

Sincerity and Hyperreality: The New Sincerity Ethos

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I: Introduction to New Sincerity

A broad literary and cultural ethos has emerged in the early 21st century that is referred to by literary scholars, writers, and journalists as “New Sincerity.” Associated with the “millennial” generation, the movement encompasses various media including books, poetry, television, films, and music. Analyzing New Sincerity as a specific movement or ethos involves studying the relationship between sincerity and irony, writer and reader, and postmodernism. This study seeks to understand the characteristics of New Sincerity and the political and cultural implications of the emergence of media that embraces sincerity and kindness instead of cynicism.

“New Sincerity” is described as an ethos in the media, indicating its cultural foothold. In a 2012 *Atlantic* article called, “Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age's Ethos,” Jonathan D. Fitzgerald argues that sincerity is the overarching ethos of our age. He says, “A recent Knights of Columbus-Marist Poll survey found that among Millennials, six out of 10 prioritized being close to God and having a good family life above anything else.” This indicates that New Sincerity is more than just a rejection of irony, but a shift in everyday values, including an acceptance of vulnerability and simplicity. Fitzgerald looks at Generation X (born in the 1960s-70s) and Millennials (born in the 1980s-90s) comparatively, saying he appreciates the culture of the 90s, “But I can also still remember the cool, detached posturing of the teenagers I looked up to as a child in the '80s, and still as a teenager myself in the '90s. To be vulnerable or authentic, to be sincere, was death in those days” (Fitzgerald). Now, music and literature that embrace “morality” are more acceptable. Perhaps being “detached” is something like what Lionel Trilling refers to in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) as the “best self of mankind” (5), or the image of a person that

society sees as acceptable. Sometimes, to be one's true self is to be an unacceptable version of a person, and it seems like the New Sincerity movement is an ethos that encourages people's true selves, no matter how vulnerable that self may be. "New Sincerity" is a genuine social phenomenon. To define "sincerity" in terms of a "new sincerity-ist," one might use "sentimental" and "sincere" interchangeably. A "new sincere" work might be described as tender, melodramatic, or even self-indulgent. The contemporary literature version of "sincere" abides by this concept of "trueness," particularly when it comes to staying true to one's inner feelings.

Author David Foster Wallace is heralded as the primary origin of sincerity and sentimentality as a contemporary value criterion in art. His 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* is listed on "Time" magazine's 100 best English novels published between 1923 and 2005, making him an influential author in contemporary fiction. In literary discourse, he is regarded as the pioneer of New Sincerity, based on the sentimental content of his fiction, as well as the ideology provided in his essays and various personal statements. Wallace addresses the human need for connection in his work, building the basis for New Sincerity. In his 1993 essay, "E Unibus Pluram" (which may be treated as a manifesto for "New Sincerity"), Wallace acknowledges sincerity's bad reputation in comparison to the detachment of the 90s that Fitzgerald also addresses, ending the article with a call-to-action: "The new rebels will be the ones willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'How banal.' Accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity" (193). Here, Wallace questions postmodernism's championing of irony, acknowledging that contemporary culture might reject sincerity's "niceness" as it values more cynical stances. Wallace contends that contemporary innovation

requires “conviction” in human emotions. Wallace’s interest in “conviction” is something shared by the art associated with New Sincerity, which rejects cynicism, and finds value in honesty. Looking at things without irony, and being sincere in one’s feelings has had bad associations up until this point, so the next counterculture movement would theoretically be sincere. Wallace does not use the word “sincerity” in his essay, but literary critics and readers agree that it embodies sincerity. To Wallace, sincerity is key, as it gets to the heart of human affairs.

Wallace’s work promotes a sincere connection between author and reader. In a key text in New Sincerity discussion, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction,” Adam Kelly says, “the greatest terror, but also the only true relief, is the *passive decision* to relinquish the self to the judgment of the other, and the fiction of the New Sincerity is thus structured and informed by this dialogic appeal to the reader's attestation and judgment” (145). A key element to New Sincerity literature, he asserts here, is that the author is aware that they are being judged, and it offers a new dimension of sincerity to the reading experience. Furthermore, the authors know that someone is judging them, and may choose to acknowledge this in their writing.

While the literature often associates Wallace with this movement, any exploration of New Sincerity must examine its complexity and multiple voices. In “David Foster Wallace is Not Your Friend,” for example, Cory M. Hudson argues that one should not follow Wallace’s interviews or personal statements alone as a guide for the virtues and purpose of his work, because they drastically simplify his “narrative project.” Hudson says, “rather than seeking to create an empathetic relationship between the author and the reader... [Wallace] demonstrate[s] the impossibility that a person can truly know someone else.” The various fictional characters in

Wallace's fiction are meant to represent his internal struggles, in a way that is cathartic to the author and the reader. For instance, the protagonist Hal in *Infinite Jest* struggles with alienation and drug abuse, and although it is a fictional work, and Wallace is not Hal, Hal may represent issues that Wallace experienced. Hudson claims that because the characters are not autobiographical, the audience can never truly get to know him, his "sincerity" is an illusion, and his writing reverts back to a postmodern view.

It is likely, though, that the ethos of New Sincerity is to acknowledge the core of human sentimentality, regardless of a "capital T"-truth in the author's expression. In an interview with Hugh Kennedy and Geoffrey Polk, compiled by Stephen Burn in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, Wallace addresses the way this need manifests in literature, saying,

"We're all terribly, terribly lonely. And there's a way, at least in prose fiction, that can allow you to be intimate with the world and with a mind and with characters that you just can't be in the real world...a piece of fiction that's really true allows you to be intimate with... I don't want to say people, but it allows you to be intimate with a world that resembles our own" (16).

He admits that all good fiction writing does this in some way. He describes this work as "true," but specifies that the world described in such writing must "resemble" a true, authentic world, and not necessarily be an exact representation of one specific person's world. The world described in his fiction does not need to be autobiographical to convey "sincerity." New Sincerity redefines sincerity into the shared, and banal aspects of life.

