushed to my ears, and my heart went bang; I broke out into a sweat and the words of Rilke, the poet, entered my brain – his notion that we are all of us born with a letter inside us, and that only if we are true to ourselves, may we be allowed to read it before we die.”²⁵⁷

In this account of Rilke, the moral ideal of authenticity emerges as Trilling outlined, requiring a uniqueness modelled on art as well as a rejection of social norms. It is a reminder how the ideal that emerged from the Romantic aesthetic revolution predominates in popular culture over rational and juridical ideals such as autonomy. Chapter 2 discussed the problematic idea of a ‘antecedent personality core’ and how authenticity has not enough substance for justice (Honneth). This Romantic use of irony stands for a wholeness that can only be described indirectly through references to art. Indirectness is inherent to ironic practice, as Hutcheon reminded us in Chapter 1. Irony speaks via an allusion (Rilke’s letter) in *Generation-X* and exemplifies Romantic understanding of irony that sees inwardness in service of a wholeness. In addition, more universal Romantic tropes are present in this character’s legitimation for dropping out: “So I came down here, to breathe dust and walk with the dogs – to look at a rock or a cactus and know that I am the first to see that cactus and that rock.

²⁵⁷ Coupland, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, 65.

And to try and read the letter inside me.”²⁵⁸ These are central Romantic values of original self-creation, individuality, committed self-expression and the restorative role of nature. What is important is understanding how the idea of the political is changed by this particular conjunction of ideas and what legacy it creates for self-understanding.

Through slacker films and alternative culture, we will see that a politics of authenticity makes certain things possible but does not lead to the political resistance and ‘social authenticity’ often hoped for it by, for example, Marshall Berman or Charles Taylor. Instead, a personalisation of politics, as well as interiorisation of resistance, will turn out to navigate the breakdown of collective forms of politics by turning to personalised ones. First, however, a fuller description of the aesthetic characteristics of postmodern irony.

3.2 Postmodern Strategies

In the early 21st century, postmodernism, irony, and apathy became interchangeable among the pro-sincerity-debaters. Returning to the popular “How to Live without Irony” essay once again as representative, irony is equated with cowardice, half-heartedness, a deliberate shield against criticism: “Irony is the most self-defensive mode, as it allows a person to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic and otherwise.”²⁵⁹ These last words are important, typical of the equivalence of stylistic practice (aesthetic choices) to a way of living, a kind of subjectivity (his or her choices). Irony stands for hiding behind indirect language, “postmodern cynicism” and “a large segment of the population to forfeit its civic voice through the pattern of negation”, and so the

²⁵⁸ Coupland, *Generation X*, 66.

²⁵⁹ Wampole, “How to Live Without Irony.”

possibility that irony can have meaning, intention and urgency is *incorrectly* foreclosed.²⁶⁰

So, it will help to start our investigation of ironic authenticity with a reminder of the expressive strategies of ‘doing’ postmodern irony in the 1990s. Instead of being politically silent, will see how slacker films articulate forms of political engagement under difficult circumstances. And crucially, features postmodern irony in various intentional, expressive forms focused on repair. The films playfully embody central ideas of European postmodern philosophy, combined with upholding authenticity as a moral source for *socio-political critique*.

As a structure of feeling is always a response to change, the first change is the socio-political and technological globalisation of mass-media capitalism, prompting the themes well known postmodern themes of *fragmentation and disorientation*. A condition that *Generation X* finds obviously detrimental, at the start of the novel a character laments how storytelling has been reduced bite-size bumper stickers: “the world has gotten too big – way beyond our capacity to tell stories about it, and so all we’re stuck with are these blips and chunks and snippets on [car] bumpers” (6). Of course, then, the book’s own style ironizes this statement by fragmenting its own pages with ‘bumper stickers’ that give bite-sizes description of the ills of living in the mass-media-era. Secondly, it responds the accelerated, increased reach of commodification through themes of *invasiveness and human diminishment*. A darkly silly scene from *Slacker* sends up the limitless reach of human commodification: a street hustler who tries to sell a celebrity’s pap-smear. Marketing human-fluids-as-products is a satirical trope that emerges in *Generation-X* as a proposal to make soap out of rich-peoples’ liposuction fat, an idea repeated in the novel *Fight Club* (Palahniuk, 1996) and making its way into Hollywood film adaptation (Fincher, 1999).

²⁶⁰ “Moving away from the ironic involves saying what you mean, meaning what you say and considering seriousness and forthrightness as expressive possibilities, despite the inherent risks. It means undertaking the cultivation of sincerity, humility and self-effacement,” Wampole.

Slacker films from the early 1990s are thematically connected films that dwelled on youth as lethargic and lost. Against the backdrop of globalised disorientation and limitless commodification as themes of political critique, the films bring alive quintessentially postmodern ideas and show how ‘postmodern irony’ results in creative, *generative* strategies.²⁶¹

Postmodern Irony in Slacker films

First, we can see irony as a strategy of forcing open. *Slacker*’s narrative conceit – a seemingly wandering camera that briefly follows and then abandons characters street-walking– is similar to Lyotard’s diagnosis of postmodernism: a plot-less plot that ‘loosens up’ a grand narrative, creating a noticeable, negative space which then becomes coherent. The force of such *little narratives* stem from their imaginative invention. *Slacker* is not just an ethnographic, docu-fictional portrait of Austin’s counter-public community-culture, its style brings alive radical ideas such as the *dérive* described earlier, full of ‘winking’ nods at radical concepts.²⁶² One of the film’s most remembered characters is the Video Backpacker, who lives in a small room walled by old televisions and he even carries one on his back.²⁶³ His scene begins by telling a story that plays up Baudrillard’s concept of *hyperreality*: he recounts how he witnessed a disappointing stabbing in the street, which felt unreal compared to the reality of his screens. Then, he switches to a rambling story about a conspiracy to cover up a student’s violent rebellion: a second Baudrillardian vignette of imploded, chaotic and self-undermining

²⁶¹ Parallel to slacker films, irony in the cinema of the 1990s was as widespread as diverse in form. This is not a historic or comprehensive investigation into the politics of irony in nineties American (independent) cinema, so many of the most popular ironic elements fall outside of this investigation: think of the ‘ironic’ embrace of violence made famous by *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) or the inventive layers of pastiche and self-parody exemplified by *Scream* (Wes Craven/Kevin Williamson, 1996).

²⁶² Even though *Slacker* has recurring references in spoken dialogue to chaos, multiple worlds, and randomness, I would not see it as connected to Rortyan ideas of contingency.

²⁶³ The Video Backpacker even became part of a media studies textbook making the same point. S C Benyahia et al., *Media Studies: The Essential Resource* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 260.

attempts at meaningful communication. It is the communal knowledge shared between film and audience of countercultural ideas that allows the ironic (indirect, alluded) gestures to amalgamate into a meaningful narrative that is conventionally speaking 'plotless'.

Secondly, irony functions a strategy of creating double meaning. *Slacker's* final sequence is a pastiche (imitation) of the nouvelle vague – a frantic musical sequence set to 1958 polka with faded stock colouring and jittery handheld cinematography – that ends by evoking that the camera is hurled over a cliff to cut-to-black destruction. The allusions to Antonioni's *Blow-Up* deserve more attention than can be given, important now is the quintessentially postmodern orientation on the past - 'the already said' as an inescapable cultural language in the mass media age. For Gianni Vattimo, "the dissolution of the value of the new" in the arts express the metaphysical (anti-foundational) transformation of the way history is experienced; it functions as the privileged locus of expression of an all-permeating societal *crisis of the future*.²⁶⁴ The film presents a conclusion that can do nothing but conjure up the past, a gesture that expresses postmodern 'nowness' rather than nostalgia.

Nevertheless, *Slacker* films are more funny than pessimistic. The common use of pastiche and intertextual references as forms of *metafiction* invite hopeful reflection on art's own possibilities and problems. An obviously self-reflexive film is *Living in Oblivion* by Jim Jarmusch's cinematographer Tom DiCillo (1995), a black comedy with a knowing, winking take on films-about-filmmaking. It is filled with apathetic characters prone to bad luck and laziness, who manage to endanger the already strained work of low-budget independent filmmaking. Still, the film is a love letter to this precarious industry as well as to the dreaming heart of filmmaking itself – an *8½* in not-so-cynical New York. In

²⁶⁴ Vattimo, Gianni. *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 105-107.

this film, playful invention displaces any supposedly paralysing dependence on ‘consuming the past’,

Thirdly, postmodern irony is principally a strategy of suture and repair. Redemption is central to one of the most famous elucidations of postmodernism-as-irony, written by Umberto Eco. His account is best left unabbreviated, pithily acknowledging the experience of erosion of language itself and alluding to the shadow of historical failure that characterises post-Second World War Humanism:

“I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and who knows he cannot say to her, “I love you madly”, because he knows that she knows (and she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland [an exuberantly kitsch romance novelist, ESR]. Still, there is a solution. He can say, “As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly.” At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wants to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony...But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love.”²⁶⁵

Precisely such ‘banal’ allusions mark the pioneering independent film *Clerks* (Kevin Smith, 1994) where the dialogue communicates its high irony via explicit inter-textual references that, for instance, made political discussion feel fresh. In a day-in-the-life story of two immature working-class heroes, the clerks make an exhibit of their lack of ambition in their ‘McJobs’ at a convenience store and

²⁶⁵ Eco’s own career as a novelist exemplified postmodernism’s embrace of the popular. Umberto Eco, “‘I Love You Madly,’ He Said Self-Consciously,” in *The Fontana Postmodernism Reader*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (London: Fontana Press, 1995), 32–33.

video store (Quentin Tarantino's former job, needless to say). The film was as resourceful in low budget production, as it was in bad-taste humour and irreverent dialogue. Its infamous 'Storm-Trooper-debate' blends a discussion of *Star Wars* (in the stead of historical Nazi Germany) with remarkably earnest questioning of ethico-political responsibility. The scene's Eco-esque humour is effective by juxtaposing the silly and the grave, the low-brow, and the high-brow.

Contrary to their remembrance, these postmodern ironic strategies are *generative strategies* that share the quality of breaking open space, bringing current problems into view and finding playful ways to overcome them. Denounced as "the most self-defensive mode", irony's characteristic *indirectness* is dismissed as apathic meaninglessness, while here irony works obviously in an oppositional and resonant way. Then, if irony can be so varied and meaningful, why does it have such a bad reputation, especially when paired to another rhetorical surrogate for moral relativism: postmodernism?

Postmodernism as Disempowering Diagnosis

The connection between irony, political apathy and 'postmodern moral relativism' emerges hand in hand with the English-language discourse on postmodernism.²⁶⁶ Specifically, the American stamp on the discourse on postmodernism as the 'culture of late capitalism' needs to be re-examined to, hopefully, renegotiate its damning account of irony. I would argue for a specific transformation of the meaning of postmodernism in the 1990s, in the same period when alternative (slacker) culture became so popular it was suddenly 'mainstream'. In the American debate, postmodernism transforms into a culturally pessimistic social diagnosis rather than a generative philosophical

²⁶⁶ Both the foreword to Lyotard and Jameson's own pastiche-parody essay were published in 1984, Jameson's introduction to Lyotard's book gives an inverse normative valuation of it. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146, no. July / August (1984): 54-92.

programme in epistemology and ethics (propelled by figures such as Lyotard or Derrida).

Contrary to the 1980s, when the very category of postmodernism was still challenged by, for example, Frankfurt School thinkers as Jürgen Habermas, however, from the 1990s postmodernism functioned *uncontested* as the framework for cultural critique. The older contestations of postmodernism meant that an alternative grand narrative (Enlightenment Humanism) or normative ground (a prescriptive program of social democracy) was still upheld as rival to the new postmodern philosophy. The postmodern philosophical movement de-emphasises or even opposes normative prescription in favour of ‘little narratives’ or deconstructive ethics. Yet the challenge to postmodernism as a category, paradigm, or framework disappeared in the 1990s, coinciding with a shift from a European discourse of Postmodernism to an American one.²⁶⁷

The crucial shift from postmodernism as a *generative* perspective to a new kind of *diagnostic* is most visible through the work of Fredric Jameson, who redefined postmodernism as a periodised socio-economic and aesthetic phenomenon beginning roughly in 1980.²⁶⁸ In contradiction with Lyotard or Umberto Eco, postmodernism is not a strategy that creates openings for difference and inclusion, but the cultural counterpart of ‘late capitalism’ that explains the pervasive consumerist complacency with multinational corporatism. Jameson’s work not only reoriented the theoretical (humanities) cannon of academic teaching, but his work also left a mark on subsequent

²⁶⁷ With thanks to Aukje van Rooden.

²⁶⁸ Even though he later attempted to better differentiate using the terms postmodernism (late capitalism) and postmodernity (aesthetic style), the impact of this was minimal. Even Jameson himself lamented the obfuscation in a 2016 interview, although the periodisation claim remains. See Baumbach, Nico, Damon R. Young, and Genevieve Yue. 2016. “Revisiting Postmodernism.” *Social Text* 34 (2 127): 143–144.

literature itself, as writers graduated from reshaped English literature degrees and newly created MFA programs in the 1980-90s.²⁶⁹

Central to the diagnostic understanding of postmodernism is the idea that the process of meaning making has fallen into a state of crisis. Jameson's Marxist aesthetic theory transposes Baudrillard's simulacra onto postmodern forms and style, which are denied their capacity to undermine capitalist processes or destabilise the conceptual 'logocentric' tools of instrumental reason. As Theo D'Haen writes: "Jameson's view of postmodernism, not coincidentally, directly grafts onto that of Lyotard – even though the negative evaluation of the phenomenon he eventually arrives at runs counter to the rather celebratory evaluation of Lyotard."²⁷⁰ The primary evidence Jameson finds for this differing judgement is his aesthetic interpretation of late 20th century cultural forms. For example, a damning analysis that compares the restorative, unalienating work of Van Gogh's peasant shoes with the new superficiality of Warhol's Diamond Dust Shoes. He worries about works that: "*ought* to be powerful and critical political statements. If they are not that, then one would surely want to know why, and one would want to begin to wonder a little more seriously about the possibilities of political or critical art of the postmodern period of late capital."²⁷¹ The claim put forth by Jameson is that culture has *lost* its possibilities for political critique.

What has then been lost? Jameson claims that the idealised 'depth' of high modernism is connected not with *form* but in a different relationship between art and a hermeneutic 'reception culture'. Nevertheless, Jameson argues his pessimistic account via a-priori claims of how art is perceived and responded

²⁶⁹ See for example on the role of Jameson and "the academic construction of American literature and society specifically as "postmodern". Adam Kelly, "Beginning with Postmodernism," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57, no. 3/4 (2011): 396.

²⁷⁰ D'Haen, Theo, 'Introduction' in Haen, T, and P. Vermeulen. *Cultural Identity and Postmodern Writing*(Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2006) 4

²⁷¹ Emphasis in original Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 60.

to and cautions for a culture of “waning affect” (61), “depth replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth).” (62). He warns that “the older *anomie* of the centred subject may also mean, not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling.” (64). It seems that for Jameson, the 20th century’s philosophical decentring of the subject continued by postmodernism (he includes Foucault) means the disappearance of an actual feeling subject, as if the latter was somehow an outcome of the first. The characteristic of ‘breaking open’ shared by postmodern philosophy and aesthetics signifies, for Jameson, an obstacle to an individual’s access to coherence and emancipation –a denunciation in the name of authenticity.

The problem with the diagnostic definition of postmodernism is that it tends to amplify a process of complexification and differentiation until the point it collapses into an opposite binary. If Habermas warned that the ‘anti-foundationalism’ of postmodern philosophy creates a crisis for normativity that would be defenceless to conservative reactionaries, Jameson sees postmodernism as a catastrophic collapse of meaning making. His argument takes the form of historical degeneration, anchored in implicit valuation of in Literary Modernism’s de-alienation and an 18th century Swiftian moral clarity:

“If the ideas of a ruling class were once the dominant (or hegemonic) ideology of bourgeois society, the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm. Faceless masters continue to inflect the economic strategies which constrain our existences, but no longer need to impose their speech (or are henceforth unable to); and the postliteracy of the late capitalist world reflects, not only the absence of any great collective project, but also the unavailability of the older national language itself.”²⁷²

²⁷² Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” 65.

This passage is followed by Jameson's famous declaration that critical parody has been historically superseded by uncritical pastiche. It wrongly assumes that parody and irony 'ought' to be critical and express counter-hegemonic ideological positions, while irony is inherently *trans-ideological* and functions across a variety of tactics and political affiliations. As Hutcheon's work reminds us:

"There is nothing intrinsically subversive about ironic skepticism or about any such self-questioning, "internally dialogized" mode (LaCapra 1985: 119); there is no necessary relationship between irony and radical politics or even radical formal innovation (Nichols 1981: 65). Irony has often been used to reinforce rather than to question established attitudes (cf. Moser 1984: 414), as the history of satire illustrates so well."²⁷³

Nevertheless, Jameson represents a popular assumption about irony, writing:

"In this situation, parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs: it is to parody what that other interesting and historically original modern thing, the practice of a kind of blank irony, is to what Wayne Booth calls the 'stable ironies' of the 18th century [in writing by moralists, ESR],"²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, 10.

²⁷⁴ Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 65.

The idea that postmodernism is characterised by a kind of *uncritical*, unopinionated, apathetic irony is echoed in the 21st century debate's diagnoses of 'culture in general'. Absence of critique is an undeniable problem, but its causes – here, postmodernism-as-globalisation as the loss a clear *hegemon* – cannot be identified through unhelpful suppositions about irony. In addition, Jameson's choice to graft postmodernism onto 'late capitalism' (then called computerised, post-Fordist or third stage capitalism) collapses many semantic differences between aesthetic interpretation and socio-economic critique. It rhetorically neutralises two elements at once: postmodern philosophy as a way of critiquing foundations of capitalist society and postmodern poetics that are themselves heterogeneous in ideological meaning.

In retrospect, the impact of Jameson's highly influential transformation of the term postmodernism has had a negative influence on how the postmodern ironic can be *understood as generative critique* towards the status quo in the 2012-2015 debate. Subsequently, even the most subversive postmodern art or radical postmodern philosophy could be linguistically labelled as mere expressions of capitalist society and somehow ideologically aligned. It is as if the terms 'anti-racism' (standing in for the postmodernism of anti-capitalist French philosophy) and bigotry (late capitalist society in Jameson's term) were suddenly designated by the same word. As postmodernism was debated across a wide array of social fields, from fine arts to mass media, journalism, education and notably even pop culture – unlike most academic discussions, the postmodernism-debate became part of popular culture. Even though the idea that postmodern irony equals the absence of critique persists (see chapter 1) presently, term globalisation has taken over the meaning of 'late capitalism'. I do not aim to refute Jameson's analysis of mass culture's post-1970s embrace of capitalist consumerism or the democratic crisis of disempowerment. My argument is that popular culture presents diverse forms of self-understanding rather than a cultural logic that is susceptible to narratives of 'exhausted critique'.

3.3 Postmodern Politics of Irony

Looking at ironic authenticity as a structure of feeling in 1990s popular culture shows how postmodern ironic aesthetics can be both generative and critical. The slacker films discussed earlier, denounce, and respond to social change by taking on particularly (European) postmodern notions such as erosion of language, hyperreality or presentism. This goes hand in hand with a continuation of the 'bohemian' form of artistic critique that denounces capitalism's inauthenticity and oppression. However, ironic authenticity presents a tricky notion of political subjectivity, that makes irony central to the claim that 'withdrawing in disgust is not the same as apathy'. In the following, I will first set out the characteristics of artistic-bohemian critique of capitalism. Then, I will describe how the political commitments of postmodern poetics rely on the same Romantic conception of selfhood that underlies the notion of authenticity-as-separateness discussed in Chapter 2, which seems to be the most problematic aspect.

Artistic Critique of Capitalism

In slacker films, generative postmodern strategies go hand in hand with an older bohemian form of social critique. Denouncements of consumerism's hollowness and the falseness of work satisfaction are central themes, expressed against a backdrop of post-1980s adulation of wealth and the cruelty of Reaganomics. Among the fictional protagonists and actual audiences of slacker films and novels such as *Generation-X* there is an alternative consensus view of capitalism, incredulous of mass media's bombardment of careerism and consumption. Their diagnosis flips the two central doxa of the American Dream's pursuit of happiness – upward mobility through productivity and material accumulation – into sources of unhappiness.

Slacker's cinematic views of Austin continue a tradition rooted in the Baudelairian invention of the bohemian lifestyle and its radical claim to

autonomy. As such, the structure of feeling corresponds to what Boltanski and Chiapello describe in their sociology of critique as *artistic critique* or *critique in the name of authenticity*. (I will discuss their conception of authenticity in 3.4).²⁷⁵ Artistic critique “counterposes the freedom of artists, their rejection of any contamination of aesthetics by ethics, their refusal of any form of subjection in time and space and, in its extreme forms, of any kind of work.” (33). In this schema, artistic practice makes important contributions by articulating two important sources of indignation with capitalism: (1) capitalism as a source of “*disenchantment* and *inauthenticity* of objects, persons, emotions and, more generally, the kind of existence associated with it”, (2) capitalism as a source of *oppression*.²⁷⁶ As discussed, slacker films and the wider structure of feeling of ironic authenticity continue this tradition, specifically adding the claim that “withdrawing in disgust is not the same as apathy”.

Here, postmodern irony is not apathic, unpolitical or ‘blank’ and enables a continuation of political engagement and critique in a “tight place”. In the following, I want to show how the source of that tightness is not the essential exhaustion of irony’s possibilities, but that the specific transformation of political subjectivity – an understating of the relationship between self and socio-

²⁷⁵ “The formulation of a critique presupposes a bad experience prompting protest, whether it is personally endured by critics, or they are roused by the fate of others. This is what we call the source of *indignation*. Without this prior emotional – almost sentimental – reaction, no critique can take off. On the other hand, it is a long way from the spectacle of suffering to articulated critique; critique requires a theoretical fulcrum and an argumentative rhetoric to give voice to individual suffering and translate it into terms that refer to the common good. This is why there are actually two levels in the expression of any critique: a primary level – the domain of the emotions – which can never be silenced, which is always ready to become inflamed whenever new situations provoking indignation emerge; and a secondary level – reflexive, theoretical and argumentative – that makes it possible to sustain ideological struggle, but assumes a supply of concepts and schemas making it possible to connect the historical situations people intend to criticize with values that can be universalized”. Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 36. Emphasis in original.

²⁷⁶ The authors distinguish four sources of indignation with capitalism between (a) artistic critique that concentrates on (1) capitalism as a source of “*disenchantment* and *inauthenticity* of objects, persons, emotions and, more generally, the kind of existence associated with it”, (2) capitalism as a source of *oppression*. In contrast, (b) social critique expressed by social movements concentrates on (3) “*poverty* among workers and of *inequalities* on an unprecedented scale” and (4) “*opportunism* and *egoism* which, by exclusively encouraging private interests, proves destructive of social bonds and collective solidarity, especially of minimal solidarity between rich and poor”. Boltanski and Chiapello, 37–38. Emphasis in original.

political world – in *response to changing circumstances*. The self-understanding of slacker films (and ironic authenticity more widely) expresses what is popularly called an ‘awareness of co-option’ and a subsequent unavailability of critique.²⁷⁷ In Boltanski’s sociology of critique, the “ethnomethodology takes seriously the actors’ self-understanding, and thus the categories employed in their practices of justification and critique”.²⁷⁸ Before discussing this crucial dimension, I need to draw more attention to the implicit Romantic conceptions at work in their justifications. Drawing out how this political subjectivity emphasises interiority and personalisation only becomes coherent by looking at the role of Romantic ideals and their inherent dangers.

Poetics of Complicity and Critique

Hutcheon’s analysis of the politics of irony – or ironic practice – is enduringly helpful, especially for understanding how a structure of feeling articulates engagement. Ironic authenticity combines postmodern invention with a form of socio-political critique, it is influenced by the mechanics of irony’s often deliberate dissonance or contrariness. Postmodern irony signals a distancing rather than rupture from ideological consensus exemplified by the sobering experience of contingency in Rorty’s proposition of irony-as-probabilism or Habermas’s reading of the ‘post-’ prefix as a gesture of ‘standing back’.

A careful examiner of the diversity of cultural practice, Hutcheon argues for *continuity* with artistic Modernism instead of rupture.²⁷⁹ She stresses how the *poetics* of postmodernism are just as capable of challenging conventions and

²⁷⁷ In the case of artistic practices (versus sociological field work) an academic hermeneutic interpretation such as mine adds many categories and conceptual schemas to those of the artistic ‘actors’. These works are read in relation to the words of social actors, such as cultural critics.

²⁷⁸ Robin Celikates, “Systematic Misrecognition and the Practice of Critique: Bourdieu, Boltanski and the Role of Critical Theory,” in *Recognition Theory and Contemporary French Moral and Political Philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 160.

²⁷⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988), 49–50; Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New Accents (London: Routledge, 1989), 27–28.

concepts as modernism.²⁸⁰ For example, novels in the form of historical pastiche strategically challenge the views we hold in the present and illuminate doxa we then no longer see as natural or self-evident. Postmodern-ironic poetics have the possibility to *de-doxify* (Barthes), to destabilise pre-existing categories and generate new positions and attitudes towards the past. However, Hutcheon cautions against easy belief in subversion, stressing contradiction:

“paradoxical postmodernism of *complicity and critique*, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world. It uses the reappropriated forms of the past to speak to a society from within the values and history of that society, while still questioning it.”²⁸¹

Hutcheon’s pragmatist hermeneutics describe a postmodern cultural practice (such as slacker films and alternative culture) that is *reformist*, politically moderate compared to (European) philosophical postmodernism as *radical* anti-capitalism and anti-foundationalism; akin to “the yes and no of their culture” Trilling saw in American liberal imagination.

Crucially, postmodernism can still be a poetics of commitment to truth and moral norms. As Linda Williams’s lucid essay on postmodern documentary argued, it is in Errol Morris and Claude Lanzman’s *artistic* achievements to reactivate the past via invention (she emphasises their employ of irony as “manipulation”) that postmodernism-as-negativity and paranoid nihilism is avoided. Films as *Shoah* and *The Thin Blue Line* manage to show historical truth

²⁸⁰ Instead of opposing modernism and postmodernism, high art and popular culture, depth and surface, heroism, and scepticism, “what postmodernism does is use and abuse these characteristics of modernism in order to install a questioning of both of the listed extremes.” Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, 50.

²⁸¹ My emphasis in Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 11–12.

by creating a style that allows audiences to see, as well as to ‘step back’ – achieving that double meaning so associated with irony.²⁸²

The real events at the centre of these documentaries (the fact of the Holocaust and a miscarriage of justice respectively) are primarily shaped by an existence one degree removed from us, accessible only via the human witnesses it portrays. The two exemplary films, by drawing attention to how they *are* films, achieve a particular self-reflexivity or ‘postmodern’ viewing experience that thus allows history to emerge, albeit indirectly. In stepping back, an absence (the direct access to truth) is acknowledged and via mutual acknowledgment, transcended.

Postmodern ‘good’ films such as these, signify a *political* commitment to historically reflexive truth for Linda Williams: “I think it is important to hold on to this idea of truth as a fragmentary shard, perhaps especially at the moment we as a culture have begun to realise, along with Morris, and along with the supposed depthlessness of our post-modern condition, that it is not guaranteed.”²⁸³ Refusing to reify the crisis of postmodern meaning, what she champions instead is a Schlegelian-Romantic commitment to truth via fragments. A strategy she sees as timely, appearing when the rise of scepticism has not diminished the desire for truth, too often creating ‘bad’ postmodern coping strategies and destructive forms of assertive certainty (often paranoid or nihilist).²⁸⁴ The implicit Romantic foundation of postmodernism that American popular culture makes visible is mostly an expression of Romantic ‘repair’. Hutcheon and Williams’ assessments of postmodernism differs from those like

²⁸² *Shoah*, directed by Claude Lanzmann, (New Yorker Films, 1985), 9:26. *The Thin Blue Line*, directed by Errol Morris, (Miramax Films, 1988), 103 mins.

²⁸³ Linda Williams, “Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary,” in *Film Quarterly: Forty Years - A Selection*, ed. Brian Henderson and Ann Martin (Berkeley: University of California Press, n.d.), 324.

²⁸⁴ Linda Williams describes something now called post-truth: “Stone [and his feature film JFK] would seem to be a perfect symptom of a postmodern negativity and nihilism toward truth, as if to say: “We know the Warren Commission made up a story, well, here’s another even more dramatic and entertaining story. Since we can’t know the truth, let’s make up a grand paranoid fiction.” (311)

Jameson's in their attention to how knowledge about the 'crisis of meaning' is contained within cultural practices and the ideas that circulate because of them.

Unavailability is not Exhaustion

I want to return now to ironic authenticity and the way "awareness of co-option" is central in it, the understanding about unavailability – the possibility of effective resistance via dissent. A structure of feeling articulates a response to change in moments of breakdown, self-reflexive knowledge that cultural works (film, literature, criticism) contain. To analyse this, I will draw on Boltanski and Chiapello's sociological-philosophical vocabulary that describes how social actors (including artists and philosophers) formulate justifications that criticise or defend participating in capitalist society.

This approach stresses that articulations of critique happen in cycles, congenial to Williams' idea of structures of feeling as *response*, and will help replace one final unhelpful, teleological trope about irony: the superimposed arcs of invention and exhaustion. The legacy of essentialising irony creates not only an inherently defeatist view, its rise-and-fall also echoes the way 21st century cultural critics search for 'markers of engagement' in unhelpful places; Jameson exemplifies the prevalent view that irony is a singular contrarian power that can be degenerated, like a dying revolutionary spirit. Despite claiming that it is the changes in the *culture industry* that matter, political significance is relentlessly placed on the interpretation of the artistic work itself, *essentialising* art's political meaning and disregarding its heterogeneous life form.²⁸⁵ His claim

²⁸⁵ An example of a degeneration 'arch' in Jameson: "Not only are Picasso and Joyce no longer ugly; they now strike us, on the whole, as rather 'realistic'; and this is the result of a canonisation and an academic institutionalisation of the modern movement generally, which can be traced to the late 1950s. This is indeed surely one of the most plausible explanations for the emergence of postmodernism itself, since the younger generation of the 1960s will now confront the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics, classics, which 'weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living', as Marx once said in a different context." Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 56.

To be clear, I do not aim to deny that the history of institutionalisation is incorrect, the point is that the meaning of a cultural practice is placed in a generational frame and therefore – again – essentialised, here in terms of automatic pro-or-contra-revolutionary ideological positions.

that postmodernism is a culture of pastiche where irony has somehow abandoned its counter-hegemonic nature, illustrates the problematic role of essentialised representational markers. This practice leads to superimposing rebel-to-authoritarian ‘arcs’, which dominate 2010s discourses on engagement and contain popular tropes of post-war youth culture revolution (see also Chapter 1 on the generational-oedipal frame), or the recurring stereotypical trope announcing a new generation that will finally dispel the political apathy of the previous one. The latter misplaces the locus of power by focusing on a conventionally powerless group: the young. Even if tropes of exhaustion-and-renewal inject rhetorical power to 1990s irony and post-2000 sincerity in popular discussions, they do more to obscure the underlying problems.

Intriguingly, it is a quintessentially postmodern *and* Romantic belief that an emergent aesthetic strategy has a decreasing effect (or a kind of revolutionary cause that fades within a generation). An important influence on the postmodernism of Lyotard, the original ‘notion’ of postmodernism came from American literary criticism: the 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” argued that the transition from modernism to postmodernism was a consequence of modernism *exhausting* its possibilities as a literary style.²⁸⁶ This Romantic belief pervades across traditions: from liberal approaches such as Cavell and Taylor’s to Hegelian-Marxist ones of American Critical Theory in Jameson.²⁸⁷ In *Critique and Disclosure*, Nikolas Kompridis argues that even Habermas’ concern over exhausted Utopianism as a normative project, is *itself*

²⁸⁶ John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” *The Atlantic*, August 1967; Stuart Sim, *Irony and Crisis: A Critical History of Postmodern Culture* (Icon, 2002), 207–8. John Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” *The Atlantic*, August 1967.; Sim, Stuart. 2002. *Irony and Crisis: A Critical History of Postmodern Culture*. Icon: 207-208

The idea is treated differently in the philosophy of science of Kuhn that developed in dialogue with Cavell’s ideas of Modernism as continuation-via-radical-transformation. See: Vasso Kindi, “Novelty and Revolution in Art and Science: The Connection between Kuhn and Cavell,” *Perspectives on Science* 18, no. 3 (September 2010): 284–310.

²⁸⁷ See for a discussion of Hegel in relation to Postmodern Irony: Jeffrey Reid, *The Anti-Romantic: Hegel Against Ironic Romanticism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

an expression of Romantic approach to critical engagement – and ought to be acknowledged as a Romantic rallying for “going on”.²⁸⁸

Unfortunately, the idea of exhaustion and renewal is very susceptible to idealisation (especially of rebellious young men) and to pessimism. The Romantic linear narrative of renewal-exhaustion places emphasis on the individual and their creative powers, what Kompridis calls “change we can attribute to our own agency”.²⁸⁹ As we will see (also in Chapter 4), the difficulty then becomes re-integrating such an intervention into a balanced, socially situated view where the burden of political, social-economic change is *not* on the individual but rather distributed across collective and institutional efforts. In other words, to not collapse into personalisation of politics and keep the procedural aspects of political engagement open (those that interact with social practices and institutions). Concentrating on how irony (meaning its critical potential) has been co-opted instead of exhausted takes more social factors into account.

Central to ironic authenticity is the struggle to *respond* to the ineffectiveness of irony that has come about by its *co-option*. David Foster Wallace’s impactful essay ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction’ traces the complex interpretative history of post-war postmodern American literature in relation to the rise of television culture, arguing that the potential for critique literature once had has been recaptured by pervasive cultural irony. Whilst, contrary to Jameson, Wallace still champions the political force of literary postmodernism, he sees how the practices of irony have been absorbed and thus neutralised by the hegemonic cultural language ‘spoken’ by television: “what makes television's hegemony so resistant to critique by the new fiction of image is that TV has co-opted the distinctive forms of the same cynical, irreverent,

²⁸⁸ Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought Series (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), 278.

²⁸⁹ Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure*, 279.

ironic, absurdist post-Second World War literature that the imagists use as touchstones.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, Wallace's essay identifies social atomisation as an even stronger problem (more on that in Chapter 4). As we will see, Wallace is characteristic for a self-understanding in this structure of feeling: situating himself in the *aftermath of a previous cycle* and having to come to terms with its contradictory effects. In the next section, I analyse the different layers in this self-understanding. I will argue that a (pre-formal) structure of feeling does in fact express a coherent conception of 'authentic' political self-understanding with Romantic foundations and surprising (and undesirable) consequences. Drawing again on sociological-philosophical theoretical vocabulary of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, I hope to show that there can be a productive dialogue between sociological-philosophical work and film-philosophy.

3.4 Recaptured Irony and Commodified Dissent

Instead of a singular cultural logic making all cultural practice complicit, we have seen reflexive and critical *self-understanding*. The claim "withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy" articulates the unavailability of critique, dissent, or resistance. In 1992, director Richard Linklater explained slackers to journalists as those "spending their whole lives in their own heads, paralysed by the problem of making any difference".²⁹¹ The reasons for their experience of paralysis will become clear by looking at how ironic authenticity is situated historically in dynamic cycles of social change. Here, I again use theoretical vocabulary from Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999/2005), at first this may appear an unconventional context for their work but they turn out to have a surprising connection to Wallace and New Sincerity.

²⁹⁰ Wallace, David Foster. 1993. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (2): 177

²⁹¹ Malcolm, Derek. "Slacker." *The Guardian* 3 Dec. 1992: accessed 27 May 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/film/1992/dec/03/1>.

In addition to the cyclical- dialogical approach, their work makes important distinctions in the social dynamic conventionally called ‘co-option’. Boltanski and Chiapello make a three-part distinction between *recapture* (*récupération*), *discreditation* and *(self-)neutralisation* that will allow us to be more precise about how critique is rendered ineffective or unavailable.²⁹² When Wallace writes that critical, literary irony is co-opted by hegemonic (television and advertising) culture, he is pointing to a structure of recapture. He also makes another point that is most often ignored (Chapter 1). He argues that if young writers continue to practice the same kind of irony without responding to this recapture, they are in fact unwillingly neutralising their own expressions of critique. In the following I will set out Boltanski and Chiapello’s vocabulary but will also contest part of their analysis, informed by perspectives generated by the ‘alternative culture’ of ironic authenticity.

Recapture, Discreditation and (Self-)Neutralisation of Critique

I will first introduce how Boltanski and Chiapello schematise cultural change in Western capitalist through a series of historical cycles of critique; these are dynamic contests between what they call the spirit of capitalism as “the ideology that justifies engagement with capitalism” and challenges of critique by social actors and “artistic” ideas.²⁹³ This is a dialogical process: both sides are prompted into justification and participants become themselves altered during participation in a cycle. Uniquely, their approach stresses how the transformation of working societies occurs through unexpected absorptions of anti-capitalist critique called cycles of *recapture*: meaning that elements that are useful and compatible with capitalist logics are absorbed. For example, a demand by workers for greater self-determination can be recaptured by the digitised

²⁹² The English translation of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (French 1999/ English 2005) translates *récupération* as recuperation, but this loses the pejorative meaning of ‘hijacking’ it contains in French.

²⁹³ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 8.

possibilities of labour flexibilization – often with unexpected, negative outcomes for the workers themselves. Another example is the recapture of environmental demands through business strategies such as greenwashing or premium (expensive) green products. Denouncing the injustices of capitalist society can become more complicated and difficult the more elements are recaptured. This is the case with ironic authenticity, which emerges in the 1980s and implicitly responds to the recapture of a 1960s cycle. We will see how *anti-consumerism*, a central theme of critique in both protest cycles becomes increasingly difficult. For purposes of clarity, I only concentrate on elements of Boltanski and Chiapello’s multifaceted schema relevant to our discussion of these two historical cycles.

In Boltanski and Chiapello’s schematisation, the artistic critique labelled ‘1968’ objected to post-war Western society’s increased *consumerist massification* and (Taylorist) standardisation, formulating demands of liberation and authenticity.²⁹⁴ Boltanski and Chiapello do not make use of artistic examples or cultural ‘structures of feeling’ – they concentrate on philosophical debates as ‘artistic’, Marcuse being the most popular articulator. We can imagine George Perec’s *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (1965) as a novelistic example and counterpart. In it, the lives of young professionals are rendered through descriptions of their possessions, and as their possessions accumulate so does their unhappiness and alienation. The novel exemplifies a ‘critique of consumer society’ in ‘the name of authenticity’ that Trilling also presents through the words of a young Marx:

“there was no question at all of what diminished the experience of self – the great enemy of being was having. “The less you eat, drink, buy books, go to the theatre or to balls, or to the public house, and the less

²⁹⁴ This schema adheres to what Kristin Ross calls a problematic ‘official memory’ of 1968, meaning 1968’s radical geo-political demands for equality (anti-imperialism, socialism etc.) have been pushed out of view. Our case is above all a retrospective rendering that serves self-understanding in the present (the late 1990s in this case): a successful recapture of the demand for individual authenticity popularly labelled 1968. See, Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you will be able to save and the greater will become your treasure which neither moth nor dust will corrupt – your capital. The less you are ...the more you have...” It is accumulation that robs you of being.”²⁹⁵

In popular culture such as *Things*, critique in the name of authenticity involved more than a recognition that ‘having is a diminishment of being’, it takes form as an individualised response to consumer society centring around the individual ‘dropping out’ of conventional society (Marshall Berman’s *The Politics of Authenticity* from 1970 exemplifies this call).²⁹⁶ As we saw in Chapter 2, authentic selfhood is characterised by a making a violent cut between the self and social norms, a critique centred on *rejection* of norms in name of a higher calling of being, rather than *demands* for defined, substantive conceptions of free and just society. The cycle of critique in the name of authenticity reaches a zenith in May 1968. Boltanski and Chiapello stress how social change after the many crises of the 1960s and 1970s is characterised by a ‘successful’ incorporation of the demands made in the name of liberation and authenticity. On the one hand, a reformed work culture (for example, flexible team culture or outsourcing) in the new, networked capitalism was able meet many demands for more autonomy and self-regulation (for Westerners). On the other, the demand for authenticity in terms of social life (including morality, sex, religion) was also met – and recaptured – by a greater diversity of “consumer choice” called the *commodification of difference*. Boltanski and Chiapello of course does not argue that problems are solved, as governmental promises are not kept and new forms of oppression emerge, prompting new forms of critique.

²⁹⁵ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 122.

²⁹⁶ Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society*.