The idea that Wallace emphasizes, that the nature of sincerity is not necessarily interchangeable with honesty, does resemble the sincerity that Trilling questions in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972). He describes sincerity as “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (pg. 2); however, is this congruence a necessary aspect of moral virtue? For many years it was, according to Trilling. Trilling evokes a few questions like which self is the true self? And is it the most socially acceptable and good self? Or is it one’s self, including the bad? “Sincere” originally means “pure, clean, sound” (*OED*), and it still applies here, but in this context, does it mean pure, unadulterated self (even if the self is evil), or morally good? These questions are applicable when discussing David Foster Wallace’s work. When discussing the sincere quality of an author’s work, does the moral purity of the person matter? For instance, if a poet beats his wife and kids behind the scenes, yet is honest about it in his work, will he be rewarded for his “sincerity”? Probably not. Trilling goes on to say that sincerity has devalued over time, which is bundled up in Wordsworth’s statement that poets “were not persons or selves, they were artists, by which they meant that they were exactly not, in the phrase which Wordsworth began his definition of the poet, men speaking to men” (7). Wordsworth’s words encompass the general literary attitude towards sincerity from the 19th century and on; an agreement between what one says and how they feel was not a necessary virtue of art. This could explain why sincerity was not an integral aspect of art until the New Sincerity. Part of what people may find inherently wrong with sincerity as a moral virtue is that one wants to know what people are thinking, and wants to feel a connection with people, but does not necessarily want to know the immoral things about a person, even though “sincerity” as we know it means complete honesty. We do not want

people to be “sincere” in a literal sense, but we want to *feel* like people are sincere, just to get a sense of humanity in their emotional vulnerability, awkwardness, “quirks,” etc.

The meaning of “reality” in the context of fiction could be called into question, because some would argue that true sincerity isn’t possible in a work of fiction. However, the illusion of fiction, as well as film, can contribute to a deeper understanding of the author’s reality. The use of symbols and storytelling may allow the author to represent himself in ways that he cannot face-to-face. There are still postmodern aspects of New Sincerity. Many would call Wallace’s huge footnotes and post-structuralist form “postmodern,” but in “(New) Sincerity in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Octet’,” Iain Williams argues that

“by requiring of his readers a vast investment of time and concentration, acknowledging and working through the specter of irony while proleptically anticipating theoretical rebuttals, and resisting both a retrograde appeal for “pre-ironic” sincerity and a reductive synthesis of irony and sincerity, Wallace achieves a “new” position of sincerity that is ostensibly unchallengeable.”

By the end, Wallace becomes more “sincere” and directly addresses the reader and the feelings that they have. They wade through a series of post-modern absurdity to finally come out on the other side, seeing through it all. Wallace shows that irony and sincerity go hand-in-hand. There is an unparalleled level of self-consciousness in his work that dodges any question of sincerity; his long footnotes in “Octet” that reflect on his authorship have the potential to appear so embarrassing and self-deprecating that he must be genuine.

However, Williams and Thompson point out Wallace’s concept of sincerity is manipulative. In “‘Sincerity with a Motive’: Literary Manipulation in David Foster Wallace’s

Infinite Jest,” Lucas Thompson argues that the way Wallace conceptualizes sincerity becomes lost in the original literature (specifically in *Infinite Jest*), because the nature of his sincerity is manipulative, from a literary and philosophical context. He says, “the signs and markers of sincerity have been endlessly rhetoricized, such that we can no longer confidently discern between the appearance of sincerity and what the novel’s narrator characterizes as ‘sincerity with an ulterior motive’ [*Infinite Jest* 369]” (2016). He also describes Wallace’s point of using sentimentality as a way to communicate more directly with the reader and gives the reader the need to trust the author, which might be considered inherently “manipulative.” If Wallace wanted to sell the reader something, he might be in a position to do so.

The view of Wallace as an influential figure in literature is complicated by his controversial image, but these complications are a necessary aspect of New Sincerity. He is regarded as an influential literary figure, and biopic movies like *The End of the Tour* (2015) have incarnated him as a mysterious and flawed, yet generally benevolent figure. The fact that he committed suicide in 2008 adds nuance to his authorship and may alter or even build a closer relationship between his work and the reader, depending on the reader’s outlook on depression and suicide. Wallace grapples with the topic of suicide in his 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, at one point detailing the pain and feeling of being “trapped” that leads one to commit suicide. Many people struggle with these issues, and the shared knowledge that someone else feels the same could lend itself to “sincerity” in the experience of reading Wallace’s work. However, his suicide may have changed the way people remember him. Adrienne Miller provides valuable insights about Wallace in her 2020 memoir, *In the Land of Men*, saying that after his suicide in 2008, he was “reduced to a darkly glamorous suicide doll” (37), which points out that people may

interpret his work inaccurately, reducing the sincerity that he promoted. Adrienne Miller offers insight about Wallace as a human, describing his condescending, and at times, immature behaviors, which contribute to the idea that he just might not have been a great guy (Marsh, “Infinite Jerk”).

However, one could argue that after examining his work, it is not hard to believe that this same man wrote *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, a short story collection that scrutinizes alienated, masculine men? In “Octet,” Wallace writes ridiculously long footnotes about how he can improve himself as a writer, for instance, in the 12th footnote, he tells himself, “Yes: you are going to sound pious and melodramatic. Suck it up” (133). This contributes to the “sincerity” of his work because he acknowledges that it is okay to have genuine human feelings and to present them even if it makes him look silly. Also, the excessive footnotes support a vision of him as an unhealthy, self-obsessive madman. Many people will think badly of him, but this type of writing is exactly what he designates in “E Unibus Pluram” as “rebellion.”

One aspect of New Sincerity that must be discussed is television. In “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace explains that one characteristic of postmodernism-- which gave rise to New Sincerity-- is that Americans are bound by common images. Postmodernists recognize pop culture icons (i.e. 40s pop icons in *Gravity's Rainbow*, or classic Americana images in *Lolita*) and bond over their shared guilt about being familiar with icons that one would find on TV. The essay claims that Americans watch TV on average 6 hours a day, and they shared a profound embarrassment about it because television was a “low-art”; the implication of 21st-century New Sincerity, however, suggests Americans are bound by common appreciation of all art forms. Ironically, postmodernism has levelled high art and low art, thus making every aesthetic creation worthy of

consideration, and setting the stage for New Sincerity. It could be said that New Sincerity is a branch of postmodernism, for this reason.