The new, post-1980s cycle of critique that emerges in response is called the *critique of fabrication*.²⁹⁷ We have seen how awareness of commodification and Baudrillardian suspicion of ‘generalised simulacra’ are present in *Slacker* and *Generation-X* and in cultural criticism belonging to this structure of feeling. Instead of being exhausted, this critique stands at the beginning of a cycle that necessitates *transformation of its own elements*. However, Boltanski and Chiapello point out that critique in the 1990s is unable to flourish as a political movement. Undoubtedly critique in the 1990s finds itself in a difficult position having to come to terms with the complexity of 30 years of progress and recapture:

“we might wonder if the gains in liberation secured following May 1968 have not given many people the opportunity to attain to the kind of authentic life that characterised the artistic condition, precisely in so far as it was defined by the rejection of all forms of disciplinary regulation, especially those associated with the pursuit of profit.”²⁹⁸

Their analysis argues for a second problem that they see causing a “crisis of critique”: the philosophical *discreditation* of the ideal of authenticity. From here on, I will maintain a different assessment of the problem, prompted by the analysis of American popular culture.

Boltanski and Chiapello centralise authenticity within the constellation of ideas (artistic critique) that fuelled the impactful events of ‘1968’ and the ideas that were afterwards shaped by these events. In this constellation, inauthenticity stands for the terrible cost that capitalist societies inflict on human dignity and wholeness by massification and standardisation (and thus differs from previous definitions we saw in Trilling and Taylor).²⁹⁹ After 1968, they see a schism within

²⁹⁷ An example of critique of fabrication in globally mediated American pop culture is: Jaap Kooijman, *Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Pop Culture*, Kooijman. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).

²⁹⁸ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 419.

²⁹⁹“In language with Marxist echoes, but in a manner that is perfectly compatible with the Heideggerian thematic of inauthenticity (or at least, with the way this thematic has generally been understood), Adorno

Leftist intellectual work, a kind of paralysing intra-Left ‘disturbance’. Whilst some positions are emanations of critique *in the name of* authenticity (Marcuse, Adorno & Horkheimer), they see others as *discreditations* of authenticity (Derrida, Deleuze, Bourdieu, Foucault). Simultaneously, to make matters worse as it were, the hegemonic mode of capitalism evolves through cycles of recapture that incorporate the elements of critique compatible to its interests. Consequently, the commodification of authenticity through the differentiation of consumer products results in a partly successful recapture for the demand for authenticity after the 1960s:

“The artist’s life is founded by living on one’s own terms, which is a demand for liberation that can be recuperated more easily than demands for liberation from oppression within a collective mode of existence, as one group oppressed by another.”³⁰⁰

In other words, the ideal of authenticity inspired by the bohemian-artistic way of life is only partly compatible with what is popularly called ‘individualist consumerism’ but paradoxically also its opposite (being consuming rather than creative, interpellated rather than free etc.). While capitalism can meet the artistic demand for liberation from bourgeois norms (to live on one’s own terms) via differentiation as consumers, this route can never be fully satisfactory.³⁰¹ Yet the failure to fulfil this desire by commodities and consumerism does not undermine capitalism, it also *perpetuates* it as exciting new products engender the illusion of emancipation from time and space constraints.³⁰² Their example is the Sony

and Horkheimer condemn the consensual levelling, the conformist domination of a society that has made its goal the destruction of any difference. They aim to pursue the radical critique of the massification and standardisation affecting every dimension of existence to a conclusion. This standardisation extends to language, transforming words, and even proper nouns, into ‘capricious, manipulable designations, whose effect is admittedly now calculable’, intended to provoke conditioned reflexes, as in the case of ‘advertising trade-marks’.” Boltanski and Chiapello, 440.

³⁰⁰ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 433–34.

³⁰¹ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 442.

³⁰² Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 437.

Walkman but more recently new platform media technologies illustrate how such products encroach on 'leisure time' and disarm the (legal) limits to commodification. For Boltanski and Chiapello, the philosophical discreditation of authenticity engenders this crisis because: "[t]his contradictory double incorporation tends both to acknowledge the demand for authenticity as valid and to create a world where this question is no longer to be posed." The conjunction of ideological and socio-economic changes causes a 'disturbance' that they see as obstructing new demands for authenticity and renewal of artistic critique.

Saliently, the language Boltanski and Chiapello use to describe the current state of authenticity implicitly draws from the writing of David Foster Wallace, but their analysis has important differences. Contrary to Wallace, Boltanski and Chiapello place strong blame with the philosophers of discreditation (the enterprise of deconstruction):

"Along with its incorporation into capitalism, the discrediting of the demand for authenticity has also had a certain effect on the way new demands for authenticity are expressed. Following the enterprise of deconstruction, they could no longer be (if we may put it thus) as 'naive' as they were in the past – as if there might somewhere still exist an authenticity that had been preserved. Accordingly, the new demand for authenticity must always be formulated in an ironic distance from itself."³⁰³

While the connection is not made explicit, Boltanski and Chiapello's 1999 words echo the core proposition of David Foster Wallace in 1993's "E Unibus Pluram" that stated: "These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even

³⁰³ My emphasis Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 452.

started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic.”³⁰⁴ Boltanski and Chiapello describe the state of critique as:

“exacerbated by the absence of any possible solution on the part of critique, which is bound up with denouncing both the inauthenticity and the naivety of this denunciation [...] to the point where it appears anachronistic, even ridiculous.”³⁰⁵

I have two problems with Boltanski and Chiapello’s presentation of the discreditation of authenticity – quickly bypassing the schisms in French theory at work here. Wallace shares their analysis that the dynamic of recapture by capitalist consumer media culture is the central problem, but it something else that is being recuperated: the ironic, irreverent language of literary postmodernists have been adopted by television and advertising media, who pre-emptively mock themselves, acting cynically ‘in on the joke’. The recapture of ‘irony’ is part of a cultural change labelled the *bohemianization of mass culture*, which became very visible in the early 1990s.

Secondly, Boltanski and Chiapello suggest that authenticity is now discredited by consensus (in popular culture and in theoretical debates) but this neglects how strongly authenticity is upheld within popular culture. In the structure of feeling, ‘ironic authenticity’, and the resistance to globalised mass media capitalism (its critique of fabrication) is founded on Romantic appeals to authenticity: reading Rilke’s letter inside you, withdrawing in disgust and so on. Authenticity and postmodern irony are not mutually exclusive and Wallace’s argument is a trickier one. In brief: the postmodern ironic strategies of upholding authenticity have been recaptured by consumer capitalism, perhaps (postmodern imagist) irony has lost its function; the world of the 1960s is not

³⁰⁴ Wallace, David Foster. 1993. “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (2): 193

³⁰⁵ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 452–53.

that of the 1990s. But Wallace still practiced postmodern irony as a strategy to show this recapture. His call for sincerity was not an angry denunciation of limitless commodification (the central argument of ironic practices we saw in slacker films), it was an argument to show how “ironic” denunciation was meaningless in a time of *social fragmentation*. (Chapter 4 will analyse the appeal to sincerity as a response to social fragmentation). Here, I focus on how Wallace argues from a very different self-understanding that counters the idea that postmodern philosophy undermines appeals to authenticity. Discreditation (philosophical intra-Left discord) is here not the obstacle, critique in the name of ironic authenticity is ‘disturbed’ and non-flourishing for different reasons: a response to recapture of dissent itself expressed via a new dynamic of interiorised resistance.

Interiorised Resistance to the Bohemianization of Mass Culture

Ironic authenticity points us to the problem of the recapture of *artistic critique itself*. The acknowledgement of this problem is apparent in the sarcastic title *Commodify Your Dissent* given to a book of critical essays by magazine *The Baffler*. In 1993, Thomas Frank wrote in *The Baffler* how “There are few spectacles corporate America enjoys more than a good counterculture” (an idea that was popularised again in the 2000s through Mark Fisher’s work).³⁰⁶ Frank argues that the only way to resist pervasive pseudo-rebellion was the “worthy, well-screamed *no*”. This refusal would be incomprehensible to both market and academia, as these can only conceive the world in conformism, but it is “something *real*, thriving, condemned to happy obscurity”.³⁰⁷ In practical terms,

³⁰⁶ Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland, eds., *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 145. Frank was referring to the self-contradictory phenomenon of ‘independent rock’: “Consumerism’s traditional claim to be the spokesman for inchoate disgust with consumerism was haemorrhaging credibility, and independent rock, with its Jacobin “authenticity” obsession, had just the thing capital required”. Frank and Weiland, 149. See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*(London: Zero Books, 2009).

³⁰⁷ Frank and Weiland, *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, 159. Emphasis in original.

he imagines that: “for us it’s the secession, the internal exile, the thrashing release, the glorious never never never.”³⁰⁸ This kind of critical awareness is expressed through a persistently Romantic –self-creating, natural, inward – notion of authentic selfhood. The structure of feeling *responds to* the recapture of artistic critique, which then affects ideas of political subjectivity.

Interiorised resistance, that is withdrawn in disgust but not-apathic, becomes part of the post-cold war *popular* culture of the 1990s. Specifically, ironic authenticity’s status as a disturbed or gridlocked form of political critique cannot be viewed apart from how slacker films represent an unprecedented moment in the history of subcultures. *Slacker* depicts the 1989 counter-culture community of Austin, Texas, but was released in 1990 when boundaries between mass media conglomerates and ‘independent media’ were beginning to break down into new, more integrated forms of media production and consumption.³⁰⁹ The unprecedented commercial success of *Slacker* and low-budget films like *Clerks* illustrates the incongruity of ‘mainstream counterculture’.³¹⁰ The popularity of slacker films and ‘alternative music’ in mass and youth culture in the 1990s, powered by corporate investment in it, consolidates a longer process of bohemianization of mass culture. Elizabeth Wilson describes how “far from being extinct, bohemian values of expressiveness, sexual experimentation, radicalism and an aesthetic approach to life have become the mainstay of mass culture.”³¹¹ Mass bohemianism is no simple dichotomy of recapture, as bohemianism has been discursively produced within popular culture since the 1860s along with its own myth of an

³⁰⁸ Frank and Weiland, *Commodify Your Dissent*, 160.

³⁰⁹ It is the year when *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (Soderbergh, 1989) won the Palme d’Or in Cannes. For an overview of American independent cinema see: Geoff King, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumaki, *American Independent Cinema: Indie, IndieWood and Beyond* (London: Taylor & Francis), 2012.

³¹⁰ John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of American Independent Cinema* (London: Faber, 1996).

³¹¹ Elizabeth Wilson, “The Bohemianization of Mass Culture,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (1999): 11.

oversimplified schema between authenticity and falseness of commercial culture (An older kind of commodified authenticity rather than recuperated critique).³¹² Wilson especially warns that her field of cultural studies (in 1999) overestimates ideas of resistance within this new popular culture, but more on this later.

In ironic authenticity as a structure of feeling that responds to such limitless commodification, there is already a strategy of resistance to the bohemianization of mass culture: inner exile, refusal, slacking. Earlier, Thomas Frank represented a radical position of resistance closer to Adorno and Horkheimer – a form of un-ironic authenticity – in contrast to the more phlegmatic response in *Slacker*'s “withdrawing in disgust is not the same as apathy”. Generally, slacker films illustrate moderate, humorous ideas of interiorised resistance. As a film, the portrait *Slacker* paints of counter-cultural life in Austin is a defence of its ‘inoperative community’ and those that share the practice of slacking: non-participation, refusing to work, even a refusal to comply with the law.³¹³ There is, of course, an important difference between those represented in *Slacker* (Austin's 1989 radical citizens, inoperative due to swelling youth unemployment) and the new, mass audiences of “commodified dissent” music and film. These can share all too easily in the Romantic revaluation of interiority as the locus of resistance. *Slacker* itself is apprehensive of too much explanation or ideological posturing, symptomatic of this period's artistic customs (not to ‘preach’) but also of a collegiate sense of humour that

³¹² The allure explained by Wilson is close to an archetype: “On the cusp of the real/phoney dichotomy was the bohemian who claimed the status of artist yet produced little or nothing – a few fragmentary works, perhaps, rumours of an unfinished masterpiece; his reputation resting eventually on the very fact of having produced so little, if anything enhanced by the very absence of the Great Work that never appeared. The fact that the bourgeois audience rejected his work merely confirmed the outlaw's superiority. Failure proved his genius, since the bourgeoisie was judged incapable of recognising great art. The bohemian stance, therefore, expressed the paradox that to fail was to succeed and to succeed was to fail since, if the artist's work found favour with a wide audience, that must mean it had pandered to the low tastes of the philistines.” Elizabeth Wilson, “The Bohemianization of Mass Culture,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (1999): 12–13.

³¹³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

runs through all slacker films.³¹⁴ *Slacker*'s argument that "withdrawing in disgust is not the same as apathy" mobilises acknowledgement of the issues at hand (limitless commodification, ubiquitous fabrication) but inadvertently legitimates a dis-interest in and dis-engagement from democratic politics and the state.³¹⁵

If, as things seem to be at least, traditional methods of political action have been neutralised, political engagement is relocated to the mental, cognitive and affective realm. Ironic authenticity 'over-estimates mental intentions at the expense of practical action' to paraphrase Wolfe's critique of Romantic moral perfectionism mentioned in Chapter 2. Subsequently, the practice of raising awareness is lifted out from its subservient role in collective processes of social organisation and *now* cannot thrive under conditions of social atomisation, which is the real foe of Wallace's irony essay. The idea of dissent is transformed along with its popularisation by a changing landscape of mass media: it can be practiced internally and alone. For 'outsiders' of this structure of feeling, withdrawing in disgust is *indistinguishable* from apathy. Interestingly, out of all the associations with political apathy that irony gains in the 2000s "angry disengagement" is not one of them.

I would argue that the causes of disturbance of artistic critique in the 1990s are tied more to the Romantic foundations of authenticity than to the postmodern philosophical discreditation of this notion. For critics of postmodernism and postmodern irony, these undermine vital ideas of authentic selfhood that is then rendered unable to respond to the paralysing encroachment

³¹⁴ The film relays a kind of adolescent (or collegiate) sense of humour in the scenes portraying characters who proclaim with ideological fervour, for example the menacing ex-convict who sermonises to an on-screen camera-crew: "To all you workers out there, every single commodity you produce is a piece of your own death!"

The anarchist revolutionary is revealed to be liar or a senile dotage father figure. The simulacra savvy video-backpacker preaches on the rhetorical power of the image but at this point editing cuts away to a screen showing pornography.

³¹⁵ For a refutation of leftist disengagement from state politics see: Chantal Mouffe, "The Importance of Engaging the State," in *What Is Radical Politics Today?*, ed. J. Pugh (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 230–37.

of capitalist practices of commodification. Ironic authenticity shows that critique is fuelled by ideas of authentic selfhood, inwardness as interior exile being one aspect of the personalisation of politics.

3.5 Personalising Politics

I want to draw out more explicitly how this pre-formal structure of feeling illuminates a changed political self-understanding. The problem lies in its ability to shape a secondary ‘formal’ level of artistic critique “that makes it possible to sustain ideological struggle [...] assumes a supply of concepts and schemas making it possible to connect the historical situations people intend to criticize with values that can be universalized.”³¹⁶ It seems to me that it is authenticity’s emphasis on individual (self-created, original, inward) selfhood that makes it unable to translate into critiques of social dynamics of fragmentation and atomisation. The ‘personalisation of politics’ that emerges as a balm for the paralysis of resistance seems to create obstacles to formalised articulations.

The personalisation of politics can be understood through a look at *zine culture* (zine is a self-made, often money-losing magazine) that were an important part of alternative culture. Steven Duncombe’s *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (1997) explained this subculture’s distinct notion of political subjectivity, which centres on the authority of the authentic self:

“Zines put a slight twist on the idea that the personal is political. They broach political issues from the state to the bedroom, but they refract all these issues through the eyes and experience of the individual creating the zine. Not satisfied merely to open up the personal realm to political analysis, they personalize politics, forcing open even what the OEO defines as politics with a personalized analysis. In *Dishwasher* Pete Jordan surveys class politics through his own stories of dishwashing

³¹⁶ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 36.

throughout the United States.[...] Adam Bregman exposes the sham of democracy in an age of money politics by writing about his own campaign to be elected mayor of Los Angeles, financed by selling lemonade outside City Hall, in the pages of his zine *Shithappy*.³¹⁷

This personalisation of politics is easier to see in zines than in cinematic and literary counterparts of ironic authenticity. Artistic critique in the post-Reagan era personalises politics by foregrounding a personal connection to events and even statistics. Zines are thus able to foster connection and trust by interspersing confessional and testimonial stories, casting off the preaching and disingenuous tone of traditional politics. Duncombe writes that this is a way of giving authority by the writer to the reader: “Putting the personal first casts political persuasion in terms of emulation rather than conversion. The message isn’t: You should do this. Instead, it’s: Look what I’ve done. “Change ourselves so others can change.”³¹⁸

Again, a structure of feeling is a response to change, here to the sense of disempowerment of citizenship in a global-capitalist world. This redemptive strategy is important, writes Duncombe: “Personalisation is the mark of individuals who don’t have a voice that matters in public discussions about culture and politics saying: Yes, I do matter, this is what I believe, *this idea is mine*”.³¹⁹ Of course, such an appeal to the self as both moral and epistemological authority echoes the Romantic ideal of self-creation but for Duncombe it has some subtle echoes of Republican ideals of personal involvement in politics. However, Duncombe writes that the politics of zines create are ultimately self-undermining:

³¹⁷ Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (This is Microcosm (originally Verso), n.d.), 33.

³¹⁸ Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground*, 35.

³¹⁹ Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground*, 36. Emphasis in original.

As such, they have little faith in the "reality" of politics as it is presented to the public. Confronted with a world of stage managed falseness, the only thing they are sure is real is themselves. When Elayne Wechsler, editor of *Inside Joke*, writes that "[i]n the end, the only Reality in which any of us can believe involves our own personal experiences," the move toward the personal circles in on itself, closing out the world of people and politics"³²⁰ (37)

This circling in on oneself is the paradox of the personalisation of politics: while it does restore the authority to articulate democratic citizenship, it *negates* its 'procedural' consequences within democratic processes and institutions. It articulates 'critique of fabrication' but leaves it be. Similarly, Elizabeth Wilson, in her warning to the field of cultural studies, champions upholding the difference between cultural expressions of dissent and political analysis of the growing democratic deficit that marks the leftist 'Third Way' politics in the 1990s:

"However much theorists emphasize the radical potential of mass culture, they invariably describe a world in which the form taken by dissent is that of *internal exile* rather than open opposition; 'resistance' and 'transgression' replace 'revolution' or 'transformation' – [...] challenging attitudes in personal and everyday life question 'bourgeois' traditions, yet in which the impersonal power structures of the global economy are viewed fatalistically.[...] This position virtually reduces protest to mass culture, thus failing to recognize the extent to which this may represent a *narrowing rather than an expansion* of the parameters of permitted contestation."³²¹

In the case of authenticity critique, the price paid in repairing politics through personalisation is the disavowal of the social, that which is structural, systemic, and *impersonal*. Even though zine politics are antithetical to Reaganism in all

³²⁰ Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground*, 37.

³²¹ Wilson, "The Bohemianization of Mass Culture," 27. My emphasis.

other aspects (class conscious, anti-racist, queer, feminist, crip and more) they may end up echoing its self-over-society beliefs; a perverse echo of the Reaganite dream of entrepreneurship, so dependent on downplaying impeding structural forces to ‘individual success’ such as inequality. In this pattern, we see that authenticity can be means of critique (providing the reasons to dissent from social norms) but as an ideal implodes back on the self. The hard-wired problem of authenticity (discussed in Chapter 2) is making oneself the epistemological or moral authority structurally instead of incidentally, *only* when society’s injustice warrants it.

The dangers of the disappearing structural-procedural returns in the final example of more formalised analysis of ironic authenticity: in Jeffrey Sconce’s study of irony in turn-of-the-millennium American cinema, the Hollywood-centred productions now called “Indiewood”. These films became popular targets of cultural criticism for their irony, which was taken as a sign of the moral decay of citizenship by conservatives (see also Guhin, Chapter 1). Sconce rightly and eloquently defends these films against the accusation of being amoral; his readings of the films disprove the idea that irony equals moral cynicism or nihilism (Sconce himself endorsing a rather Nietzschean conception of nihilism). His 2002 study of ironic cinema that he calls ‘smart cinema’ (a play on ‘art cinema’ of intellectual, middle-class tastes) signals a changed understanding of politics within what the now more formal and recognised bourgeois sensibility:

“No doubt there is a new sensibility at work in certain corners of North American cinema and culture over the past decade, one that manifests a predilection for irony, black humour, fatalism, relativism and, yes, even nihilism. Such cinema has many variations [listed below, ESR]. In 1991, Richard Linklater’s docudrama of hipster anomie, *Slacker*, not only captured aspects of this sensibility through its desultory formal structure, but also served as a veritable ethnographic record of the

emerging collegiate/ bohemian subculture of irony that would so dominate popular taste in 1990s culture”³²²

For Sconce, this change displaces “the more activist emphasis on the 'social politics' of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity so central to 1960s and 1970s [...] concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the 'personal politics' of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture.”³²³ In addition, he writes that “From the perspective of traditional leftist politics, smart cinema seems to advocate irresponsible resignation to the horrors of life under advanced capitalism and an attendant disregard for the traditional villains of racism, sexism and class division.”³²⁴ This is a slightly different problem than the danger of solipsism that zines represented.

The problem pivots on the fraught and necessary acknowledgement that ethico-political questions are *structural* and *procedural* questions: impersonal, social, distributed and beyond the personal experience of the self. Again, the difference between ‘old’ (post-Renaissance) sincerity and post-1900 authenticity is that old society has some moral or epistemological *primacy* over the self. Smart cinema, as highly visible ironic authenticity, illustrates the primacy of ‘authentic’ experience over the societal, which compounds Wilson’s concerns about the

³²² The full list is excerpted from quote: “Such cinema has many variations the arch emotional nihilism of Solondz in *Storytelling* (2001). *Happiness* and *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), and of LaBute in *Your Friends and Neighbors* and *In the Company of Men* (1997), Alexander Payne's 'blank' political satires *Election* (1999) and *Citizen Ruth* (1996), Hal Hartley's postmodern screwball comedies *The Unbelievable Truth* (1990), *Trust* (1991) and *Henry Fool* (1998). post-Pulp Fiction black comedies of violence such as *Very Bad Things*, *Go* (Doug Liman, 1999) and *2 Days in the Valley* (John Herzfeld, 1996); Wes Anderson's bittersweet *Bottle Rocket* (1994), *Rushmore* (1998) and *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001); PT Anderson's operatic odes to the San Fernando valley *Magnolia* (1998) and *Boogie Nights* (1997); the 'cold' melodramas of *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997), *The Sweet Hereafter* (Atom Egoyan, Canada, 1997) and *Safe* (Todd Haynes, 1995); and the 'matter-of-fact' surrealism of *Being John Malkovich* (Spike Jonze, 1999) and *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001).” Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'smart' Film,” 350.

³²³ Sconce writes how: “many of these films suggest the futility of pure politics or absolute morality, concentrating instead on the prison-house of habitus and the politics of postmodern paralysis.” Jeffrey Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'smart' Film,” *Screen* 43, no. 4 (2002): 352.

³²⁴ Sconce, 368.

reduction of protest “to mass culture” that *narrows political contestation* since the 1990s. Historically, authenticity’s powerful potential for critique stemmed from the appeal to self when conforming to *objectionable* social norms. This critique is analogous to the ability of irony to point to and subvert social norms, its ability to *de-doxify*. However, when the inward-oriented personalisation of politics becomes ‘inner exile’ it shows how political engagement can lose “recognisable political consequences” as structural-procedural dimensions of political imagination wither away.³²⁵

In this chapter, I have argued that ironic authenticity is *not* apathic and that the problem is neither ‘exhausted irony’ nor ‘postmodern relativism’. Ironic authenticity stalls precisely because artistic strategies return to Bohemian, Romantic and authentic ideals that can drive towards atomism and escapism, which in themselves are shaped by *responding to* particular socio-historical conditions such as the post-1970s capitalist recapture of ideas of authenticity and the bohemianization of mass media in the 1990s. This ‘response’ then is susceptible to a “critique as withdrawal” that ignores the need to engage with the democratic state.³²⁶ While personalising the political can be a brief, temporary method of *continuing* political engagement under difficult circumstances, it risks becoming permanent. The idea that there is an ‘inner exile’ from politics may even become indistinguishable from apathy, which perversely explains the 2012-2015 disdain for ‘postmodern irony’ that forgets its critique of consumer capitalism. Chapter 4 will explore how appeals to sincerity appear as a response to a pervasive sense of social fragmentation. In the artistic critique of *ironic authenticity*, the procedural has disappeared, in *avowed sincerity* the hope for its return in ‘the social’ is nevertheless weighed down by the self-imposed constraints of personalisation.

³²⁵ Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*, 347.

³²⁶ Mouffe, “The Importance of Engaging the State,” 230.

Chapter 4: Sincerity and Depoliticisation

“I know that personality is just an invention of the news media. I know that character exists from the outside alone. I know that inside the body there’s just temperature. So how do you build your soul?”

*Sheila Heti. How Should a Person Be?*³²⁷

“I don’t know. That’s OK”

*Funny Ha Ha*³²⁸

4.1 Introduction

The post-2000 devaluation of irony went hand in hand with a reevaluation of sincerity. Irony became a shorthand for political apathy and moral relativism. Despite this, the claim that a new, dominant cultural style of sincerity equalled a return of engagement was contradictory and exaggerated, as Chapter 1’s analysis of the commentary debate has already demonstrated. In this chapter, I want to replace the large claims surrounding sincerity as a return of political engagement in favour of attention to the contradictory and difficult elements. New Sincerity can be criticised for being a superficial or insufficient form of political articulation and imagination. Does New Sincerity meet the internal criteria set out in Chapter 2 for sincerity as citizenship, does it involve conversion, articulation and future exposition? In the first part of this chapter, I will return to the most visible and debated actors in the New Sincerity debate and show how insufficient forms appear and why the objections against sincerity in the debate in Chapter 1 have merit. Then, I want to look at a different and overlooked part of the structure of feeling because there are indeed productive, positive elements – yet in a way different than has been claimed. Sincerity

³²⁷ Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?* (New York: Henri Holt, 2010), 10.

³²⁸ *Funny Ha Ha*, directed by Andrew Bujalski, (Fox Lorber 2002), 89 mins.

characterises a specific structure of feeling, which becomes coherent as a pre-formal *response* to change. This is exemplified by cultural-aesthetic practice and its circulation and reception.

I will argue in this chapter that the structure of ‘avowed sincerity’ emerges in the 2000s as a response to a pervasive sense of social atomisation – the fraying of the social fabric captured, for instance, by the U.S. bestseller *Bowling Alone* (2000). Sincerity’s early Modern and pre-Romantic conception is important in this context (see 2.3); the renewed valuation of ‘old’ sincerity stems from it being conceived as *a mediating and arbitrating practice* between self and society. Against a backdrop of a post-Thatcher view that “There is no such thing as society” the emphatic, avowed practice of sincerity tries to make ‘the social’ appear.³²⁹ I also propose that the structure of feeling is broader than the authors commonly described within New Sincerity.³³⁰ It is overlooked how the stylistic emphasis of *avowal* through declarative forms with ‘knowing’, self-conscious and not-quite-ironic accents emerges from a tradition of female artists such as Chantal Akerman in the 1970s, Jenny Holzer in the 1980s and Gillian Wearing in the 1990s.

In cinema, the more interesting work on making the social appear can be found in the experimental mumblecore film movement, discussed in detail in this chapter, where avowed sincerity characterises the preoccupation with ethical deliberation shared with contemporaneous Indiewood auteurs such as Miranda July, Nicole Holofcener and Brit Marling. In the work of novelists such as Sheila

³²⁹ Popular saying also often used to describe extreme individualism and anti-welfare state policies, based on Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s quote “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families.” “Margaret Thatcher: A Life in Quotes,” *The Guardian*, April 8, 2013. Also in the context of advanced accelerating techno-economic change, no longer solid but fragmented and liquid, see Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

³³⁰ Novelists such as David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Safran Foer and ‘quirky’ counterparts in cinema Wes Anderson Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze, Charlie Kaufman, Jared Hess, see James Macdowell, “Wes Anderson, Tone and the Quirky Sensibility,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 10, no. 1 (2010): 6–27; den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature*.

Heti and (again) Miranda July, the style of avowed sincerity can also be found, illustrated by their overstatedly sincere (but also not-ironic) titles *How Should a Person Be?* and *No One Belongs Here More Than You*. All these artists represent explorations of sincerity as citizenship for those in a relatively privileged position, one that Cavell described as “those in positions for which social injustice or natural misfortune (to themselves) is not an unpostponable issue”.³³¹ This orientation in addressing citizens that have the privilege of ‘freedom from politics’ is shared by the comedic television work of Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert, in spite of their highly ironic formats in *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (their explicit attention to institutional politics forms an exception rather than the rule).³³² Counter-intuitively, the desire for articulating the existence of the social does not result in traditional-formal political articulation, avowed sincerity is, therefore, marked by Romantic emphasis on *feeling* the social through aesthetic, sensory practices – blurring the distinction between the artistic and socio-political practices described Chapter 1. A longing to feel connection to the social world is one of the central motifs in the novel seen as the catalyst for sincerity’s popularity: Dave Eggers novel *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) – a motif captured by the word “lattice”.³³³ So, what kind of strategies for expressing a shared social world can be found in this structure of feeling?

First, the chapter will briefly return to the New Sincerity of Chapter 1 and explore how it exemplifies the limiting and curtailing political dynamics within this structure of feeling. In contrast, I will then present three more

³³¹ Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, xix.

³³² Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have been extensively studied in academic contexts. I am interested in how their work as TV news satirists blurs the line between media work and activism in actions such as *The Rally To Restore Sanity and/or Fear* (2010). Their journalism is remarkably different from the autobiographic tradition of New Journalism described in for example: Daniel Worden, “The Memoir in the Age of Neoliberal Individualism,” in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

³³³ Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*.

promising cases of sincerity as an antidote to political apathy described in Chapter 2: the mumblecore film genre embodies how the ideal of sincerity ought to involve *conversion*, a change out of apathy by responding to the world by attention to the ordinary; the television show *Girls* and its creator Lena Dunham are exemplars for how sincerity leads to *articulation* but can nevertheless create a self-immuring dynamic by anchoring in autobiography; Miranda July's work in *The Future* and *It Chooses You* illuminates the difficulties of *future exposition*, when the experience of isolated individualism hinders possibilities of imagining a future.

All these are interesting precisely because they show limits, inabilities, absences and obstacles. My argument will be paradoxical, sincerity culture is indeed important for the imagination of political engagement but primarily because it can illuminate its own limits. It allows for questioning: How does sincerity become confined to one's personal, contingent situation? How do obstacles to political engagement appear? How does the structure of feeling explore depoliticisation and the inability to connect to democratic and political institutional processes? Looking for these limits will allow me to demonstrate that the *cultural-aesthetic* practices of experimentation with forms of sincerity (within this artistic structure of feeling) shed a helpful light on the knotty problems within *social* practices of public debate on citizenship and apathy (its vocabulary and repertoires).

4.2 The Reconfiguration of Sincerity Culture in the 2000s

Associated with the urban creative class (coined by Richard Florida in 2002) and a globalised 'hipster lifestyle', sincerity culture shares a preference for embracing traditional middle-class themes of the post-war 20th century such as domesticity and family relationships.³³⁴ Contrasting with rapidly globalising, digital societies

³³⁴ In Germany, hipsters went by the name Generation Biedermeyer.

via a neo-Romantic valuation of youth, nature, sentimentality, and emphasis on the personal and ‘immediate’. The hipster style carries across in fashion, interior and product design, music to narrative arts. Creators and consumers can attribute the ethos of sincerity through stylistic markers that are recognisably deliberate. For example, in Ryan McGinley’s pictures (often young people running naked in a field), photographs are slightly out of focus in a way that imitates an amateur photograph’s intimacy and communicates the valuation of spontaneity.³³⁵ Singer Connor Oberst’s unpolished singing style and ‘deliberate mistakes’ in recorded songs conveys both naturalness and savvy communication has the same effect of website Rookie.com’s digital design mimicking folk-art handicraft and paper-based zines. The archness or ‘hypocritical’ contradictoriness of this style was a popular topic of debate and to a lesser degree there was critique of its obliviousness to belonging to a cosseted middle-class position (or in the case of Wes Anderson, a fascination with ‘old money’ eccentricity).³³⁶

Despite the frequent use of irony, sincerity cultures are marked by rejection of an irony as the do-nothingism (see Chapter 3’s interiorised resistance) that marked alternative culture. Curiously, sincerity culture itself leaves behind the political topic that irony was most articulate about in the 1990s: the critique of consumer capitalism as a form of alienation. Where ironic authenticity in the 1990s is characterised by resistance to limitless commodification, the critique dissolves in the 2000s. The exemplar is the popular film *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2012), that explores Westerners deeply emotional

³³⁵Ryan McGinley, *You and I* (Sante Fe: Twin Palms, 2011); C Kraus, J Kelsey, and G Van Sant, *Ryan McGinley: Whistle for the Wind* (New York: Rizzoli, 2012).

³³⁶ For a critical study by the *n+1* group see Mark Greif, Kathleen Ross, and Dayna Tortorici, eds., *What Was the Hipster?: A Sociological Investigation* (London: HarperCollins, 2010).

An example of popular critique is this one of singer Bon Iver: “a whiny guy who built his own studio in the woods, perfectly exemplifying that narcissistic hipster ethos of “Whatever man, I’m just gonna go over here and be chill, I don’t want to be bothered or have my mellow harshed.” Bon Iver coos the celebratory ballads of hip poseurs who refuse to get their hands dirty, that is, unless that filth is quaint and photogenic” Ben Westhoff, “The 20 Worst Hipster Bands,” *LA Weekly*, August 23, 2012.

attachment to novel technology and the rapidly increased digital mediation of intimacy. Characteristic for this sincere man-technology love story is the replacement of ironic denouncements of consumer culture's inauthenticity by a melancholy tone of resignation to such attachments. The film reflects how emotionality and communication are the central preoccupations of post-2000 popular discourse. This is sometimes called emotional capitalism (Illouz) and is part of a century long transformation into a consumer economy shaped by psychological language and practices.³³⁷ *Her* illustrates how the sources of unhappiness originate no longer from the outside (a consumerist set of beliefs imposed by callous capitalist norms) but rather from within the fallible 'human' desires.

Sincerity and popular culture are thus no longer preoccupied with anti-consumerism. As a whole, being 'against' something has become devalued (to the chagrin of some such as *Gawker* or *n+1*, see chapter 1), consider David Foster Wallace's popular speech *This is Water* is a rallying cry to "truly to care about other people" and the infamous anti-negativity manifesto of *The Believer* was titled "Rejoice! Believe! Be Strong and Read Hard!".³³⁸ Appearing across popular culture more widely, the appeal of sincerity as prompt for 'positive action' is of course attractive, yet highly distorting. One example of the scale distortion of 'newly sincere' consumer culture, is the 2000s shoe company Toms's promise to give away a pair of shoes with each purchase to a child in a low-income country, typical of new marketing practices with negligible or even detrimental social effects. Another example is the creation of a crowdfunding

³³⁷ Illouz's 2013 detailed critical theory is predated by popular academic work warning of the conjunction of psychology and consumer industries by Leach and Cushman in the early 1990s. Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (New York: Polity Press, 2013); William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993). Philip Cushman, "Why the Self Is Empty. Toward a Historically Situated Psychology.," *The American Psychologist* 45, no. 5 (May 1990): 599–611.

³³⁸ Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009); Gordon Burn, "The Believers," *The Guardian*, March 27, 2004. *The Believer* is a magazine financed by Eggers, which brought together writers that all share admiration for Wallace.

campaign on Indiegogo.com to bail out Greece in its 2015 Eurocrisis because “Why don't we the people just sort it instead? The European Union is home to 503 million people, if we all just chip in a few Euro then we can get Greece sorted and hopefully get them back on track soon.”³³⁹ Above all, the problem with sincerity is that it creates distracting, undermining kinds of *relevance fallacies* (red herrings) that over-emphasise the immediate and personable by pushing out of the picture the structural, long-term dimensions of social action needed for significant change to occur.

The author and activist Dave Eggers, the poster child for New Sincerity, embodies my concerns regarding Wordsworthian personalisation set out in Chapter 2. The personalisation of politics means an imbalanced attention to how the world *resonates within* an interior, personal, subjective experience. Where sincerity as an ideal should also be proceduralist and ought to include making clear how one's values interact with *larger social practices and political institutions*, personalisation happens when these dimensions are eclipsed and out of balance. Concerning in particular is how autobiography anchors the legitimation for “socially bonding self-expression” as Korthals Altes put it.³⁴⁰ Such a criticism of Eggers may be surprising, because of his prolific work in support of charitable causes. His activities after the success of his 2000 debut can be described by the later term ‘social entrepreneurship’: such as the founding of a voluntary literary education centre *826 Valencia*, launching the *Voice of Witness*, a series of first-person, oral-histories of international crises, and writing a genre-twisting

³³⁹ “Greek Bailout Fund,” Indiegogo.com, 2015. Accessed 1 December 2015, <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/169egit-bailout-fund>

³⁴⁰ Liesbeth Korthals Altes formulates a critique of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*: “The pathos-laden appeal to the reader seems to be grounded in a stereotypical “Dr. Phil” psychology: “[y]our life is worth documenting” as well; I’m okay, you’re okay. Is this, then, a programmatic conception of living and self-writing, captured in the idea of the lattice? By mise-en-abyme, reinforced by the apparent autobiographic pact, the value and social legitimisation of Eggers’s own book would similarly reside in the example it affords for socially bonding self-expression.” Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*, 244.

‘autobiography’ of a Sudanese former child soldier.³⁴¹ These projects are centred on generating goodwill toward the underprivileged people that participate in telling their stories. A study of Eggers’s work describes the presumption that “personal narratives told by disempowered subjects have a sufficiently impactful affective charge to convince readers to recognise the rights of victims and join them in advocating for the safeguarding of rights in future” but that the highlighted parties play for different stakes.³⁴² The problem is that building affective momentum is not enough without specific and formal strategies to address legal obstacles and institutional powers. These projects aim to ‘raise awareness’ but unlike traditional social movements, this is the endpoint instead of an element in a longer strategy. The distorted valorisation of ‘mere awareness’ within sincerity culture was even satirised by one of the 2000s most popular blogs as “the process of making other people aware of problems, and then magically someone else like the government will fix it”.³⁴³

This brings me to my returning question, is the ideal of sincerity is a match for its socio-cultural conditions? The almost exclusive focus Eggers and the New Sincerity movement have on *community*, *soft power* and *emotional investment* are not incidental but reinforce a wider governmental change. Sociologist Nicholas Rose described these characteristics of leftist politics of ‘The Third Way’ as a significant change in the language and practical conception of citizenship.

³⁴⁴ In this depoliticising dynamic, *community* takes on a new role for citizens that

³⁴¹ Dave Eggers, *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng* (San Francisco: Penguin, 2006).

³⁴² Sean Bex, “Dave Eggers and Human Rights Culture” (Ghent University, 2016), 18.

³⁴³ The full passage reads: “An interesting fact about white people is that they firmly believe that all of the world’s problems can be solved through “awareness.” Meaning the process of making other people aware of problems, and then magically someone else like the government will fix it.

[...] you get all the benefits of helping (self-satisfaction, telling other people) but no need for difficult decisions or the ensuing criticism (how do you criticize awareness?). Once again, white people find a way to score that sweet double victory. Popular things to be aware of: The Environment, Diseases like Cancer and AIDS, Africa, [...]” “Awareness,” *Stuff White People Like*, January 23, 2008.

³⁴⁴ The Third Way associated is with the Blair (UK), Clinton (USA), Kok (the Netherlands) and Schröder (Germany) governments.

are *no longer* part “of societies as national collectivities, but of neighborhoods, associations, regions, networks, subcultures, age groups, ethnicities, and lifestyle sectors.”³⁴⁵ The problem is not communities themselves, but the way in which ‘community’ has become infused by the language and policy of governmental power: “through the political objectification and instrumentalization of this community and its culture, through strategies for the government of autonomy through acting on sentiments, values, identities, allegiance, trust, and mutual dependence.”³⁴⁶ Here, community appears as a kind of natural, extra-political zone of human relations. Consequently, while normative questions are now supposed to be provided by communities – think of 21st century ‘buzzword’ jargon such as participation, bottom-up-thinking and co-creation. This forecloses and neutralises political contestation by circularly ‘relegating’ back to communities as neutral and conflict-free. Rose writes how:

“Rather than recognizing the possibilities and ethical dilemmas presented by the contemporary pluralization of cultures and ethics, this version of the politics of community seeks to foreclose the problems of diversity by propagating a moral code justified by reference to values that purport to be *timeless, natural, obvious, and uncontestable*. In operating at this moral pole of ethopolitics, the Third Way sets itself in opposition to the very autonomy it purports to respect (cf. Shapiro, 1997).”³⁴⁷

This dynamic differs somewhat from what Taylor described as the pseudo-neutrality of liberalism, which suppresses political deliberation and fosters moral relativism. In governmental practices, The Third Way idealises morality by turning community (third sector) activities and civil society into “a veritably bucolic zone of liberty” filled with volition when freed from state

³⁴⁵ Nikolas Rose, “Community, Citizenship, and the Third Way,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 9 (2012): 1398. 1398

³⁴⁶ Rose, “Community, Citizenship, and the Third Way,” 1401.