The embarrassment about TV and consuming other mass media seems to have faded. Pop culture icons are not as much of a source of guilty pleasure. People now consume television in mass amounts so much so that the term “binge-watching” is common. Everyone jokes about it, but the recent Millennial and Generation Z generations have no longer become ashamed of it, because they were born with it, and grew up with it. More effort is being put into producing high quality TV shows; for example, now there is a huge variety of intelligent, high-budget shows like *Game of Thrones*, *House of Cards*, *The Office*, etc. Television is no longer just infomercials and reruns of *Friends*. More importantly, it is “cooler” for young people to bond over their shared love of a TV show. Now there is merchandise for shows, and even popular conventions for fans to meet each other. In online dating profiles, it is not uncommon for young adults to list watching TV as their favorite activity. There are many articles discussing TV’s value, including *The New Yorker’s* 2017 article, “How TV Became Art”. The writers Joshua Rothman and Erin Overbey say, “The technology of television has changed beyond recognition—thanks to streaming and smartphone cameras, it’s now part of the Internet—but that has only made TV more influential” because this convenience now found makes the experience of watching TV much more personal. They go on to chronicle the “vitality and creativity” found in “outrageous and realistic, commercial and serious, comedic and intelligent, broad and complex” shows like “*Mad Men*”, “*The Sopranos*”, and “*Breaking Bad*.” TV-watching is no longer an embarrassing experience because of such complex shows that illustrate a variety of human stories. For instance, “*Breaking Bad*” captures the experience of a chemistry teacher who gets cancer, and cooks meth to pay his

medical bills. This captures the shortcomings of middle class America. The show's relatable yet serious writing demonstrates the depth with which we consume media now, and the shift in what is considered "high" art.

Some cite 9/11 as integral to the way young Americans consume media. In "New Sincerity, New Worldliness," Sunyoung Ahn claims that New Sincerity as a literary movement came into being post- 9/11, saying, "At a time when America seemed to be restoring the dualism of "us" and "them" and demanding immediate judgment of the Other," postmodernism was questioned. Ahn talks about how 9/11 was the main reason for the end of postmodernism, saying "The post-9/11 world demanded clarity," and a more "sincere" engagement with the world. She says, in their post-9/11 work, "DeLillo and Wallace envision a post-postmodern subject that cultivates what I call the new worldliness, which is defined by a more studied, deliberative, and sincere engagement with the world with the aim to see both the self and the world changed." While some like philosopher Slavoj Zizek, in his 2016 article with *The Guardian*, argue 9/11 pushed Americans deeper into a false reality, others like Wallace, according to Ahn, believe that this push may encourage change and a shared understanding through worldliness. One could argue that young Americans find worldliness in their shared viewing of screens, now that TV consumption is considered a genuine experience.

As far as New Sincerity goes, Wallace suggests that "TV has become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the passive unease and cynicism that requires [the American audience] to be commercially and psychologically viable at doses of several hours per day" ("E Unibus Pluram" 171). So there is some inherent cynicism that comes with watching so much TV. However, Wallace's point is that TV and cinema used to be about desire. A person

could watch TV after an exhausting day at work, and it could take him somewhere else. Theoretically, he can look at the protagonist and imagine himself in their place. I agree with this, but the concept of New Sincerity he examines embraces this. Our TV is often so “sincere” in that it captures “real” feelings and “real” experiences no matter how awkward or mundane. People watch so much TV that the characters become so familiar to them, and they “start to see [themselves] in them” (173). In an interview with Larry McCaffrey in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, Wallace says, “We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy’s impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with characters’ pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own” (22). He suggests that face-to-face interaction can be awkward, and sentimental issues of deep human suffering are often unacceptable to discuss in the average conversation. Fiction allows people to connect with each other in a creative way, without social barriers.

Characters are beloved to us, and they become real. One example of this is *The Office*, which is one of the most popular TV shows nowadays, yet the plot and characters are notably awkward. It is a “mockumentary” that follows the lives of office workers, in the mundane environment of a small paper company, which is against everything that Wallace describes TV as. He says people want to watch TV to distract themselves from work (“E Unibus Pluram” 164), but *The Office* is set at work. Perhaps viewers find the setting cathartic, as it allows them to relate to the characters, and establishes more familiarity. It embraces the boring aspects of life and isn’t afraid to be awkward. There is less illusion. The characters often “break the fourth wall” by looking straight into the camera because the premise of the show is that they are being interviewed for a documentary, so they know that they are on camera, and this promotes their

image as real people. The line between actor and character becomes thinner. There is sincerity in this. People know that the characters in beloved TV shows are not “real” in a sense, but they might as well be. Watching them makes individuals feel less lonely, and people like to see other people doing the same mundane and unpleasant things everyone must do in their everyday lives, on the screen. It makes an individual feel important, like the everyman’s life is being acknowledged. It reminds them that they don’t have to be alone. Sincerity is no longer personal, but a shared experience, and mass media is the perfect vehicle for this shared experience. The common thread of New Sincerity is representing, not necessarily *the* truth, but a kind of truth.

II: The Poetry of the New Sincerity

After establishing the origins and base definition of New Sincerity, we need to examine the contemporary poets associated with it and how sincerity as an ethos is seen in the poetry of the millennial generation. Like television, the Internet is an integral part of millennial art. Millennial digital age poetry, also known as “Alt-Lit,” emerges as the result of the New Sincerity movement. Contemporary poetry is influenced by internet culture and is often published online through social media platforms. Many criticize the simple language and self-indulgent subject matter, writing it off with, “Oh, anyone can publish poetry these days.” New Sincerity or Alt-Lit poetry relies on conveying personal struggle directly, and encourages emotional vulnerability between writer and reader. This chapter seeks to examine several different contemporary poets including Mira Gonzalez and David Berman, to analyze why or why not they fit into the New Sincerity movement. They write directly about their specific struggles and utilize raw, simplistic language and structure. This chapter will also discuss how New Sincerity is treated as a

movement in poetry by critics, and how New Sincerity poetry maintains a cultural foothold today.

A major critique of contemporary poetry is its seeming narcissism and self-indulgence. When “alternative literature” is searched, the first Google result is an article from Vice, “Alt-Lit Is for Boring, Infantile Narcissists,” criticizing “young writers who use the internet as their main method to promote their work,” and arguing that most alt-lit is not worth reading because it is self-indulgent, banal, and appears to lack the care required to have proper grammar. It is clear that some do not find this particular mode of sincerity to be well-executed, but banality is a key characteristic of New Sincerity, and that is part of what makes it a controversial movement in poetry.