³⁴⁷ My emphasis. Rose, “Community, Citizenship, and the Third Way,” 1409.

interventions.³⁴⁸ It also compounds the erosion of ‘ordinary language’ vocabulary for institutional interventions and legal and formal constraints.

Returning to Eggers’s fictional storytelling on current themes such as *The Circle* (on the rise in power of Silicon Valley tech giants) or *Promised Land* (on the ecological and economic impact of fracking), the harms of large corporations are told through the eyes of a protagonist whose emotional experience is the main event.³⁴⁹ Such works leave readers in no doubt of the mendacity of these companies and set up a naive opposition between good or naive individuals and bad, unstoppable corporations. By completely omitting the context of how public policies make such injustices possible or how collective action functions to challenge them, these stories model a state of democratic disempowerment for the reader, who is left merely with the pleasure of knowing they are on the good side.³⁵⁰ Similarly, Egger’s practices in the social realm, such as the *826 Valencia* mission, focus on voluntary action and community ‘empowerment’ without connection to local governmental processes of education funding and its relation to economic inequality. Such a narrowness of focus, characteristic of the Third Way, represents a dynamic described by Bruce Robbins in 1999 as a *disjunction in the left* where “cultural politics becomes the definitive politics” and the economic-material sphere is disregarded.³⁵¹ The sense of myopic omission of the systemic, institutional and economic echoes Wilson’s concerns over the

³⁴⁸ “Civil society as seen by Hargreaves (1998) is a veritably bucolic zone of liberty, “a place where citizens freely act together to consolidate and express their freedoms, to solve problems, to provide services to each other or simply to enjoy each other’s company” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 68). For it is “morally desirable for citizens to be able to express their instincts to help others, rather than contracting out all of these actions to ‘professional’ or ‘state’ services.” Rose, “Community, Citizenship, and the Third Way,” 1405.

³⁴⁹ Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (New York: Knopf, 2013); *Promised Land*, directed by Gus Van Sant, Focus Features, 2012).

³⁵⁰ Cary Wolfe’s objection to the Emersonian tradition touches on its overvaluation of the mental over the active and material. Wolfe, “Alone with America: Cavell, Emerson, and the Politics of Individualism.”

³⁵¹ Robbins describes how in the late 1990s American public intellectuals began calling themselves the cultural left and further exacerbated the emphasis on values as the anchor for political affiliation that had made neoconservatism successful since the 1980s. Bruce Robbins, “Disjoining the Left: Cultural Contradictions of Anticapitalism,” *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (1999): 30.

bohemianization of mass culture (Chapter 3), but differs from it in creating a new, exemplar role where artists act as community-oriented social entrepreneurs on themes (poverty, education, racism) traditionally taken up by social movements.³⁵²

At the same time, the structure of feeling encompasses more than this unencouraging kind of political imagination. There is a ‘genre’ that struggles more with making the social appear and which does not settle on this narrow answer. Beverly Best also combines Raymond Williams’s approach to structure of feeling with a focus on genre (Reality TV), in this case genre opens up questions such as: “What social, economic, and cultural dynamics, developments and processes does [it, ESR] express?; What collective desire (structure of feeling) is articulated (and deferred)?; What is the promise [...] and does it deliver?”³⁵³ In the following, I will similarly explore another ‘Cavellian genre’, as his idea of a genre is one that studies the conditions of a particular problem. Here, the problem is the seeming *contradiction* between individualistic sincerity and the collective nature of democratic politics. In other words, the question is why would sincere practice lead to common good?

³⁵² Interestingly, while the artist was traditionally not seen as a model citizen before 1970 (see Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 97, 119, 130), now it is the obverse. As Boltanski and Chiapello write regarding the work culture of digital capitalism: “the extension to an ever greater number of wage-earners of the lack of any distinction between time at work and time outside work, between personal friendships and professional relationships, between work and the person of those who perform it – so many features which, since the nineteenth century, had constituted typical characteristics of the artistic condition, particularly markers of the artist’s ‘authenticity’– and the introduction of this modus operandi into the capitalist universe, can only have contributed to disrupting reference-points for ways of evaluating people, actions or things.” If the artist was a claim to difference in modernism (Jameson), nowadays the ubiquity of an “urban creative class” that expanded the artistic professions renders them an ordinariness. Within New Sincerity, autobiographic stories of being an artist are ubiquitous (Lena Dunham’s *Girls*, Niña Weijers *De consequenties*, Miranda July’s *The Future*, Sheila Heti’s *How Should A Person Be?*). Nevertheless, these make important differences between writers or performance artists that are expected to have more integrity than high-income add executives, continuing artistic critique not from a position of difference (alterity, non-conformity) but from their abilities for responsiveness and care that make up their artistic practice.

³⁵³ Beverly Best, “Raymond Williams and the Structure of Feeling of Reality TV,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2, no. 7 (2012): 195.

4.3 Mumblecore: Between Conversion and Articulation

Mumblecore is the name of a highly visible but short-lived genre in American Independent Cinema, roughly between 2003 and 2012. Mumblecore's low-budget, do-it-yourself methods and narrative themes were in fact so similar to slacker cinema that critics originally called them 'Slackavettes'.³⁵⁴ Another early label was 'Myspace neorealism', for the way cheaper digital tools and the internet made it newly possible to publish one's own life (very differently from zines). Mumblecore films, like slacker films, tell stories of young people drifting aimlessly through life in the city. However, these protagonists are not deliberate 'drop-outs' but rather 'non-starters': college graduates and other young adults who spend their time suspended in the search for a place to belong (*Medicine for Melancholy*, *Mutual Appreciation*, *In Between Days*), meaningful human connection (*LOL*, *The Puffy Chair*), or a direction in life (*Funny Ha Ha*, *Hannah Takes the Stairs*, *My Effortless Brilliance*). The mumblecore genre was the subject of intense attention.³⁵⁵ Initially this was directed in a typical frame 'new wave auteurs' at a group of young, male directors as emblems for the 'legibility of culture' but these were not the creators of the work that would turn out to have the most impact and recognition, such as Greta Gerwig, Lena Dunham, Barry Jenkins and Sean Baker.³⁵⁶

If slacker films legitimated a particular kind of withdrawal from traditional politics, then how does mumblecore imagine politics' return? Sincerity occupies the centre of the differences between the two, both as an

³⁵⁴ Evokes the paragon of daily-minutia cinema John Cassavettes, however, mumblecore's lacks that distinctive emotional intensity and is closer to Eric Rohmer's style of gentle observation.

³⁵⁵ The mumblecore 'hype' was in part fuelled by new players in the U.S. independent film marketplace (IFC and SXSW) that sought to carve out their identity and legitimacy, yet this does not take away from the genre's distinctiveness. See for example: Dennis Lim, "A Generation Finds Its Mumble," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2007. J. Hoberman, "It's Mumblecore!" *Village Voice*, August 14, 2007.

³⁵⁶ The artists listed have gained significant recognition as well as commercial success. For an analysis of the role of gender in the reception of mumblecore see: Claire Perkins, "My Effortless Brilliance: Women's Mumblecore," in *Indie Reframed: Women's Filmmaking and Contemporary American Independent Cinema*, ed. Linda Badley, Claire Perkins, and Michele Schreiber (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 138–53.

ethos and as characteristic style. Where slacker films in the 1990s are dominated by inventive irony and ‘postmodern knowingness’ in advancing hyperreality, the mumbling films of the 2000s marked a sincere ‘realism’ through everydayness, voco-centric (embodied) expression and a preoccupation with the limits of being articulate.

This is a different aspect of Romanticism that the one I described Chapter 3, where slacker films mobilised Romantic ideas in service of ‘inner exile’: as a distinctive interiorisation of resistance in response to the limitless commodification of irony-as-critique and alternative culture. Mumblecore and avowed sincerity show how sincerity functions as a way for the ‘separated’ subject to *return to the world* via an *intensification* of self-reflection and everydayness. Or, as Cavell once described this aspect: “To speak of our subjectivity as the route back to our conviction in reality is to speak of romanticism. [...] hence Wordsworth competing with the history of poetry by writing out himself, writing himself back into the world.”³⁵⁷ Exploring how Cavellian conversion appears in the mumblecore genre will help me clarify the possibilities as well limitations of sincerity as an ideal for democratic citizenship. I will explore three cinematic elements in relation to how they investigate the problem of sincere engagement: 1) realism and everydayness, 2) voco-centrism and responding to passionate speech, and 3) the question of articulation.

Realism and Everydayness

Mumblecore films are united by a commitment to naturalistic realism, its verisimilitude suddenly breaking with the postmodern ironic customs that reminded viewers they were watching a film through ironic, meta-textual devices. Mumblecore films depict undramatic, slice of life narratives filmed in

³⁵⁷ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed, Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 22.

domestic spaces – giving them a documentary feel – and were often performed by the filmmakers and their (non-actor) friends in a collaborative production. Their plots are filled with ordinary events and characters, ‘cold opening’ the story without introduction nor providing clear narrative resolution (in this respect closer to European or art house conventions than Holly-Indiewood). This creates the impression of ‘just dropping in’ on a stranger with intense voyeuristic intimacy; it echoes the disorientation created by personal blogging’s explosion in the 2000 that began to disrupt the conventions of propriety in autobiographic disclosure in the 21st century.

The centrality of everydayness in mumblecore follows from an intense investment in one’s own life that is integral to the structure of feeling shared by filmmakers and audience. In this self-understanding, the everyday is the pre-eminent space for ethico-political exploration. As said earlier, it is important *not* to dismiss this as ‘privatisation’ and unconscious, ignorant neoliberal subjectivity. An extreme focus on the personal and ordinary was all too obvious to the filmmakers themselves.³⁵⁸ The excitement that mumblecore generated coincided with the conspicuous silence in American popular culture regarding the indefensible policies of George W. Bush and the U.S.’s loss of global moral leadership after the 2003 Iraq invasion.³⁵⁹ Against this backdrop of shaken self-esteem, the mumbling of indie cinema appeared to be a sign of change.³⁶⁰ The praise for Andrew Bujalski by cultural critic Chuck Klosterman in 2007 is illustrative:

³⁵⁸ As Mark Duplass commented in 2007: “Sometimes I see films like ours and I think ‘Fuck off dude, there’s a war going on, who cares about your relationship?’” Andrea Hubert, “Speak Up!,” *The Guardian*, May 19, 2007.

³⁵⁹ Registering the change in global standing of the U.S.A. in for example: Martin Wolf, “How the Noughties Were a Hinge of History,” *The Financial Times*, December 23, 2009.

³⁶⁰ Claire Perkins makes an interesting point regarding the importance of Indie Cinema as crucially the art of the middle class white male: “a relatively small group of figures are regularly attended to by commentators and scholars – not because their work is valued as ‘great’, but because it is representative of indie as a legible cultural formation” Perkins, “My Effortless Brilliance: Women’s Mumblecore,” 142.

“certain directors can shoot unfamous people talking about themselves and make it feel like they are explaining the contemporary experience of being alive. [...] All these characters are mumbling about morality. And it's a specific kind of morality. It's "onset morality." The people in Bujalski's films are actively constructing their ethics.”³⁶¹

Klosterman highlights the preoccupation with moral investigation in the genre, showing characters striving – and notably failing – to be good people through unremarkable situations and everyday occurrences. They contrast with conventional (Hollywood) drama’s where it is clear what ethico-political topic they are ‘about’. However, I want to stress that mumblecore’s salience stems from its preoccupation with everydayness itself and *not* with showing specific representations of ideals and principles (more on this later). What is so counter-intuitive about mumblecore and Cavell’s philosophy is that the route back to political engagement and citizenship does *not* happen through latching on to the ethico-political dilemmas of the front-pages. What Cavell learns from cinema’s attentiveness to the everyday is that it asks more fundamental questions: “What is the public's business? How do we come to our knowledge of what bears on the common good of our lives?”³⁶² In mumblecore, everydayness and the ordinary appear in the same way as in Cavell’s philosophy, as a privileged site for the discovery of knowledge necessary for change. As Mark Greif writes: “You might think a commitment to the ordinary would spell an acknowledgement of what already is. Instead it became an investigation of what we hide from ourselves [...] and how else we might be.”³⁶³ Discovering what is hidden from ourselves has obvious echoes of Freud and therapeutic conversion, but for Cavell involves much more than that.

³⁶¹ It also contains the saviour-youth trope, see. Chuck Klosterman, “Chuck Klosterman’s America: What’s (Not) Happening!,” *Esquire*, 2007.

³⁶² Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, 11.

³⁶³ Mark Greif, “Cavell as Educator,” *N+1* 12, no. Fall 2011 (2011): 112.

Cavell and ‘avowed sincerity’ as a structure of feeling are congenial in how the transformation of the social cannot be separated from a transformation in self-understanding. In Chapter 2, I described Cavellian perfectionism as a non-teleological, open-ended view of selfhood as *reciprocal* with society; reinventing the reciprocal ‘old sincerity’ through new emphasis on responsiveness and anti-essentialism.³⁶⁴ Cavell’s philosophy has made the experience of ‘growing up’ (a surprisingly informal term) central to its imagination of human progress and ethico-political movement toward justice. Perfectionism orients towards “its possible future in the direction of a better individual and social future” as Stephen Mulhall writes in a more explicit interlocking of the individual and social, which Cavell often leaves implicit.³⁶⁵ It is all too easy to over-focus here on moral motivations and virtuous intentions, while forgetting that Cavell is always interested in how the self’s continual change is *prompted by others* – conversations, friends, films, plays, novels, songs and so on. These are crucial for the uncanny experiences of ‘turning to attention’ and disrupting our habitual avoidance of the world that is so deeply imperfect and disappointing.³⁶⁶

Conversion is a practice that centralises the access people have with experiences (as processes) “which gives to my desire for the attaining of a self that is mine to become, the power to act on behalf of an attainable world I can actually desire”.³⁶⁷ Cavellian perfectionism of an *adult* growing up ought to avoid the adolescent views derived from American Emersonianism, exalting a boyish

³⁶⁴ Cavell views the self as doubled or split between an attained and an unattained (more desirable, just) self. Perfectionism represents a nonteleological, open ended dynamic because it does *not* entail thinking “there is one unattained/attainable self we repetitively never arrive at, but rather that “having” “a” self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts.” Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, 12.

³⁶⁵ Stephen Mulhall, “Stanley Cavell,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Volume 2 Brahman to Derrida*, ed. Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), 260.

³⁶⁶ A complicated question remains open regarding the way Cavell equates moral desires and political claims.

³⁶⁷ Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, 33.

‘inner voice’ speaking home truths. To renew democratic citizenship, Cavell appeals to the more (dangerous) unknown in everydayness that invokes but also modifies the sound of Thoreau’s Transcendentalism:

“we are trying again to buy and bully our way into heaven; that we have failed; that the present is a task and a discovery, not a period of America’s privileged history; that we are not free, not whole, and not new, and we know this and are on a downward path of despair because of it; and that for the child to grow he requires family and familiarity, but *for a grown-up to grow he requires strangeness and transformation, i.e., birth?*”
368

So, what does it mean for grown-ups to grow up? Contrary to superficial and recuperated versions of authentically “getting in touch with yourself”, or to dropping out of society in search of “the letter inside you” like *Generation-X*’s protagonists, it requires alterity and letting *the outside in*. Cavell refutes the idea of (inner) exile (see also section 2.4), very explicitly in an essay unconventionally styled as a letter to Alceste, the protagonist of Moliere’s 1666 play *The Misanthrope*.³⁶⁹ His youth represents the interrogation of political consent to one’s society and contains both *epistemological* significance – society *is* rotten – as well as an appeal to society’s *responsiveness* regarding it.³⁷⁰ The point Cavell makes is that Alceste’s wish for exile from hypocritical society, which is untenably puritan, represents something for ‘us’, the play’s viewers, that cannot be brushed aside via formal procedures – consent cannot be forced. The experience of

³⁶⁸ Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 59–60. My emphasis.

³⁶⁹ “Like Hamlet before you (with his sensitivity to odor, to the rotting), and like the romantics and the existentialists after you, you represent the discovery of adolescence, of that moment at which the worth of adulthood is—except, I suppose, to deep old age—most clearly exposed; at which adulthood *is* the thing you are asked to choose, to consent to.” Cavell, “A Cover Letter to Moliere’s *Misanthrope*,” 99. See also Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*.

³⁷⁰ “If youth cannot over a period of time make itself clear to age, this is tragic for both. I once described this situation as one in which society cannot hear its own screams. The nation was living then in the dissociated state of a foreign and incomprehensible war and I was, at the time I speak of, trying, defiantly if unsuccessfully, to conclude a private essay about King Lear, another dissociated world.” Cavell, “A Cover Letter to Moliere’s *Misanthrope*,” 104.

growing up and overcoming the disgust of adolescence can only happen through the acknowledgement of the “repugnance at the idea that your life should partake of the world's, that what it does, you do; or is it at the idea that the world's life partakes of yours, that what you feel, it feels?”. (99) This is an ‘old’ view of sincerity where there is self-social reciprocity, a kind of conventionally imposed formality Cavell names ‘sociability’. (105) In this light, mumblecore’s thematic preoccupation with growing-up, its realism of everydayness, is interesting. The protagonist of Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha* (2003), Marnie, is seen stumbling through life working temp-jobs and navigating unrequited love, having recently graduated. The film is like its protagonist “unassuming to the point of diffidence”, yet filmmakers as well as critics began to rally around it in 2005 as “a (whispered, half-swallowed) generational statement”.³⁷¹

Funny Ha Ha depicts Marnie’s experiences with her peers by showcasing all the undramatic *minutiae* that constitute both a form of life (Wittgenstein) and a realism effect (Barthes); Small talk in kitchens during parties, temping generic office spaces, aimless wandering in supermarket aisles, the film relishes in the familiar to the point of uncanny estrangement – Chantal Akerman was Bujalski’s tutor. Like many mumblecore films, the narrative takes place ‘out of time’ omitting reference to locations or current events. Marnie’s everyday activities are ordinariness itself, filmed in an observational and (Chantal Akerman-esque) static style that seems to make a strange point: the world *is* there – a kind of reassurance to those experiencing dissociation. The excitement that mumblecore created via such self-consciously naive realist gestures can in hindsight seem absurdly slight, akin to someone pinching one’s arm. Yet it also speaks to the state of dissociation.

³⁷¹ A.O. Scott, “The Best Films of the Year: Rome in Six Hours and Four Decades,” *The New York Times*, December 25, 2005.

Sincerity as a commitment to realism has to be understood as a ‘response to change’ that unites a structure of feeling. Guiding the idea of avowed sincerity is it being a response to a ubiquitous experience of social atomisation amongst rapid fragmentation of what were common institutions and media. However, it does so in more modest and outward-oriented ways than those of literary modernism described by Charles Taylor’s analysis of 20th Century Post-Romanticism (see Chapter number section 2.3). There, the loss of common referents was transcended via ‘epiphanic’ strong, inner-oriented subjectivity, but in the 21st Century it is not the self that is lost (and regained) but its relation to *the other, the social and the intersubjective*. This should become clear in the second characteristic element (after realism) of mumblecore’s experiments with sincerity, the ‘vococentric’ mumbling that gives mumblecore its name.

Vococentric Mumbling and Responsiveness

So, how does mumbling show sincerity as a route to common good? On the one hand, it does so via attention to the recompense of embodied human expression and on the other hand by the *thematization* of the problem of moral inarticulacy. Compensation is always deliberate, the label mumblecore itself was coined by *Funny Ha Ha*’s sound mixer in response to many complaints over its deliberately unconventional sound (mumblecore films also tend to lack the use of music). The choice for mono-recorded sound erases sonic depth and distorts and expands the voice, an example of the deliberate imperfections that simultaneously appeared across early 21st century aesthetics in post-digital culture.³⁷²

Overall, the mumblecore genre is characterised by voco-centrism, “the privilege of the voice over all the other sonic elements in audiovisual media.”³⁷³

³⁷² Caleb Kelly, Jakko Kemper, and Ellen Rutten, eds., *Imperfections: Studies in Mistakes, Flaws, and Failures* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

³⁷³ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 5.

Curiously, this style of the film ‘dialogue’ presents the human voice in service to a spectacular kind of inarticulacy. *Funny Ha Ha* stood out because of the *absence* of ironic wit of dialogue of ‘smart cinema’, slacker films or (post-Tarantino) Indiewood, offering instead the countless interjections of “Hmm”, “Uhm” and unreassuring repetitions of “I don’t know” and “That’s ok.” Its extreme focus on the sound of the human voice – now emptied of witty textual-referential meaning – draws attention towards the *embodied* non-lexical conversational sounds of the human voice as well as to the gestures and movements of the face and body. In this style, *Funny Ha Ha* exposes the passive-aggressive defensiveness that underpins their inarticulate way of communication, their ways of not saying something that ‘hangs in the air’. After the protagonist Marnie and her friend Marshall get into a small argument over her reticence to express herself and just “be happy!”, she repeatedly walks away from him to different rooms until she plunks down in the kitchen. Then, sitting in the middle distance, the frame draws attention to her folded arms, legs and, above all, to the contracted, curled toes of her feet in the centre of the image. While the words she speaks (“It’s ok, I forgive you”) are formally an attempt at casual reconciliation, her toe-curling discomfort is plain to see.

As a result, while the fictional character Marnie mumbles, the film itself is expressive and articulate –in the general and Taylorian sense – about her mumbling as an ambivalence in life and reticence towards others. It is a study of people not being able to express themselves, against the backdrop of Marnie’s post-graduation inertia.³⁷⁴ As Catherine Wheatley points out in Cavell, it is the film’s capacity to record the human body that makes it particularly well placed to do draw our attention to embodied expression: “the power of moving pictures to find interest in the most insignificant repetitions, turnings, pauses

³⁷⁴ While Marnie’s experience as a recent graduate may have an atemporal appeal, it was prescient of the 2000s lexical invention of the ‘quarter-life crisis’.

and yieldings of human beings.”³⁷⁵ Mumbling in spoken dialogue goes hand in hand here with a cinematographic focus on human gestures and aural foregrounding of the (absent) sounds of the voice. Unlike Eco’s postmodern *ironic* sensibility, shared by cinema and literature alike, which found ways to overcome the erosion of language by commodification through meta-textual play, here we have a *sincere* strategy of repair. It is an achievement of cinema that Cavell explored specifically in *Contesting Tears* melodramas:

“To counter the skeptical emphasis on knowing what the other doubts and knows, I have formulated my intuition that the philosophical recovery of the other depends on determining the sense that the human body is expressive of mind, for *this* seems to be what the skeptic of other minds directly denies.”³⁷⁶

As mumbling, body gestures and imperfect sounding voices constitutes our co-habitation with others in the everyday, *within cinema* they become a doubled form of exemplifying attentiveness –through the cinematic experience of viewer to the screened world and through the film’s characters (often failing) responses to each other. In Cavell’s ordinary language philosophy, the ordinary’s uncanniness and richness provides the means of overcoming our persistent, oscillating disappointment-acknowledgement, and he links it to therapeutic conversion:

“Freud’s twist on the philosophers here is registered in his idea of our expressions as betraying ourselves, giving ourselves (and meaning to give ourselves) away - as if, let us say, the inheritance of language, of the possibility of communication, inherently involves disappointment with it and (hence) subversion of it.”³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Wheatley, *Stanley Cavell and Film: Scepticism and Self-Reliance at the Cinema*, 152.

³⁷⁶ Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, 104.

³⁷⁷ Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, 105.

What the *Contesting Tears* melodrama's teach Cavell is the idea that while we are fundamentally unknown to each other, even to ourselves, unknownness itself can be 'therapeutically' acknowledged and productively overcome. We 'live out our scepticism'. In the same way, the mumbling of mumblecore paradoxically 'repairs' possibilities of human intersubjectivity and co-habitation, by recognising Marnie's inability to express herself. It is Cavell's view that the deprivation of not being able *to name things properly* can be reflexively overcome. Cora Diamond points out that this is what distinguishes Cavell from other more pessimistic moral philosophers, for with Cavell, you cannot fully 'lose your concepts'.³⁷⁸ Even if a majority finds themselves in the apathic condition of conformity, our use of language within the ordinary is able to provide pedagogical experiences for conversion, be it cinematically heightened, exemplified through friendship or so on.

Whilst mumblecore presents a recompense for failing language (in *conversion*), it also struggles with what Taylor termed *inarticulacy*: a damaging social dynamic arising in the late 20th century that forecloses ethico-political discussion, especially among young people (see also 2.4).

Articulation and the Limits of Vocabulary

Taylor has argued that this inarticulacy is not principally a result of young peoples' lazy moral relativism ('to each their own values' as critics like Bloom claim) but rather is a result of how liberal individualism's socio-political and institutional arrangements work to stifle deliberation. Eroding the possibilities of democratic citizenship, it serves to worsen technocratic-tutelary power and pseudo-neutral liberalism. Mumblecore thematises inarticulacy by drawing attention to the limits of what characters can, are able or are willing to put into

³⁷⁸ Nevertheless, Diamond argues that under specific conditions such as deprivation you can, which raises the question of what counts as deprivation here, see Cora Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts," *Ethics* 98, no. 2 (1988): 255–77.

words. Reticence is not just a trait of characters in *Funny Ha Ha* (a propensity for meta-conversations about what they would *like* to talk about) but of mumblecore characters in general. The film *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008) was directed by Barry Jenkins, one of the few non-white directors associated with the mumblecore movement.³⁷⁹ It tells the story of Micah and Jo, who spend the day together in San Francisco having met during a one-night-stand. The film opens with them waking up the morning after and observes their tense, avoidant glances and reticent – mumbling – conversation for almost ten minutes. As the film and the day progresses, we learn through their conversations how Micah and Jo live among San Francisco’s rapid millennial changes: once economically and politically diverse in its struggles, now homogenised as the new wealth of the digital ‘creative class’ move in and push up housing prices. Both are part of the city’s indie subculture but only Micah struggles with how it erases part of them: “Everything about being ‘indie’ is tied to not being black!” Through its unusual cinematography, the film switches from black-and-white to saturated colour in moments that are ‘sincere’; when self-interrogation and self-revelation (through speech and action) can reveal the underlying social and emotional forces in their lives. *Medicine for Melancholy* circles around, rather than addresses directly, the ethico-political questions that divide Jo and Micah, such as her assimilation but also her infidelity (to her white boyfriend). It draws attention to what is avoided in conversation rather than actually put into words. Placed in Cavellian terms, neither Jo and Micah as characters can manage the risk of conversation and thus of conversion, finally parting and remaining unknown to each other. But not to the viewers of the film.

One ‘articulation’ scene in the film creates a sharp contrast within the film’s pattern of implying their problems indirectly: they stumble onto an activist housing meeting, so naturalistic is this scene that it suggests the activists are

³⁷⁹ Barry Jenkins, *Medicine for Melancholy* (IFC Films, 2008), 88 min.

playing themselves. Two older men discuss how neighbourhoods and communities will continue to disappear as the non-rich are pushed out. One character verbalises a salient point about the loss of vocabulary (lexical repertoire): San Francisco's mayoral candidates "never use the word rent-control" in their campaign languages, so "they are trying to make this into something that no-one can put their finger on". By naming the taboo on naming things that *matter* (the connection between gentrification and governmental withdrawal into market complicity) the film circles in on the problem of articulacy.

On that same theme, the film presents a visual vignette in two different scenes that show Jo and Micah looking at the City Hall building, one shot from a far and another circling it in a cab at night. The building is visibly there, in the background of the character's lives and the audience can see how it forms the *literal background* without the characters having any possible interaction with it. City Hall can be seen to as deceptively close but mysteriously out of reach in both a literal and figurative sense (or a Rancierian would say, aesthetically and representatively). Here, we see how sincerity can work in the service of making 'the social' appear, in this case a vital separation. As a form of artistic critique (pre-formal, aesthetic, first-order), the film *Medicine for Melancholy* articulates something that in the 2000s appeared as ineffable and diffuse: depoliticisation.

In 2008 depoliticisation was not *yet* a popular, non-academic topic of debate for those concerned with the diminishment of democratic citizenship but would become so later.³⁸⁰ One example is Wendy Brown's critique of the forms of highly instrumental and tutelary modes of neoliberal governance that

³⁸⁰ In the 2000s the major themes in progressive cultural commentary and academia were globalisation and capitalism, explored, for example in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000). Political theorists such as Philip Pettit used depoliticisation as a positive quality for reorganising democratic governance bodies, see for example: Philip Pettit, "Depoliticizing Democracy," *Ratio Juris* 17, no. 1 (2004): 52–65.

diminished citizenship.³⁸¹ Films of the mumblecore genre show different aspects of depoliticisation: the ways it diminishes the possibilities for democratic deliberation by not having access to the necessary vocabulary (“rent control”) and knowledge of democratic, formal and legal procedures in order to progress towards what Boltanski and Chiapello call second-level critique “that makes it possible to sustain ideological struggle, but assumes a supply of concepts and schemas making it possible to connect the historical situations people intend to criticize with values that can be universalized.”³⁸² The broader expressive possibilities of film allow it to transcend limits of a current moral vocabulary as Cavell argues (here, manifesting the problem of depoliticisation), but the practice of critique entails more than articulation.

The ideal of sincerity for citizenship involves three aspects, the mumblecore genre shows how *conversion* happens by responding to the ordinary and how *articulation* can follow from having a broader range of aesthetic means of communication. Finally, the ideal should also make future exposition possible, bridging towards concepts and schemas that can be universalised. Can all aspects of this dynamic take shape within this structure of feeling?

4.4 Autobiography and its Limits of the Political Made Personal

If avowed sincerity makes absences visible, and in the case above the presence of depoliticisation, what other forms of articulation does the structure of feeling illuminate? How does it wrestle with the problem of making sincerity a *civic*, more universalising claim through future exposition? This section analyses Lena Dunham’s highly successful television show *Girls* (2012-2017), made after her mumblecore film *Tiny Furniture* (2010). In this section, the intense valuation of *autobiographic* connection for political critique seems to create a “self-immuring”

³⁸¹ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

³⁸² Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*, 36.

dynamic that so characterised the culture of authenticity.³⁸³ I would argue that her work ‘theatricalises’ the personalisation of politics in interesting ways – primarily by the exaggeration of self-absorption. In addition, it will also question if collective justice can be ‘seen’ from the vantage point of ‘privilege’. Overall, this chapter is an interrogation of how avowed sincerity as a structure of feeling gives insight into the *potential* of the dominant sincerity ideal for democratic, engaged-active citizenship. In addition, I have been arguing that avowed sincerity is united by an interest in making ‘the social’ appear and that expressive articulation *ought* to connect to civic matters or common orientations of justice. What is so difficult about the ideal of sincerity is how it so popularly opens modes, vocabularies, and styles of ethico-political exploration but can close them down again by self-neutralisation and self-curtailed. It is important for understanding the processes of *how* that can happen.

To write that the HBO show *Girls* was a phenomenon in the early 2010s is no exaggeration: a ratings and critical success, attracting the curiosity of twentysomethings ‘represented’ on screen as well as seniors and tastemakers. An illustration of the sudden national profile of Lena Dunham as creator, writer, director, and protagonist, is her appearance on the cover of U.S. *Vogue* on 15 January 2014 coinciding with the third season premiere. Dunham’s accomplishment was rare for a young female - to become a topic of popular culture as *author* of social commentary and by taking on that public role. While a structure of feeling is characterised by being a pre-formal response to change, the success of *Girls* propelled the show and Dunham into the formal structures of U.S. political power: incorporating Dunham into the Democratic Party’s

³⁸³Charles Taylor’s warning: “To shut out demands emanating beyond the self is precisely to suppress the conditions of significance, and hence to court trivialization. To the extent that people are seeking a moral ideal here, *this self-immuring is self-stultifying*, it destroys the condition in which the ideal can be realized.” Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 40.

presidential campaign for Hillary Clinton in 2016 as its ‘millennial spokesperson’.

A Satire of Self-Absorption

While Lena Dunham’s debut film *Tiny Furniture* (2010) adhered to mumblecore’s art-house elliptical conventions, the show *Girls* negotiated the requirements of popular television in clever and complex ways. Beginning by moulding its protagonists on the four *Sex and the City* women and claiming the cultural significance of that ‘unapologetically female’ show into its own project. The allusion made it commercially accessible, yet by having characters reference *Sex and the City* within the first minutes, it was at the same time ironically mobilised to establish a distinct ‘knowing’ self-referential tone of voice. It recounted the daily life of young, self-absorbed members of the creative class (writers, actors, curators, coffee shop employees etc.) by nodding dutifully to all the current lifestyle tropes of hipster trends, tastes, and aspirations, such as the 2000s proliferation of the coffee shop-living-room-office hybrid space of the ‘creative city’. The characters in the show were presented as clueless, entitled, and self-absorbed but the show announced itself as critical and interrogative.

The show and Dunham traverse so many value-laden contexts and therefore the meta-hermeneutic approach of Korthals Altes is particularly useful, drawing attention to how interpreters make use of extra-textual information as clues for their attribution of ethos in a narrative. Dunham’s own performance as Hannah Horvath pulled in the meaning of her extra-textual appearance (acclaimed on social and traditional media) as the show’s precociously talented creator.³⁸⁴ When at the end of the first episode she speaks the line “I think I may be the voice of my generation. Or at least *a* voice of *a*

³⁸⁴ The publicity for the television show also emphasised Dunham’s collaboration with the more experienced Jenni Konner and Judd Apatow.

generation”, viewers combine their knowledge of the immature, self-aggrandising character Hannah with extra-textual knowledge of Dunham the competent, sure-footed author of the show in their interpretation of the ethos of that statement – ambitious in its aim to universalise but with comedic room for error. *Girls* provides an ironic, incongruous perspective on the character of Hannah in particular: explicitly and repeatedly told by other characters that she is selfish, ignorant and immature while acted by Dunham with an exaggerated, self-regarding style of speech vocalisation that together provide “signals of dissonance”.³⁸⁵ Viewers are invited to evaluate that ‘voice of a generation’ statement as a complex proclamation of ethos involving multiple frameworks that will inevitably be judged differently according to viewer’s own moral standpoints. Making it even more tricky, the show combines an ethos of critical denunciation of hipster socio-economic life ‘in general’, with an ethos of considerate, realist commitment to autobiographic self-interrogation. The combination of these two ethos frameworks creates a tension and contradiction for *Girls* and Dunham, one that is never resolved and to which I will return to shortly.

Before, I want to describe how clearly and exemplarily *Girls* conforms to the hope that sincerity provides the route to rediscovered and re-invigorated political imagination. The show’s satirical and comedic aspects clearly invite the moral evaluation of characters and lived norms, something characteristic for this structure of feeling as a whole. Unlike the mumblecore films that seemed to exist ‘out of time’ (no reference to current events), *Girls* makes the social appear by Taylorian forms of articulation. Unusually outspoken for a television ‘comedy’, the show opened by a traditional form of political articulation, through a ridiculously under-informed discussion of the economic crisis and the lack of meaningful democratic response. This scene’s irony functions to highlight a

³⁸⁵ Korthals Altes, *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*, 210.

doxa of disinterest in the aftermath of the economic crisis – it de-doxifies (Hutcheon).

Taylor’s redemptive reading of the sincerity ideal proposes how it can be an imperative to discover what ‘matters to you’ – something you alone can decide – and that this will lead you to discover that these ‘matters’ can only flourish within collective, communal, social existence. Saliently, what matters to these four girls in *Girls* throughout the series leads to a thematic exploration of the conditions under which they live *as women*: scrutinising with transgressive realism questions of labour exploitation, sexual consent, reproductive rights, work harassment, heterosexual power dynamics and self-determination. In this domain *Girls* and Dunham have had unprecedented cultural impact by stimulating articulation as a ‘rediscovery’ of feminism at a time when popular culture was dominated by a ‘resigned consensus’ without a critique of systemic or structural forces (known by the labels post-feminism and post-racism).³⁸⁶ In the ten years since the show, critique of ‘isms’ as structural forces has returned to popular culture embodying a shift in consensus. A reminder of the previous consensus – that Sconce described “an attendant disregard for the traditional villains of racism, sexism and class division” – is necessary to explain why this show was so transgressive and provoking in its daring to ‘preach’.³⁸⁷

Simultaneously, however, a significant portion of the public debate of *Girls* and Dunham (in tandem between social media and publishing) concentrated on the myopic, privileged worldview they represented.³⁸⁸ Although

³⁸⁶ Intense public discussion of Lena Dunham and *Girls* was matched by academic interest, as of 1 December 2022 there are 4.140 publications registered on Google Scholar, including edited volumes such as: Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan, eds., *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls: Feminism, Postfeminism, Authenticity and Gendered Performance in Contemporary Television* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

³⁸⁷ Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism and the New American ‘smart’ Film,” 368.

For an analysis of *Girls*’s multifaceted reception see: Faye Woods, “Girls Talk: Authorship and Authenticity in the Reception of Lena Dunham’s *Girls*,” *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 10, no. 2 (2015): 37–54.

³⁸⁸ Matt Zoller Seitz, “Girls: From Lightning Rod to Must-See TV,” *New York Magazine*, June 18, 2012; Lorrie Moore, “Lena Dunham: Unwatchable in the Best Way,” *New Yorker*, March 27, 2012; Emanuelle

befitting, these criticisms also overlooked how the show *satirised* the self-absorption it was accused of and the role of gendering in such critiques was, in turn, often pointed out by defenders. The show's ambition to use popular storytelling for social critique made for unconventional civic engagement (a commitment to values in action). As the ironic and comedic elements of the show's style conformed to the traditional genre elements of the coming of age or *bildungsroman*, a reasonable expectation of character change and redemption were set up. However, this is not where *Girls* and Dunham were headed. Instead, the show developed in a direction that left ironic-comedic elements behind, becoming increasingly a transgressively realist exploration of the most intimate parts of Hannah's physical and mental health. These are the two combined ethos frameworks described earlier: a critical (ironic) denunciation of self-absorption and a realist commitment to autobiographic exploration that seems to 'almost' confirm that it is indeed self-absorbed.

Anchoring and Confinement via Autobiography

I want to explain how this myopic, contracting focus on the autobiographic has to be connected to a socio-historically typical practice where political imagination is anchored in and confined by the autobiographic elements of a person's life. *Girls* explains that value perspective to 'outsiders' of this structure of feeling in Episode 8 of the first season. The character Hannah, a writer of personal essays, is invited to give a reading of her work at a prestigious literary club by her former professor. Beforehand, she is lectured by a character Ray (the show's drop-out critical theory academic) telling her she should write about 'real issues' instead: "How about abuse, how about acid rain, the plight of the panda bear, racial profiling, urban sprawl, divorce, death!". Civic matters, one could call them. She then changes the essay into a bad imitation of another writer,

Wessels, "Girls, Ancillary Media, and Audiences," In Media Res: A Media Commons Project, January 14, 2013.

which does not impress the audience. The professor, representing the show's perspective, tells Hannah she should have had confidence in her own style and artistic choices. What is novel here is that a traditional Romantic valuation of originality has become part of the language and conventions of social critique. As "the Romantic writer seeks to assert authentic individuality through originality [...] the form of autobiography and the self-expressed are mutually dependent, the originality of the former in particular being assured by that of the latter."³⁸⁹ Notwithstanding *Girls*, many laudable accomplishments, this is also a very limited and *limiting* mode of political imagination. Of course, the show and Dunham's extraordinary accomplishments in female authorship, broke ground in prestige television for explorations of young female relationships or the politics of sex and health and these are of course *not* apolitical. My argument is that it exclusively focuses on these topics while at the same time adheres to an ethos of social critique that *cannot* omit how these are socially constituted and structured: the role of 'a voice of generation' demands a non-autobiographic disclosure and 'capability'.³⁹⁰

Yet this omission follows quite naturally from the conventions of English Romanticism for sincerity. The demand of originality turns *autobiographic disclosure* into a resource for veracity and trustworthiness, Milnes and Sinanan write how: "Within the unprecedented textual productivity of the Romantic period, the sincerity of the person writing is increasingly invoked as a touchstone of moral value and of the worth of the literature itself." (15). Instead of Taylorian articulation in the direction of non-selfish values such as "history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of

³⁸⁹ Milnes and Sinanan, "Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity," 14.

³⁹⁰ See discussion of Keats in Chapter 2.

citizenship, or the call of God”³⁹¹, there appears to be a dynamic of contraction instead.