Perhaps New Sincerity is potentially illusory and controversial, as well, because of the knowledge the reader has that a poem is never truly real. In an article, “The Rhetoric of the Rearguard? Sincerity in Innovative American Poetics,” Nicholas Manning mentions that “the occasional efforts to reintegrate sincerity into avant-garde poetic traditions—such as the problematic *New Sincerity* of the 1990s—met with limited success.” He goes on to explain that the New Sincerity movement that Wallace started is generally unsuccessful because poetry creates a translucent wall between the author and reader. He says that there is a childlike side of the reader who takes what they read at face value and cannot conceive of poetry as anything but “real,” but there is also the mature, critical side within the reader who knows that a reader cannot truly participate in a poet’s life by reading their poetry alone. He discusses sincerity as a criterion in poetry, saying,

“Poetic sincerity can never be understood, however, as that which provides an escape from language; depending on a readerly act of deliberate credulity, its potential value may only be glimpsed if we accept that sincerity is necessarily a construction of language, as imbricated in the problems of self and sense as any other verbal artifice.”

In these lines, he proposes a different definition of “sincerity” that has not been seen yet, assigned specifically to poetry. That is, “sincerity” cannot be proven, but can only be measured in the language the poet provides to construct a sense of self that the reader then must believe to be true. He uses the words “deliberate credulity,” implying that there is a conscious effort on the behalf of the reader to believe in the poet. Issues of the “self” in poetry and the use of first or second person narration contribute to the reader’s recognition of the poet’s sincerity.

Language of the self is prevalent in Alt-Lit poetry; because their poetry is published online, through social media, the poetry is generally specific to the poet or Internet “user.” There are endless opportunities for the poet to release their material through social media, and there are no barriers to entry like there are in publishing, which means there may be less investment involved in each poem, and more opportunity for the poet to write about what they want to and what they know. In their article, “#poetryisnotdead,” Kovalik and Curwood analyze Instagram poetry within the framework of literacy, highlighting that younger people can find artistic agency through multimodality. Social media like Instagram allows people of all ages to curate new poetry experiences with pictures and music. They did a study and found that “Finding one’s voice” and expressing oneself are the most important things to young Instagram users. In “Selfie-Help: The Multimodal Appeal of Instagram Poetry,” Paquet argues that there are benefits of having easily accessible poetry to reach new audiences because poets can use social capital

and a new type of Internet-based popularity to reach new poets. This also means that there is a new set of cliches (bad grammar, lack of punctuation, etc.), for poets to work with.

Social media is a useful tool in spreading contemporary poetry, but it could be argued that it decreases the overall value of poetry. The article, “Digital Storytelling and the ‘Problem’ of Sentimentality,” by McWilliam and Bickle seems to point out how excessive sentimentality in Internet literature is holding the genre back from being taken too seriously by many scholars. With a variety of critique towards *sentimentality* in mind, McWilliam and Bickle describe sentimentality as a mode that transcends genres, but they come to the conclusion that,

“...while digital storytelling has received considerable scholarly attention as participatory media..., its intersections with affect theory in general, and sentimentality in particular, are yet to receive scholarly attention, outside of educational research focused on the affective impact of the practice in the classroom.”

They describe *sentimentality* as “the excessive, self-indulgent and banal use of affect to manipulate audiences into ‘tender’ emotional responses,” which, right away, is critical of the sensationalism that may arise when people of all ages are encouraged to share their thoughts in an unfiltered digital world. The lack of barriers to entry for digital poetry makes the criteria used to measure the value of a poem more difficult to pin down. The new set of poetic rules and cliches that Paquet suggests complicates the scholarly treatment of digital poetry even further.

McWilliam and Bickle recall the term “Instapoetry”, which describes short, direct alternative poetry of the digital age. The part *insta-* implies that users can post pictures immediately after they take them, or post poetry immediately after they write it. They can achieve instant gratification for their observations and thoughts without ever speaking with or

even seeing another live human being face-to-face. They highlight the possibility that storytelling through social media should be celebrated as a new way through which “ordinary” people can communicate and share their feelings outside of the constraints of professional literature. This contributes to an even newer form of New Sincerity. They also explain that, recently, some women scholars have embraced sentimentality as a feminist concept, and strive to recover sentimentality’s reputation (as Wallace originally strove for) just as they strive to encourage female literature to be taken seriously.

Mira Gonzalez is a key figure in New Sincerity because she is one of the few women representatives of the genre. She is an American poet born in the 1990s, known for two published collections of poetry in the alternative literature genre: *i will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together*, and *Selected Tweets*. She is active on Twitter, and regularly posts humorous anecdotes. Her work calls into question the value of social media as an effective mode of contemporary poetry. In an interview with *Medium*, she explains that she finds value in social media, particularly Twitter, as an effective writing platform because “You really have to edit it down to the very essential words. It makes it so much easier to communicate thoughts you wouldn’t otherwise be able to communicate because it forces you to make it readable and make it something everybody can understand.” This universality in poetry, reducing barriers to entry that social media has provided everyone who has access to a computer to show their work to other people. Although, Gonzalez adds that getting work published in a book is a typical desire for poets, and there are still barriers to entry there because it is difficult to market oneself and get attention from publishing companies. She is an interesting case because most of her work is

posted on Twitter, but she still has published work and wants to be taken seriously as a professional poet.

In personal statements, Gonzalez justifies the purpose of her writing and it is undeniable that it is a poetic style that has staying power. Her style, even in her published work, is characteristic of a “tweet.” For instance, the collection *i will never be beautiful to make us beautiful together* starts with a poem called, “mortal kombat.” She says:

“I want to take a bath with all the lights off
the couple that lives next door are yelling at each other again
I feel happy that my neighbors have a relationship that is important
enough to yell about.”

She uses no punctuation and organizes her thoughts into brief packages of sentences. She mostly writes in the first-person perspective, which means we aren’t getting a full story, only how Gonzalez interprets things around her. However, the scene of sitting in a bath and hearing loud neighbors is so mundane, and speaks to a collective experience that many people have. Her poetry recollects of her life; however, in the article “Western Lit: SoCal Poet Mira Gonzalez’s Debut Collection Finds Success With Deep Simplicity” by Brian Blueskye, Gonzalez admits that she “will spend hours on one sentence sometimes, and if I feel that sentence isn’t expressing exactly what I want it to express, I will delete the sentence entirely. I think it takes a lot of precision and tedious work.” What may seem thrown together and raw to some is the result of hours of editing. She crafts her poetry meticulously, paying great attention to the construction of sentences and ideas, no matter how fragmented they appear. The fragmentation of ideas

throughout the collection contributes to the idea that the reader receives individual thoughts with each page and allows Gonzalez to communicate her thoughts in a small package of words.