The personalisation of politics can be objectionable because it *exclusively* mobilises the autobiographic domains of a person or characters life. As the life of the white and middle-class characters of *Girls* did not directly touch many question of injustice, it struggled to fulfil its promise as universalising ‘voice of a generation’. The misjudged introduction of Sandy, a black character in the second season, reinforced how the show had a blinkered, exclusively auto-ethnographic perspective when Sandy merely was used to play up that ignorance. Such concern with its own ‘privilege’ exemplifies what Sonia Kruks calls an *over-autonomous conception of the self* that disregards the systemic or structural: “how power distributes material resources, respect, and knowledge along axes that may include gender, sexuality, race, and class. [...] the discourse on privilege generally shifts away from structural (and poststructural) analysis, "inward" toward a discourse of personal self-discovery, confession, and guilt.”³⁹² Dunham’s example is both blinkered and a product of a much larger authenticity culture that *legitimizes* only discussing ‘what you know’.³⁹³ Similarly, Lena Dunham’s essay endorsing Hillary Clinton in *Time* limits its reasons and arguments to ‘what she knew’ and the topic of female reproductive rights. Again, the subject itself is deeply vital but the choice of topic illustrates the curtailment of topics deemed socially legitimate to speak on with authority.³⁹⁴ The autobiographic emphasis can also lead to an instrumental view of the self as

³⁹¹ “to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.” Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 40-41.

³⁹² Sonia Kruks, “Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Privilege,” *Hypatia* 20, no. 1 (2005): 181. For a reading of

³⁹³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “On Being Your Authentic Self,” *The Atlantic*, 2013.

³⁹⁴ Lena Dunham, “Why I Chose Hillary Clinton,” *Time*, April 25, 2016.

providing legitimacy through reference to ‘personal experience’ as ultimate source of authority. The popularisation of this kind of political imagination was coined ‘I-pistemology’ by Liesbeth van Zoonen to warn how “online and offline popular culture have raised personal experience to the level of the only relevant truth”.³⁹⁵ I-pistemology can not only undermine trust in collective institutions and processes of knowledge but also contains a significant threat to progressive politics in its popular rhetorical use by reactionary political movements.³⁹⁶

Such a paradoxical, undermining effect of sincerity appears earlier in the work of Wordsworth, where the exemplarily authentic ‘Michael’ assures sincerity by his distrust of language: “His muteness, a withdrawal from voice, is a consequence of seeing language and history *as threats to*, rather than the conditions of authentic being and sincere expression.”³⁹⁷ *Girls* uses such instances of muteness for its most poignant scenes, withholding for example a long-awaited declaration of love through an abrupt cut at the end of Episode 7. As with muteness, Wordsworthian sincerity is also communicated in *Girls* by the ‘unmediated’ emotional-psychological wounds. There is something unsatisfactory about how Hannah Horvath’s (mental) illness does work in providing legitimacy for the seriousness of the show in the second season as it leaves behind the ‘voice of a generation’ aspirations of broader, universalising critique it began with. Traditionally, feminist explorations of ‘the personal is political’ articulated in the direction of how the intimate domains of life interrelate with collective practices, institutional arrangements and public policies (connecting to a proceduralist vocabulary). *Girls* and Dunham’s own memoir intensified the focus on intersubjective, intimate domains in psychological and confessional terms. Shying away from non-autobiographic and non-personal structural aspects, the ethos of sincerity can become curtailed

³⁹⁵ Zoonen, “I-Pistemology: Changing Truth Claims in Popular and Political Culture,” 56.

³⁹⁶ Zoonen, “I-Pistemology: Changing Truth Claims in Popular and Political Culture.” 67.

³⁹⁷ My emphasis in Milnes and Sinanan, “Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity,” 6.

by drawing exclusively on the “languages of the self” that so characterise contemporary political argumentation, self-understanding, and imagination.³⁹⁸ The question remains if this is desirable. What happens when speaking about yourself becomes the *only* self-permitted language for the political? Once again, is the ideal of sincerity for citizenship a match for its socio-historic conditions? How do we identify its limits?

4.5 On Not Knowing How

If the mumblecore genre shows how sincerity as an antidote to political apathy involves conversion through attention to the ordinary and *Girls* shows a (limited) articulation of modern ills, there are few examples of how avowed sincerity involves the question of future exposition (how engagement is imagined to unfold over time). One notable example is the film *The Future* (2011) by Miranda July, which tellingly is an exploration of the inability to imagine the future. July’s work does not form part of the naturalistic mumblecore genre, using a more diverse register of visual styles that employs symbolism and scenes that shift in tone towards surrealism. Yet *The Future*’s investigation of how to ‘manifest for another’, as Aletta Norval once described Cavellianism, makes it congenial.³⁹⁹

Seeing the Absence of What is Needed

Miranda July’s *The Future* tells the story of a couple named Sophie and Jason, thirtysomethings who live in a state of protracted adolescence. The first *mise-en-scene* presents them as a kind of 21st century houseplants – stunted in their growth – blending the humans into the plants behind them with white MacBook cables as roots. They talk about wanting to have a crane that brings them water

³⁹⁸ Kenneth H Tucker, “The Political Is Personal, Expressive, Aesthetic, and Networked: Contemporary American Languages of the Self from Trump to Black Lives Matter,” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 6, no. 2 (2018): 359–86.

³⁹⁹ Aletta J. Norval, “Moral Perfectionism and Democratic Responsiveness: Reading Cavell with Foucault,” *Ethics & Global Politics* 4, no. 4 (December 23, 2011): 207–29.

so that they never have to leave the sofa. The arrival of a wild cat, who has come from the darkness (a Romantic motif) is the prompt that sets them and the film in motion. It will set Sophie and Jason on a melodramatic journey of education and an *attempted* transformation. Central to the plot is how they set out to live the next month of their lives as if it were their last, hoping to find their ‘true calling’, a purpose to their yet un-lived lives. Such contemporary strategies of rapid self-transformation, instant makeover and self-help cliché-language evokes what Cavell would call the perversion or distortion of Emersonian perfectionism in American thought and American culture.

The Future questions today’s propagated version of each person’s potential for discovering their ‘inner genius’, as Sophie and Jason’s challenge to move out of their state of adolescence will respectively fail in very contemporary ways. The visual style of the film also plants itself in the Romantic tradition by recreating canonical paintings of solitary figures. Sophie tries to finally become an artist but her inability to be original drives her towards the only social connection to she has available in the socially isolated present. She begins an affair in which she enacts a kind of fantasy 1950s life of patriarchal domesticity, figuratively and literally burying herself alive. Jason lets himself be enlisted in local climate activism, but soon discovers that the organisation comprises only of the man that recruited him— a tragi-comic symbolisation of the absence of broad social movements in 2011. These are just some of the examples of the ways in which Jason and Sophie fail but it is this existence of a specificity is important. Why and how their education fails, matters. What is remarkable is that neither Cavell nor the films show what the ‘new’ must look like. In Cavell’s words, we are “invited – or seduced? – to take steps, but without a path.”⁴⁰⁰ The protagonists go through this moral cynicism and desiring of a perfectionist

⁴⁰⁰ Cavell, “The Future of Possibility,” 30.

path, which as of now the world cannot accommodate, similar to how *Contesting Tears*'s protagonists become 'standing claims' for an alternate future.

What Future?

There is only one aspect that is prescriptive in July's *The Future* and that its denouncement of over-relying on oneself for direction in societies of relative privilege (meaning where questions of justice can be 'postponed', paraphrasing Cavell again). As a counter to the absence of collective life, Miranda July's companion book to the film, *It Chooses You*, modelled ways of being responsive to one's surroundings instead of relying on 'inner genius' or rational choice to break out of an impasse and out of inaction.⁴⁰¹ Responsiveness requires 'let yourself be educated by others' instead of the more familiar 'educate yourself'. Tellingly, the struggle to find forms of popular narration that can expand beyond the dominance of first-person storytelling is never really solved in this structure of feeling.⁴⁰² Yet, it puts a question into place: how can 'the social' become the primary source of knowledge and action rather than 'the letter inside you'.

An imagination of the political that is other-directed and im-personal can in theory be compatible with the ideal of sincerity. A perhaps counter-intuitive approach to Cavellian sincerity is formulated by Hent de Vries, who stresses that Cavell understands sincerity to be, ultimately, unfathomable. In a discussion of Hippolytus's famous line "my tongue swore to, but my heart did not", the counter-intuitive proposal is that *it does not matter* if there is congruence between heart and tongue: our words are binding because language is *all we have access to* – we cannot know one and other hearts, and probably not even our own.

⁴⁰¹ Miranda July, *It Chooses You* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2011). A similar idea is the motif of Benjamin Kunkel's satirical-sincere novel *Indecision*, where the concept *die Weltbitte* (the world-request) is introduced via a fictional German philosopher. Benjamin Kunkel, *Indecision* (New York: Random House, 2005).

⁴⁰² A similar idea is visible in Jon Stewart's later, un-ironic show *The Problem with Jon Stewart*: "It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the world's problems. It's harder to pinpoint the systems responsible for creating them. In this series, Jon Stewart brings together people impacted by different parts of a problem to discuss how we come up with change." "The Problem with Jon Stewart," IMDb, 2021.

We live in a groundlessness were we “have nothing else to call for”.⁴⁰³ De Vries explains Cavell as such:

“We are fatefully stuck with (or to) ourselves, not so much in the sense of unconsciously coinciding externally with some solemn internal (that is to say, spiritual-mental) deliberation in the depth of our soul, *foro interno*; but, more fundamentally, of being always already too late to reflect, to regret, to withdraw, to moderate, and, indeed, to be insincere.[...] , Cavell observes, Hippolytus expresses terror and implores pity, both of which are “some function of the knowledge that the most casual of utterances may be irretrievable: so my tongue swore without my heart- *nevertheless I am bound*”⁴⁰⁴

Sincerity here becomes a practice of social reciprocity rather than internal authority, a pre-Romantic sincerity that counters Romanticism’s tendency towards isolation (so symbolically thematised in this film). *The Future* tells the story of protagonists coming to realise their conformity and voicelessness and as a film it is able to express causes for this voicelessness. *The Future* undermines contemporary ideals of ‘rapid self-transformation’ and instead proposes to develop a *desire for time*. The desire for time means something different than the desire for self-reinvention: a desire for time means to move out of living in isolation because a desire for time here means a desire for communal experience – characterised by being in time. In a climactic scene, also a highly Romantic one that references Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Monk by the Sea*, protagonist Jason undoes his frozenness-in-time by literally embracing time through the movements of his arms and body. Once he is once again ‘in time’, he is no longer separated by connecting the chrono-libidinal with the communal.

⁴⁰³ Hent De Vries, “Must We (NOT) Mean What We Say? Seriousness and Sincerity in the Work of J. L. Austin and Stanley Cavell,” in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, ed. Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal, and Carel Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 107.

⁴⁰⁴ De Vries, “Must We (NOT) Mean What We Say?” 107–8.

It is precisely because a film like *The Future* can examine conformity in our contemporary time and our (Western) specific place that Cavell leaves prescriptiveness out of this therapeutic philosophy. By being a diagnostic of absences, it functions as an unusual kind of ‘realism’.⁴⁰⁵ The route of *The Future* lies towards understanding the conformity of living in isolation and in illusory ‘self-transformation’. To de-conform would mean finding ways to leave this behind in favour of an undisclosed neighbouring form. In this case, it demands finding practical ways to leave behind both isolation and rapid change – as the conditions of conformity. Again, however, the question of how then the de-conformed future is to be imagined is deferred, or delegated, now from the film to the spectator. *The Future* ends with a type of *direct address* to the viewer. The final scene plays a non-diegetic love song sung by Peggy Lee, a song that in the film also signifies Jason and Sophie’s relationship. In the moment the end titles are shown – the beginning of the end – the film’s tale takes on a sense of ominous warning. A direct address to us in our states of conformity, as the song lyrics turn to the following words:

Some things that happened for the first time
Seem to be happening again
And so it seems that we have met before
And that we laughed before, also loved before
But who knows where or when

Cavell’s therapeutic film-philosophy leaves us only with the means for diagnosing conformity. This Cavellian approach to film and narrative culture

⁴⁰⁵ In this light, I differ from Robert Sinnerbrink’s view that Cavell’s film-philosophy overlooks the relationship between ethics and politics. It rather conceives of politics itself as an intimate practice anchored by language. It is limited as Sinnerbrink writes, Cavellian film-philosophy offers “an oblique, attenuated perspective on the manner in which the ethical question of self-transformation is enabled, but also constrained, by the social institutions and cultural norms of the larger political community to which individuals belong. For it is always in the context of, in response to, and being enabled (or disabled) by, the norms, practices, and material conditions of one’s social-cultural community that the quest for a moral perfectionist form of ethical education and self-transformation can at all take place.” Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2015), 48.

thus avoids making aesthetic practices the spaces of resolution and directs us back to our everyday experiences. A film like *The Future*, in a sense trusts its viewer to respond to a mirror of contemporary conformity and turn away from isolation and vacuous transformation. If it is right to do so, depends on how you see the future.

Conclusion: Apathy by Another Name

So, what *do* we want from irony and sincerity? In Chapter 1, I asked this question to explore the confusing and contradictory public debates about the dismal state of democratic citizenship in the 2000s. How was it possible that these terms attracted such opposite assessments? Cultural critics used (postmodern) irony as a synonym for political apathy and moral relativism in order to advocate for more sincerity, while at same time, just as many critics saw that very sincerity as disengaged and lacking any political articulation. The debate in cultural criticism within prominent liberal-intellectual publications such as *The New York Times* was plagued by two fundamental disagreements; the first over the political imagination of sincerity in popular culture, the New Sincerity associated with artists and public figures such as Dave Eggers and Lena Dunham: to some they represented the return of political engagement, to others sentimental superficiality or narcissistic self-absorption. The second disagreement resulted from the thorny problem of *not being able to put into words* what made something political or not. Precisely because of this more pervasive uncertainty about criteria for the political, cultural critics were using the terms ‘irony’ and ‘sincerity’ as placeholders to express socio-political problems that were diffuse, subtle and not yet formalised in ordinary language. All were using irony and sincerity to describe apathy by another name.

At the same time, irony and sincerity express *different* and specific problems of political apathy and that becomes clear by looking closely at how they correspond with structures of feeling, located “in the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts.”⁴⁰⁶ After the

⁴⁰⁶ Buchanan, “Structures of Feeling,” 455.

analysis, I will now return to the claims by cultural critics and make sense of the relationship between irony, sincerity and political (dis)engagement.

In public debate, both sides make distorting claims about their opposition, which has the curious effect of hiding how *similar* irony and sincerity are in terms of political imagination and self-understanding. They share a Romantic valuation of creative self-expression that serves to revitalise or maintain political engagement, primarily by focusing on individual, everyday experience. Both structures of feeling contain positive, generative strategies that nevertheless share a high risk of becoming *too insular* and *decoupled* from traditional politics because of the way the ideal of sincerity interacts with specific, historical social conditions. The problem with sincerity as a kind of practice that tries to ‘weave oneself back into the social fabric’ is the way *personalisation* overshadows the necessary *proceduralist* dimensions of engagement that interact with larger socio-political practices and existing institutions and networks. Yet, the specifics of the irony-versus-sincerity difference matters because of how an engaged political self-understanding can *inadvertently curtail* its own political imagination or become prone to ‘neutralisation’. I will revisit these specific differences for their illumination of deeper problems for citizenship that cannot be addressed via the term ‘political apathy’ alone.

We have seen that the claim that irony equals apathy is partly wrong and partly right. Wrong, because it is neither indifferent nor uncaring, apathy’s most common ‘mental’ connotations. The irony illustrated by the film *Slacker* portrays a counter-culture where “withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy” and where irony is *not* moral relativism – an accusation similarly levelled at postmodern philosophy. Instead, in the structure of feeling of *ironic authenticity*, irony is employed to critique consumer capitalism and to resist the way *limitless commodification* diminishes human dignity. While continuing the denouncement of capitalism in the name of ideal of authenticity, central to historical social movements (Boltanski and Chiapello), it also signals a change in how this

political imagination *interiorises resistance* by putting emphasis on awareness, mental attitudes, feeling and aesthetic taste instead of outward-oriented ‘action’.⁴⁰⁷ (The role of the ‘Emersonian’ disjunction of action-versus-mentality remains an open question, see Wolfe.) I must make a qualification to my proposal of ‘irony as interiorised resistance’. When irony is semantically used to describe apathy in the post-2000s, it is because of the way interiorised resistance is an individualistic perspective that can potentially block participation in collective, political practices. Recently however, the communicative use of ironic forms (so not the use of the term ‘irony’ itself) appears in strategies of political movements across differing ideologies, including environmental activism (Seymour) and the far-right (Tuters) - such ironic use is outside this discussion of irony-as-apathy as it concentrates on different questions.⁴⁰⁸ At hand here, in this specific liberal-intellectual context, critics use the *term* irony to signify a practice of de-doxification that is anti-consumerist and critical of capitalist practices. However, irony also becomes a synonym for *withdrawal from traditional politics* because the emphasis is on a person’s interior life and their ‘authenticity’.

Sincerity represents a different kind of political apathy; critics of New Sincerity object to it because they see this re-engagement as superficial, overly sentimental, narcissistic, or regressive. There is something *wrong* with the post-2000 revaluation of sincerity for democratic engagement but critics struggle to put their finger on what it is. What is so frustrating in the New Sincerity represented by Dave Eggers or Lena Dunham as both public figures and artistic

⁴⁰⁷ Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism: New Updated Edition*. Sconce in 2002 also describes how the ironic structure of feeling that dominated the 1990s cinema displaced “the more activist emphasis on the ‘social politics’ of power, institutions, representation and subjectivity so central to 1960s and 1970s [...] concentrating, often with ironic disdain, on the ‘personal politics’ of power, communication, emotional dysfunction and identity in white middle-class culture.” Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism and the New American ‘smart’ Film,” 352.

⁴⁰⁸ Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Marc Tuters, “LARPing & Liberal Tears: Irony, Belief and Idiocy in the Deep Vernacular Web,” in *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US*, ed. Mark Fielitz and Nick Thurston, Edition Politik (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018).

works? Crucially, there is a shift here to how political engagement may be *present* yet *deficient*, somehow misdirected and ill-conceived. In order to find the enabling and constraining dimensions within a very broad ‘hipster’ sincere popular culture, I concentrated on how the structure of feeling of *avowed sincerity* mobilises ideas of resisting *social atomisation*: focussed on expressing that there *is* such a thing as society. This allows me to differentiate between the general problematic traits of New Sincerity popular culture and the more productive and worthwhile elements of the ideal of sincerity. Generally, New Sincerity popular culture is haunted by a *self-neutralising engagement* with politics via turning away from engagement with existing political organisations and structures of power – similar to ironic authenticity, which is why they both ‘passed’ for apathy in the ordinary language of cultural criticism. While, at the same time, it may be hard to see what can be objectionable to the way Dave Eggers uses his celebrity for community-oriented social charities, or how his children’s book on citizenship declares: “A citizen should be engaged. A citizen should care and care.”⁴⁰⁹ Principally, the reason is that these Romantic strategies reinforce (in parallel, as it were) governmental strategies of ‘The Third Way of the Left’ that *relegate* political claims back to a depoliticised sphere of community voluntarism and away from the democratic state.⁴¹⁰ For example, Eggers creation of a children’s charities to foster literacy, however positive it may be, can *distract* from attention to how the state of California spends its budget on education. The positive news-media coverage that such small, self-organising initiatives attract especially when endorsed by celebrities, then creates a relevance fallacy that *discredits* the contestation of structural inequality in public education.⁴¹¹ Why Eggers becomes such a lightning rod for criticism of ‘hipster smarm’ is that his neglect of existing

⁴⁰⁹ Dave Eggers, *What Can A Citizen Do?* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2018).

⁴¹⁰ Rose, “Community, Citizenship, and the Third Way.”

⁴¹¹ For an analysis of this detrimental dynamic see Lillie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

political institutions is echoed by his highly popular contemporary political novels. Through their *over-focus on the individual* first-person ‘subjective’ experience, they become allegories of numbed, defeated citizenship in a world where modern politics is an exclusively individual practice. The Wordsworthian personalisation of politics puts such weight on how the world resonates within interior, personal, subjective experience that it eclipses the procedural domains of political engagement. This shift in urgency, credibility and relevance through personalisation in turn makes the articulation of values into an end in itself, *uncoupling* the element of ‘raising awareness’ from a multifaceted and temporally unfolding practice aimed at social change. In such cases, the post-2000 valuation of sincerity becomes a case of what Berlant termed ‘cruel optimism’: something desired and fulfilling that is actually creating obstacles to what you desire.⁴¹²

Yet, avowed sincerity does not necessarily have to make autobiography central, one of its most fruitful and generative elements are its strategies of *responsiveness* to others in the *everyday*. A reminder that political engagement is often not ‘personal’ but ‘other-directed’, which is especially relevant when citizens lead relatively privileged and comfortable lives. As Miranda July put it: it chooses you. The key appeal of avowed sincerity is the centrality of the everyday rather than the autobiographic. Anchoring political engagement in the registers and repertoires of the everyday and ordinary can turn this into a site of the *strange* that directs to an *unknown future* rather than to the familiar.⁴¹³ This perspective on the everyday, shared by Stanley Cavell as much as the Chantal Akerman-influenced mumblecore cinema, offers a counterweight to the rhetoric

⁴¹² Although more the word cruelty emphasises its non-personal social structure the idea of ‘cruel optimism’ shares many features of critique of self-deception with bad faith and false consciousness. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1–2.