This line of thinking already exists in modern poetry. For instance, in his poem, “Adam’s Curse”, Yeats says, ““A line will take us hours maybe;/Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought,/Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.”” The purpose of poetry is to convey a fleeting thought, says Yeats in this poem, and a single line may take hours to write. The poet’s meticulous work will always go unnoticed, but this is the beauty of poetry. Gonzalez captures this, reinvigorating Yeats’ legacy in modern poetry.

Gonzalez captures fleeting moments in her young life. One poem in *i will never be beautiful to make us beautiful together*, called “what I think about when I think about the zombie apocalypse,” contains only one line: “I would kill myself immediately.” In another poem, “haiku”, she writes, “crying and parking my car/outside a mexican restaurant/a man offered me drugs.” This could be taken as a fun take on the traditional haiku. The random setting of a parking lot, and the brash subject matter of drugs contrasts the appreciation of simple beauty found in other haikus. However, to some, these poems may seem like uninteresting nonsense, but they are truly illustrative of what she thinks about in her most average daily life, and some people might find this poem amusing, especially because it is published in a printed poetry collection. Gonzalez faces a constant risk of not being taken seriously by publication houses because she got started on Twitter, and she owes much of her success to social media. The fear of being pigeonholed into social media is valid for alternative poets like her, but she shows that contemporary poets can transcend mediums. Gonzalez does not believe that social media poetry is inferior to published poetry, and thinks Twitter will have to be taken seriously and integral to

our professional and artistic lives eventually, because it is increasingly being used as an artistic platform.

Twitter poetry captures certain feelings in a new setting. While controversial, it is just one new way to write poetry. The *OED* defines poetry as “Composition in verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; the art of such a composition.” There are alternative poets who write distinctively and expressively. While some new poetry may seem overly-emotional, self-indulgent, or even selfish and uninteresting, it is all illustrative of the poet’s feelings, which could capture the overall feelings of an era. Multimodal poetry should not be dismissed.

Contemporary poetry illustrates the struggles of young people today. In *i will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together*, Gonzalez writes about her struggle with substance abuse, rape culture, and mental health issues that many women experience. In “this friday I woke up at 2 pm” she writes, “at 12:30 am the guy I lost my virginity to told me he is having a baby/at 1:30 am I ate drugs in the bathroom about telling anyone/I don’t know how to maintain relationships”. She takes the reader on a journey through her day, which consists of drinking and taking drugs. She also interacts with an acquaintance, but her interactions are notably awkward, reminding her of her first lover. However, her memories of him are altered when she learns that he is having a baby. He is reaching a major life milestone; meanwhile, Gonzalez struggles with reaching such milestones, which she expresses in her drug abuse and lack of any prolonged relationship. It seems like she is struggling to be a “proper” adult, which is

an issue that many young people may share today. In another poem, “untitled 6”, she captures another moment, saying

“last night you told me/that everything in your life/is a shade of light green/I touched
your
leg under the table/you spilled wine on my shoe/the next morning we woke up/thirsty and
alone in our respective beds/we allowed tenuously beautiful memories/to momentarily
occupy our minds.”

The temporary “beauty” felt between Gonzalez and the unknown person in the poem plays on the fleeting nature of poetry; such moments of beauty are “momentary”. However, the shared moment seems nonsensical to the audience, because we do not know why the person thinks their life is “green” or why Gonzalez finds it beautiful. There is a sense of disconnect in this moment because of her lack of description, but this may serve to reflect her desperation for meaningful relationships. This concept is furthered when she shares that the pair did not stay together that night, but went their separate ways. She is clearly wistful or “thirsty” for a meaningful connection, and finds it, but only momentarily. The beauty of the moment is “tenuous” and is not entirely clear to Gonzalez. She expresses detachment from the people around her, which seems to express one of the problems of contemporary culture. With technology, there seems to be a problem with young people maintaining meaningful relationships.

Sincerity establishes itself in Gonzalez’s work as a collective appreciation of the mundane, personal aspects of life to combat the lack of meaningful relationships caused by social media. Interestingly, Gonzalez is adamantly opposed to the New Sincerity movement, and is particularly uninterested in David Foster Wallace. She admits she gave up on reading Infinite

Jest, saying she didn't like reading the pain of a "privileged" white man (Burnett 2018). This is indicative of a certain privilege in New Sincerity. However, it is important that Gonzalez's work is celebrated in the Sincerity movement because women poets represent an interiority and sincerity in women that has not quite been seen in poetry up until this point. Readers are likely to find comfort in the knowledge that they are not alone in their experiences, and most importantly, that they are allowed to talk about them. On Twitter, Gonzalez said, "we need a disney princess who ignores the fact that she has a UTI until it becomes an unmanageable hell and ends up in the hospital with a kidney infection," (2018) calling for a representation of women that is different than the purity and idealization seen in Disney princesses. New Sincerity poetry opens up a space for women to talk about how they feel, no matter how uncomfortable and private their personal matters are. Women's health is generally a private thing, but Gonzalez makes it visible with her transparency.

David Berman is another poet associated with the New Sincerity movement and shares with Gonzalez and Kaur the addition of multimodality. He is known for his work with the bands The Silver Jews, and Purple Mountains, although he is also a published poet, and wrote the poetry collection, *Actual Air*. In the most popular poem in the collection, "Snow," he creates intimate snapshots of him and his brother. One thing that contributes to its status as New Sincerity is the language. It is in first-person, and the setting is relatively banal. "Why he asked. Why did he shoot them./I didn't know where I was going with this./They were on his property, I said." The story is told from his point of view, alone, but some conventions signify that he put thought into interacting with the reader. For instance, there are gaps of various lengths in

between stanzas that may indicate the separation of individual thoughts, or that tell the reader to pause for a certain amount of time, like in the lines:

“He asked who had shot them and I said a farmer.

Then we were on the roof of the lake.

The ice looked like a photograph of water.”

The large gap between lines allow the reader to place themselves in the mind of Berman, seeing each of his individual thoughts. First, he is talking to his brother, and then he moves to a specific, memorable image of the ice looking like a photograph of water. In the poem he describes walking with his brother in a snowy field, seeing snow angels, his brother asking what they are, and the narrator explaining that “troop of angels had been shot and dissolved when they hit the ground.” Berman disrupts the linear narrative to describe speaking to a neighbor at a different time, then abruptly changes back to his brother’s questioning in the last line. There is a long paragraph break before he ends the poem with, “But why were they on his property, he asked.” The reader’s eye has no choice but to linger on this single sentence. His poetry may lack proper punctuation (i.e. lack of quotation marks when quoting his brother), but like Gonzalez, this is an artistic choice by the poet. New Sincerity poetry, often criticized for its self-indulgence, is likely more of a celebration of simplicity meant to highlight personal, shared experiences.

Berman’s work in music is an example of this because, with instruments and a new setting to create art in, he has the opportunity to reach more people and cloak his poetry in a

medium that is accessible and easy to consume. In the 2019 song, “All My Happiness Is Gone,” which he wrote and performed with his band Purple Mountains, Berman looks back on his life and the “darkness” and “stressing” that he feels as his life goes on. The acoustic guitar and tambourine ring cheerfully and the chorus features an upbeat drum beat, but Berman’s lyrics illustrate a deep depression and sense that Berman has given up on being happy. This is shown in the chorus and title, “All my happiness is gone,” as well as the line “And I confess I’m barely hanging on.” He says, “Friends are warmer than gold when you’re old/And keeping them is harder than you might suppose/Lately, I tend to make strangers wherever I go/Some of them were once people I was happy to know” (1-4). In these lines, he illustrates the sense of alienation that comes with getting “old” or perhaps with depression in general. This feeling of loneliness in the 21st century parallels the feelings Gonzalez expresses in “this friday I woke up at 2 pm”. Both poets capture fleeting emotional moments in their work, but the subject matter of Berman’s later poetry expresses an emptiness that is rare in modern poetry. He is no longer capturing moments of simple beauty like in his earlier work, but expressing his complete lack of interest in life. He says that he was once happy to know people, which mirrors how he once appreciated simple beauty, but now he confesses he can no longer do even that. The lyrics further reflect this because, rather than focusing on specific moments and poetic style like he does in *Actual Air*, in “All My Happiness is Gone” he can only focus on his general loneliness and lack of interest. This song became one of Berman’s top hits, but his listeners may or may not have been surprised at the news that he committed suicide just three months after the song was released.

After hearing of Berman’s suicide, “All My Happiness Is Gone” reads like a suicide note, and a declaration of the end of his life that was to come. His suicide speaks to an apparent

pattern; first David Foster Wallace, and now David Berman. While these are the only two artists associated with New Sincerity who have committed suicide I know of, it raises a particular issue within the movement. Part of New Sincerity is being sincere about one's sadness. It is clear that all New Sincerity artists write about being sad and struggling to simply carry on with life, so it is no surprise when an artist in the scene does take their life. The suicide of a beloved artist is difficult for fans to face because, although the reader engaged with the person's work intimately, no one thinks of the author as a mortal, and there is nothing that they can do to help their death. This is also one of the burdens that the reader must face, knowing that the author/poet they read is indeed a real person. Suicide demonstrates, tragically, that the difficult feelings these artists write about are incredibly real and could make their work more emotionally difficult to engage with. Unfortunately, the author's suicide potentially "proves" the sincere quality of their work.

The dark sincerity that these contemporary poets provide contributes to an understanding of the current world as an unkind, hostile place-- even in the United States, where people of all classes are afforded the privilege of posting their most sentimental thoughts to anyone who will listen through social media. Poetry that is sincere is cathartic to troubled individuals, and they may use it to cope with their negative feelings; readers use poetry as a guide and inspiration in their own lives. However, the suicidal tendencies of troubled poets demonstrate that even the most privileged, well-educated individuals cannot survive the hyper-violence and consumption of today. The New Sincerity movement is a reaction to the American culture of hostility.

III: New Sincerity Politics and Film

With the ubiquity of technology comes new digital poetry, but also inevitable frustration at the political and cultural landscape that presents itself at one's fingertips. Politics have

effectively merged with creative social media platforms like Twitter; the key figure in this phenomenon is President Donald Trump, who has co-opted Twitter into a place of politically-driven aggression. Contemporary social media is now an overwhelming mixed-bag of poetry, politics, and pop culture. Social media also lends itself to corporations, which pervade the informal setting of social media and capitalize on the perceived sincerity of social media reactions. In this strange, hostile landscape of American capitalism and politics, there emerges a combative rhetoric of sincerity, kindness, and nostalgia in American media, as well as film. That sort of rhetoric lends itself to the definition of New Sincerity being developed in this paper. This section addresses key developments in New Sincerity of the digital era, like popular films from the director Wes Anderson, as well as a revival of figures who are celebrated for their kindness and sincerity, like Fred Rogers (as seen in the recent Fred Rogers biopic, *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* [2019]). The popularity of such a revival indicates that the American audience craves sincerity, possibly as a reaction to cultural cynicism. This lends itself to the ethos of New Sincerity, in a new wave of digital New Sincerity, which mirrors the 1990's New Sincerity as a reaction to postmodern cynicism.

The current state of media is highly affective, breeding strong negative emotional reactions and altering peoples' perception of reality. Studies show that the hostile nature of American media in the 21st century is connected to high levels of emotional reaction, and increased levels of anger and sadness. In "Angry, frustrated, and overwhelmed: The emotional experience of consuming news about President Trump," Maria Celeste Wagner and Pablo J. Boczkowski contribute their own survey of Americans' reaction to the news, to provide an explanation of the role of emotion in news consumption--particularly political news-- from the

personal perspective of 71 participants (diverse in terms of race, age, gender, education, etc.) in the greater Chicago, Miami, and Philadelphia areas. One thing that many of the participants noted was that Trump has created a front on American media, co-opting social media and political news. The majority of participants also noted a feeling of anger when consuming such media, and that the constancy of the news led to feelings of being overwhelmed, and overall negative outlook on the state of world. Participants on both sides of the political spectrum express frustration with the constant bombardment of “stupid” news about President Trump by the media. There is a risk of becoming addicted to consuming news media based on the resulting emotional response. News consumption has become personal to individuals who are so emotionally impacted that they feel they cannot look away. Rather than staying impartial and fact-based, the news has become more focused on satisfying the individual consumer’s emotional needs. When the news is made to satiate the audience, reality becomes less clear.

Social media has been co-opted into a platform more overwhelming than originally intended. “Social media” is not necessarily always interchangeable with “the news,” but many people admit to getting their news off of social media sites, which Wagner and Boczkowski (2019) believe is especially straining emotionally because social media is central to the individual, and to interpersonal relations between friends. Platforms like Twitter provide the opportunity for quick individual expression and quick communication, but they have also moved into the political sphere. The creator of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, explains how he was inspired by the word “twitter”: 'a short burst of inconsequential information,' for his social networking project, saying, “that’s exactly what the product was” (2009). Since the site’s inception in 2006, it has grown to have hundreds of millions of users, and it has also grown from its origins as a

network of “inconsequential information.” President Trump is notorious for using Twitter as an outlet for his politics.