⁴¹³ Chantal Akerman formulated this in 1982 as: “If I have a reputation for being difficult, it’s because I love the everyday and want to present it.” “Retrospective: Chantal Akerman at the New Horizon Film Festival,” accessed July 1, 2023, <https://chantalakerman.foundation/retrospective-chantal-akerman-at-the-new-horizon-film-festival/>.

of ‘self-interested choice’ that so dominates the post-2000 belief in the ‘homo economicus’.

The generative example set by Lena Dunham is more complicated; she represents one of the few examples of the political articulation that was supposed to be a hallmark of sincerity in the 2000s - the success of *Girls*’ explicit feminism offers a rare “single-entendre principle” so longed for by Wallace.⁴¹⁴ However, a different risk of *neutralising engagement* emerges from the primary role *autobiography* plays as a ‘resource’ for political imagination and self-understanding. Again, this is connected to a parallel social change that reinforces the dynamic of *contracting* the political; Noting its risk to institutional politics, communications scholar Liesbeth van Zoonen coined the term ‘I-pistemology’ for the way “online and offline popular culture have raised personal experience to the level of the only relevant truth”.⁴¹⁵ Similarly, sociologist Kenneth Tucker notes how “languages of the self” cut across the political spectrum from social movements to Trump-voters.⁴¹⁶ How autobiographic *registers* of experience are used in political arguments becomes problematic because of the contingent nature of that autobiography’s connection to procedural engagement *and* questions of justice.⁴¹⁷ If, and when, one’s autobiography connects to marginalisation and deprivation, its specific articulation can more easily and readily connect to broader patterns of experience that interrelate with larger practices, policies and institutions.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with drawing on one’s autobiography in the practice of political engagement. However, that practice

⁴¹⁴ Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” 193.

⁴¹⁵ Zoonen, “I-Pistemology: Changing Truth Claims in Popular and Political Culture,” 56.

⁴¹⁶ Tucker, “The Political Is Personal, Expressive, Aesthetic, and Networked: Contemporary American Languages of the Self from Trump to Black Lives Matter.”

⁴¹⁷ That such appeals to autobiographic experience will often be misused for unjust political projects is precisely van Zoonen’s concern, noting how I-pistemology provides rhetorical force and efficacy (thus a seeming ‘legitimacy’) to racist and misogynist political actors. See: Zoonen, “I-Pistemology: Changing Truth Claims in Popular and Political Culture.”

becomes something else when it becomes a demand of contemporary rhetoric, or when ‘I-pistemology’ is instrumentalised to legitimate belief that is unjust, or when autobiography over-focuses on questions of guilt and confession, as Kruks described in cases of privilege (another risk of relevance fallacy).⁴¹⁸ The last case is especially relevant for the irony and sincerity phenomenon because of its connection to ‘privileged’ publics who are not too frequently deprived by “traditional villains of racism, sexism and class division”.⁴¹⁹ In such cases the Wordsworthian personalisation of politics – the exploration of ‘autobiographic resonances’ – will eclipse the procedural dimensions of self-understanding and political imagination, resulting in a contraction of the political vocabulary and repertoire. In other words, the personal is political, but the political is also impersonal and shaped by collective and material conditions. This means we have to pay more attention to the pragmatic conditions that surround the appeal to sincerity and irony-authenticity. Is the ideal of sincerity for citizenship limited due to specific socio-historic circumstances or is the problem more complicated?

Reuniting the Personal and Procedural Repertoires of Politics

In the previous chapters, I have tried to demonstrate that irony and sincerity are not as opposed to each other as cultural critics make them out to be. Both structures of feeling struggle with different, severed links to the collective, temporally unfolding dimensions of politics. I have argued that irony and sincerity appear as placeholders for problems of democratic citizenship that were diffuse and not formally named. These include the unavailability of traditional counter-cultural forms of political dissent due to newly ‘flexible’ capitalism (Chapter 3), another is the difficulty of addressing the relevance

⁴¹⁸ Kruks, “Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Privilege.”

⁴¹⁹ Sconce, “Irony, Nihilism and the New American ‘smart’ Film,” 368.

fallacies of community oriented ‘engagement’ that distract attention from increasingly depoliticised and de-democratised political institutions (Chapter 4). I began this dissertation with the suggestion that looking at the meaning of ‘political apathy’ in a specific context will also illuminate the obstacles and problems of political engagement.

In cultural criticism, irony and sincerity are not just used to describe apathy but to express the desire to move beyond an impasse in citizenship. However, the overarching ideal of sincerity mobilises attention towards social dynamics that cannot be overcome by the ideal of sincerity in its current form.⁴²⁰ Current social conditions often hinder the ‘fruition’ of a personalised vocabulary and repertoire for engagement beyond the small or insular. Perhaps there is an alternative, I would speculate. I have been arguing that sincerity as an ideal for citizenship involves three elements by following Cavell, Taylor and Trilling: these are conversion, articulation and future exposition. It is this future exposition that is the most eroded in progressive politics, as the following example will hopefully illustrate, an example that directs toward the procedural repertoire and vocabulary.

In 2016, the photographer Wolfgang Tillmans was one of the few artists actively campaigning for the UK to remain within the European Union in the upcoming referendum.⁴²¹ One of his posters presented the phrase “Say you’re in if you’re in” followed by a key addition: the web-address of the British Government to register to vote. It presents an appeal to sincere expressivism in service of a procedural counterpart. To say your commitments and state your values obviously *also means to act* in certain way, to register to vote and show up

⁴²⁰ Such as the post-2000 social dynamic of erasing contestation in the realm of ‘community’ (Rose), the disjunction of a cultural U.S. left in the 1990s no longer invested in economic justice (Robbins), the rise of an over-autonomous conception of engagement (Kruks), predated by long-term dynamics such as bohemianized mass culture and detranscendentalized Romanticism.

⁴²¹ Born in West-Germany, Wolfgang Tillmans has worked in New York and London as one of the most influential ‘street photographers’ of the 1990s and 2000s, later expanding his artistic practice.

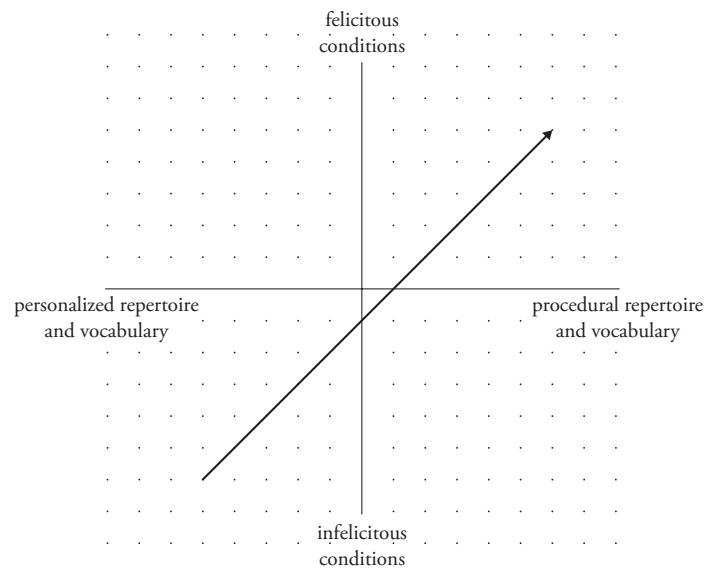
on referendum day to cast it. To only “say you’re in if you’re in” without acting correspondingly would self-evidently be futile. That futility does not only emerge from the fateful consequences of this particular referendum (which against expectations resulted in a majority for ‘Brexit’). Here, the appeal to sincerity has a *procedural* counterpart because the social *repertoire* of voting contains a series of actions that are invariant and ritualised. The ritualised framework of voting bridges the appeal to sincerity’s conversion (interrupting your abstinence) to articulation (“I want to stay in the EU”) and towards future exposition (registering for and voting in a referendum). Such implicit future expositions are the most difficult to establish through the sincerity framework, because they are dependent on shared assessments of the future that are not automatically given within progressive politics by the conventions of the past (much easier in conservative and reactionary politics). Future expositions must be continuously produced and reproduced and thus, the ritual-procedural repertoire of the political is key.

I have proposed the procedural as the counterpart to the ‘sincere’ personalisation of the political, embodying two major, interrelated frameworks of maintaining a “shared social world”: sincerity and ritual.⁴²² Based in philosophical anthropology, the framework of *ritual* stands for creation of an ‘as if’ space that navigates uncertainty and ambiguity. I focus now on how these can *balance* sincere ‘as is’ social processes. Because of the dominance of the sincerity framework in Western culture, we overlook the way ritual-procedural practices *prioritize* action, formality and repetition (e.g. voting).⁴²³ The figure 2 (next page) explains how the personalised repertoire of politics exists on a spectrum with

⁴²² Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, 6. I thus strongly differ from Anderson’s Habermasian approach (concerning communication).

⁴²³ “Unlike ritual, the sincere form is characterized by a search for motives and for purity of motives, reminiscent of Immanuel Kant’s privileging of the purity of the moral will. Sincerity morally privileges *intent* over action.” My emphasis in Seligman et al., 105. In addition, “the ‘balance’ between them and differentiation of realms that each addresses in society have critical consequences for the ways that individuals experience the world and, significantly, for civil order.” Seligman et al., 104.

increasingly formalised political procedures. Repertoires and vocabularies for the political imagination can be placed on this horizontal line and their outcomes can be either contextually appropriate, or contextually self-neutralising and even detrimental.



In the figure I use the term ‘felicitous conditions’ from ordinary language philosophy to describe practices of democratic citizenship, which is of course not the same as progressive political engagement even though this is the area I am interested in. On the side of personalised repertoires, a Wordsworthian personalisation of politics is an infelicitous example because it self-undermines (from ironic interiorization of resistance to sincere over-emphasis on autobiography). A Wordsworthian personalisation can be contrasted by more felicitous examples from the political autobiography tradition that disclose societal, structural and systemic aspects (the U.S. Black Civil Rights movement is an enduring touchstone for such practices). Here the line between felicitous

and infelicitous conditions seems to be influenced by how autobiographic experiences of ‘non-privilege’ bridge more easily towards procedural-structural societal elements for critique than privileged ones that are susceptible to relevance fallacies (blocking effective change). On the other side of the horizontal spectrum of the political repertoire, procedural repertoires contain infelicitous examples such as international trade agreements, contrasted by felicitous examples of mobilisations for progressive referendums for equitable law reform. In the middle range of the repertoire, the social entrepreneurial community projects exemplified by Dave Eggers contrast with ‘traditional’ social movements that aim to change institutional practice or formal rights.

Progressive political imagination has perhaps the most to gain by expanding towards the procedural-ritual repertoires. Ritual contains an emphasis on action that bypasses the demand to shift to a ‘collectivist self-understanding’ that is so antithetical to modern individualism and difficult to shift in competitive, post-welfare Western societies such as the Netherlands and the UK (as well as in the U.S.A.) We cannot simply go back to the collectivist views that changed in the Western cultural revolution of individualism. Procedural engagement should probably therefore *not* lead with a communitarian self-understanding even if it can include it but instead focus on procedures and social practices that provide futurity. In addition, the repetitive, externally given imperatives of rituals moves us away from a ‘neoliberal’ over-emphasis on emotional resilience that scholars have recently begun to criticise in sincerity culture.⁴²⁴ Similarly, the patterns described in relation to ‘irony and sincerity’ cannot be remedied by *even more* engagement and care.

⁴²⁴ Lambert uses Robin James and Jane Elliott’s concepts of “resilience discourse” and “suffering agency” to critique New Sincerity in Stephanie Lambert, “‘The Real Dark Side, Baby’: New Sincerity and Neoliberal Aesthetics in David Foster Wallace and Jennifer Egan,” *Critique - Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 61, no. 4 (2020): 394–411.

Instead, it is more helpful to diversify the repertoires and vocabularies and so reconfigure a highly personalised ideal where procedural politics is unfortunately 'boring'.⁴²⁵ For example, the *procedure* of a repetitive school strike such as *FridaysforFuture*'s high school students weekly strike for action on climate change, does not exist in 'sincere' service of student's agentic resilience. (Nor to transfer one's responsibility onto the *person* Greta Thunberg). A weekly strike contains formal conventions of action and counteractions, it has a ritualistic, impersonally decided, and invariant form that *already* directs towards the future. *FridaysforFuture* strongest impact (having little economic effect) emerged from its demand to expand public action beyond the present 'as is' horizon. Taking part in a recurring strike allows personalized political engagement to expand through 'as if' forms that can unfold over time – emphasising the action of repetition over 'inner resonances'. Such examples of procedural imagination and self-understanding can bring counterbalance to the sincere repertoires and vocabularies that become too insular and ineffective.

⁴²⁵ Ralph Clare, "The Politics of Boredom and the Boredom of Politics in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*," *Studies in the Novel* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2012) (2012): 428–46.

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Summary

The Politics of the Apolitical: Irony, Sincerity, Engagement

What do political engagement and apathy mean against the backdrop of a rapidly changing society? What kinds of problems are being expressed when people complain that young individuals are too ironic or too sincere? This dissertation explores the problems of understanding contemporary (progressive) citizenship by analyzing the cultural preoccupation with irony and sincerity in post-millennial Anglosphere Western culture. It presents a framework of philosophical and cultural-historic analysis in order to understand the valuation of the Modern ideal of 'sincerity' for citizenship.

While central to modern culture, there is a lack of clarity in how 'sincerity' can be an ideal that revitalizes citizenship. For this reason, the work of Stanley Cavell, Charles Taylor and Lionel Trilling provide specific criteria. Additionally, the problems of individualized and fragmented societies are difficult to counter via the appeal to sincerity and authenticity. The risk of a "Wordsworthian" personalization of politics risks obscuring the necessary procedural (temporally unfolding) dimensions of political engagement and democracy. An exploration of different 'structures of feeling' analyses the dangers of the ideal within specific Western conditions. The conclusion points to the need to create balance between the personalized and procedural aspects of political imagination and self-understanding, and offers insights as to how to navigate this imbalance.

I first analyse the 2012-2015 Anglosphere debate in cultural criticism (*The New York Times*, *Gawker* etc.) in order to show how irony and sincerity function as ways to deliberate the state of political engagement. What causes the disagreements and confusions in this debate? How does a term for an aesthetic style such as irony and sincerity take on political meaning? The chapter explains the buried problem that irony can signal three very different things: 1) irony as aesthetic speech act, 2) philosophy of subjectivity, 3) a set of cultural-historic

values. The chapter then provides theoretical frameworks for analysing these three different functions.

If the desire for sincerity is motivated by alleviating political apathy, the question in Chapter 2 becomes why and how it should do so. For this, the work of philosophers Stanley Cavell, Lionel Trilling and Charles Taylor provides answers. All share a reasoning of why the ideal of sincerity can restore democratic citizenship and alleviate political inarticulacy. Through Cavell and Taylor, we can understand the Romantic-Pragmatist valuation of everydayness and the practice of self-expression. The chapter will also explain why sincerity and authenticity contain different (more inward-oriented or outward-oriented) political imaginations, but paradoxically also share the same dangers of over-*personalising* the political domains of life. Then, what are the ideal of sincerity's 'internal' criteria for political engagement? How can we formulate a critique of sincerity in terms of its capacity to be politically enabling or obstructive? These characteristics and criteria will then provide an evaluative framework for the subsequent two chapters on 1990s irony and 2000s sincerity. Do the structures of feeling and their political imagination and self-understanding meet these criteria and if not, why?

Chapter 3 explores the connection between irony and political apathy, why did the terms become synonymous for proponents of sincerity? I begin by making a productive distinction between the very broad – often maligned – category of postmodern irony and the structure of feeling of ironic authenticity. I trace this structure via the 'Cavellian' genre of slacker films, characterised by postmodern ironic aesthetics and a thematic preoccupation with apathy. I will argue that contrary to popular opinion, ironic authenticity is not apathic but rather highly critical, preoccupied with how counter-culture and 'artistic critique' itself has become a ubiquitous commodity in the 1990s.

In Chapter 4, I connect the loss of confidence in collective politics that concluded Chapter 3 with the revaluation of sincerity. Here, I take a critical

perspective towards claims that New Sincerity as an artistic movement represents models of revitalised engagement and propose looking at a smaller subset and structure of feeling for more productive examples. The strong anchoring of political engagement in autobiographical registers can inadvertently confine and curtail possibilities of political engagement. At the same time, the attention towards the everyday and the 'other-directed' presents a more open-ended imagination of the political. The question nevertheless will remain, is sincerity is a fruitful ideal for citizenship under current, post-2000 social conditions?

In the conclusion, I return to the social practice of debating citizenship with the specific insights gleaned. Instead of framing apathy and engagement as opposites, the problems represented by irony and sincerity have to do with severed links to the collective and temporally unfolding dimension of politics, as well as the increasing demand for mobilizing one's autobiography in the political imagination. There is a need to balance the repertoire and vocabulary of political imagination and self-understanding, as the dangers of over-personalizing politics (e.g. relevance fallacies or 'interiorized' forms of resistance) create obstacles for progressive politics. Here, expanding the political vocabulary and repertoire toward procedural-ritual practices offers promise in addressing the imbalance

Samenvatting in het Nederlands

De Politiek van het Apolitieke: Ironie, Oprechtheid, Engagement

Is er nog een duidelijke betekenis voor de termen 'politiek engagement' en 'politieke apathie' wanneer de maatschappij razendsnel verandert? Wat is er aan de hand, wanneer er wordt geklaagd dat jonge mensen te ironisch of te oprecht zijn? Het proefschrift onderzoekt de problemen bij het begrijpen van hedendaags (progressief) burgerschap tegen de achtergrond van de millenniumwisseling. Door middel van een analyse van de culturele fixatie op ironie en oprechtheid in de Engelstalige wereld waar Nederland toe behoort, worden onderliggende problemen benoemd en van context voorzien. De methodologische keuze voor een combinatie van filosofische en cultureel-historische analyse concentreert zich op centrale rol van het Moderne ideaal van 'oprechtheid' voor burgerschap. De Moderne idealen van (praktische) oprechtheid en authenticiteit (als een soort zelfbeeld) kunnen goede vormen van democratisch burgerschap bevatten, hierbij is specifiek het werk van Stanley Cavell, Charles Taylor en Lionel Trilling een goede leidraad voor criteria. De belangrijkste voorwaarden zijn: 1) responsieve conversie binnen het alledaagse leven, 2) articulerende dialogen en 3) toekomstgerichte uiteenzetting.

Tegelijkertijd stelt dit proefschrift de beperktheid en traagheid van progressief burgerschap tussen 1990 en 2022 centraal. Door middel van cultuur-analyse (o.a. populaire cultuur, film, literatuur) wordt onderzocht hoe verschillende historische ideeën ontstaan over de relatie tussen het eigen, persoonlijk-morele verlangen enerzijds en het leven in een samenleving anderzijds.

Hierbij is de nadruk in vocabulaire en repertoire tussen 1990 en 2015 op authenticiteit en ‘autobiografische ervaring’ een bron van zorg. Deze nadruk op de eigen levensbiografie kan ónbedoeld een vernauwend en inperkend effect hebben op de politieke verbeelding van het sociale (structureel-systemische) en de relatie die dit heeft tot het eigen leven. Deze manier van politiek ‘personaliseren’ kán relevant zijn, maar moet ook in balans blijven wanneer het níet relevant is. Het Moderne ideaal van oprechtheid voor burgerschap vraagt namelijk ook om aandacht te hebben voor het onbekende, zelfs wanneer dat het eigen comfort bedreigt.

In de conclusie stelt het proefschrift dat de vernauwing van ‘het politieke’ met name in het leven van geprivilegieerde burgers uit balans raakt. Door de aandacht te verschuiven naar de (nieuwe) expressieve taal voor de procedures en ‘saai’ beleids-vormen die ritualistisch en herhalend zijn (tevens essentieel voor een functionerende democratie), ontstaat ruimte voor het gemeenschappelijk vormgeven van een meer rechtvaardige en multiculturele toekomst.

Cover design in Trump Mediaeval font. Dr. Wangari Maathai of the Green Belt Movement chose this typographic font to honour peace-activist Professor John Trump of MIT within her autobiography titled *Unbowed*. A copy of this book is owned by Pili Lartategui-Sancho.