He has turned something that was originally supposed to be fun and inconsequential into a political mouthpiece. People are forced to take his statements seriously because “presidential statement” and “inconsequential” do not go together; people typically want someone who is trustworthy and responsible to be their leader. So, Trump has co-opted Twitter as consequential. In “Trump on Twitter: How a Medium Designed for Democracy Became an Authoritarian’s Mouthpiece,” Fred Turner goes even further to say that social media is meant to be a completely democratic realm in which “The strangleholds of corporate media centralization and state censorship would finally be broken and a new, benevolent era of free expression would emerge.” (143) Corporations like Wendy’s, for instance, had already taken hold of Twitter with its witty Twitter posts, making advertisements integral to the social media experience, far prior to the Trump administration. This democratic vision of social media as a safe space for individuals free from the reach of capitalistic and authoritarian rule is not the reality, because it has become a networking platform for *everyone*-- including politicians. During his presidency, Trump has centralized communication in social media, which, according to Turner, gives him a new-found power through personal expression. Personal expression through social media is no longer just an escape from the rule of “the real world,” but an asset to corrupted political rule.

The virtual realm and real-world politics meet to create a paradoxical political performance. This is best illustrated in Trump’s spectacular failures as a businessman, which he has attempted to hide by cultivating his image as a successful businessman through reality television. He fell into hard times in the 1990s, going into millions of dollars of debt and

required assistance from his family; meanwhile, he painted himself and his business ventures as the pinnacle of success and luxury. His true net worth is unknown, but a 2019 New York Times article revealed that in a single decade from 1989-1999 he lost an estimated 1.17 billion dollars in various failed business ventures-- the greatest loss of any taxpayer during that period, according to the IRS. He was truly the “biggest loser”, and the worst businessman, and one would never know based on the luxurious, successful lifestyle he shows on television. He has been accused of lobbying to media organizations to inflate his perceived valuation, as well, in a 2016 *Fortune* piece by Shawn Tully. His identity relies far more on the media, and reality TV-type “reality,” than on capital-R Reality.

Trump’s falsity has altered Americans’ perception of reality. Jeet Heer describes Trump as “America’s First Postmodern President,” harkening back to the philosopher Jean Baudrillard who wrote in *The Perfect Crime*, “Our culture of meaning is collapsing beneath our excess of meaning, the culture of reality collapsing beneath the excess of reality, the information culture collapsing beneath the excess of information—the sign and reality sharing a single shroud.” So much emphasis is placed on “being real” and creating signs in our culture that are “real” and achievable for Americans, that true reality becomes unrecognizable. This is exacerbated by reality television, which has created a new language of signs. Trump has adopted various signs (the toupee hairstyle, tanned skin, pearly whites, model wife) to cultivate a specific image that is associated with value, when in reality, the signs he displays only mimic a simulated reality.

Trump and his reality TV empire is a simulacrum, a term Baudrillard uses to describe a copy or representation of something that doesn’t exist to begin with. There is nothing about a toupee, glistening white teeth, or tan skin that inherently represents a successful businessman;

Trump has built this image himself. Again, this representation is made empty when learning of his failures as a business, as well. He has created a new reality in which he is all of these things: rich and powerful. This reality has bled into the real world, in a new hyperreality, which is the consciousness' inability to differentiate physical reality from simulated reality, particularly in technology-based society. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard says, "Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us—a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hype" (6-7). Baudrillard suggests that a simulation is a strategy used to help consumers achieve desire by constructing a false reality that is meant to be consumed as real. This may be seen in advertisements that promote a specific lifestyle for the consumer, as well as in Trump's rhetoric.

Furthermore, in his rhetoric, Trump demonstrates that politics nowadays is not about truth, but performance. Heer recalls that Trump uses the rhetoric of nostalgia, of returning to a simpler time, of "Making America Great Again," inspiring images of utopia, yet his lifestyle is that of exploitative late-stage capitalism. Trump aligns himself so closely with luxury lifestyles, exemplified in his company's lavish, golden real estate towers, golf courses, etc., yet campaigned in a down-to-earth, "tell it like it is" attitude, so as to target working-class republicans. The idea that his image relies on both promoting the accrual of absurd amounts of wealth, and being a champion for the working class is paradoxical and ironic. This paradox only seems to heighten the disparity between the lower and upper classes in America. He targets blue-collar sensibilities, yet is upper class, carrying out the desires of his blue-collar audience. By promoting a specific lifestyle, not only does he send the message that even the average-Joe has social mobility, but he

also reminds them that they *want* a high-class lifestyle. In reality, this lifestyle is unattainable for most Americans, so his rhetoric, in reality, serves to exploit vulnerable working-class Americans for votes. By implying that anyone in America can achieve luxury, Trump paints a false picture of American economics, rewriting the current state of society. Americans may be subdued in their political ideology because no one knows what is true.

Trump brings the two sides of the financial spectrum into one campaign and meanwhile bridges the other ironic divide between the decentralized realm of the internet, and political reality. In Heer's words, "The entire spectacle shows we're living in a Baudrillardian funhouse where the firm ground of reality has slipped away." Because social media is (as described in Chapter 2 of this essay) a place for emotional sentimentality and sincerity, Trump's outbursts on Twitter could naturally be taken as a sincere representation of himself. This is "one of the ways he claims the right to our attention and, with it, our political support." (Heer 148) He tweets frequently and intimately, sharing his seemingly unfiltered thoughts about politics, popular culture, and random mundane musings. Many of his tweets are offensive or critical of others. For instance, in 2019, according to a Newsweek report of Trump's tweets,

"Trump also used a meme to attack possible 2020 rival Joe Biden, using a doctored version

of a Nickelback's music video for the song 'Photograph.' In the doctored clip, singer Chad

Kroeger holds up a photo of Biden and his son Hunter—who Trump and his allies accuse of corruption in Ukraine while Biden was vice president."

This example shows that Trump uses Twitter to make political moves, and posts content that may be familiar to the Twitter audience in order to build associations of relatability. He heightens his credibility with a rhetoric of sincerity which manipulates the voters in his favor. While Trump creates a performance of sincerity, in reality, he is proven to be insincere, lying for his own benefit. This is shown in the way he manipulates his perceived valuation, and even his most recent claims about how the coronavirus. When asked whether he thought the coronavirus would spread to the U.S., he said, “Well, I don’t think it’s inevitable. It probably will. It possibly will. It could be at a very small level or it could be at a larger level. Whatever happens, we’re totally prepared. We have the best people in the world” (*The White House*, 2020). Later, the coronavirus did spread to the U.S., killed thousands, and left millions unemployed due to the ensuing business shutdowns. Such misinformed claims, coming from a person who has a reputation for being “genuine”, are dangerous. This shows the profound consequences of President Trump’s disingenuity. He also presents an inversion in the relationship between sincerity and morality discussed earlier in regards to Wallace. For Trump, sincerity means being his true, immoral self, yet this does not delegitimize his popularity. His many followers seem to admire his honest corruption, and prefer transparency in a candidate, which is contrasted with his competitor, Hillary Clinton, who was slammed by the press for the 2016 email scandal of her using a private email server for public communications. Trump represents a complex shift in perceptions of sincerity, which says that, at least in politics, voters would at least prefer their candidates to be sincerely corrupt.

With this new social media-oriented campaign style, contemporary partisan politicians seem to take advantage of individuality to gain votes. This tactic is mirrored in any form of

marketing. Contemporary advertisements often rely upon cultivating an individual identity for the consumer. In his article, Stephen Dunne uses the term “murketing” to describe this tactic, and connects it to the New Sincerity movement. Murketing is a marketing tactic coined by the economist, Philip Mirowski, which is meant to appeal to people (even people who do not want to be marketed to), by offering an alternative story that tries to convince viewers that they are not being marketed to. Selling directly is not the main objective, but stealthy publicity.

Again--politicians, companies, and even writers like David Foster Wallace are in the position to sell someone *something* when there is a stripped-down, “no-nonsense” connection between the seller and buyer. Dunne implies that relationships like “writer and reader” can be made synonymous with “seller and buyer.” “Candidate and voter” may be adapted this way, as well. Dunne explains how Wallace’s writing tactics like “breaking the fourth wall,” which were explained in Chapter 1 of this essay, are comparable to marketing tactics. For example, the Wendy’s company is notorious for posting witty critiques of other fast food companies on Twitter. In 2018, after a Twitter user tweeted them, “Hey @Wendys, why did the Big Mac cross the road?”, Wendy’s responded with, “Because that's where the nearest trashcan was.” Wendy’s blends in with other Twitter users with their jokes, and provides an interactive experience with consumers through Twitter, making their posts seem unrelated to direct marketing, and although they are not selling their product to Twitter users directly, they are planting a seed. Their sincere, funny, “non-corporate” image increases their credibility to consumers in a subtle way, making themselves approachable to internet consumers who are wary of overt marketing tactics like commercials.

The constant bombardment of pandering advertisements and the negativity of consuming news media has led to an insurgence of media that promotes kindness, cooperation, and the appreciation of simple beauty. This can be seen in recent movies like *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* (2019), based on the life of Mr. Rogers, a childhood icon of kindness. This is the most overt example of kindness and sincerity being represented in a mainstream film that is not marketed as a children's film. The film shows a cynical journalist's quest to uncover the "truth" behind Fred Rogers' (played by Tom Hanks) kind image, but all the journalist finds is a genuinely nice human being and his life changed by Rogers' caring nature. This is the story of a cynic-turned-believer. For example, at one point in the film, the journalist Vogel opens up to Rogers about feeling "broken," to which Rogers responds reassuringly, "I don't think you are broken." This speaks directly to anyone in the audience who has low-self worth.

This film seems to target the contemporary audience's lack of faith in public figures. There is another scene when Rogers comes to Vogel's house to visit with Vogel's ailing father, breaking down the barrier between his television persona and real-life persona. He helps comfort the family, offering some advice on how to cope with the father's death. This act proves that he is just as kind as his on-screen persona, and is willing to help anyone he meets. Lloyd's brother-in-law, Todd, asks, "Mr. Rogers, is it true you're a sharpshooter? A navy seal?". Here the film acknowledges that people do not believe that there is someone as genuinely nice and harmless as Mr. Rogers. In this American culture where the media is so manipulative, and it seems like everyone is selling something, young adult audiences need a champion of sincerity. Rogers is a trustworthy figure who directly reassures the audience, unconditionally. Reviving Mr. Rogers, whose show originally aired about the time current adults were children, offers a

nostalgia factor. Furthermore, Tom Hanks is a similar universally-admired figure. This attempt to build trust in cynical adults shows a reaction to other media that breeds negativity. The American audience can only hope that the *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* biopic is accurate and that there are trustworthy figures who make a living by genuinely caring for other people, the antithesis to President Trump.

Mister Rogers is a pioneer for sincerity in television with his work, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.” In the book *Mister Rogers and Philosophy*, Mohr describes the rarely-found qualities that Rogers conducted himself in, saying that Rogers “opens himself up to the world and sees it as it really is.” He recognizes that people present themselves with illusion and acknowledges this, saying, “if it is make-believe, let it be make-believe” (pg. 14). He recognizes the presence of irreality in other people and achieves sincerity by simply accepting how things are. He sees the negativity, yet loves humans regardless of this. Mohr explains that Rogers also displays sincerity because his show had somewhat low production value; for example, he dresses casually in a sweater, used simple, easily accessible props, and primarily used one set. Mr. Rogers was an unlikely star, but the show was successful because what he said was “important” (pg. 16). Sincerity is cultivated by subverting typical signs that are expected in the genre the creator operates in and getting to the core of human matters. Before Rogers’ success, one would not expect to find an older gentleman on camera, acting as himself rather than any character. Rogers’ words speak to the need for sincere entertainment today; young people like watching someone they can trust and who provides a good example of human behavior. Rogers always ended his episodes by saying to his viewers,

"You always make each day a special day. You know how: By just being you/yourself.

There's only one person in the whole world that's like you, and that's you. And people can like you just/exactly the way you are. I'll be back next time. Bye-bye!"

He targets children, but by repeating these words, he implants a message within his viewers that presumably stays with them throughout their lives. He provides an example of positivity that has become a legacy of true humanity. There is a sense of reliability in his message that reminds people over time that sincerity, positive self-image, and the simplicity of existence are virtues of humanity. It is rare that films that celebrate these virtues appear in mainstream cinema.

One director associated with sincerity whose movies were once independent, but are now high-profile, is Wes Anderson. His film "The Royal Tenenbaums" (2001) provides examples of sentimental characters and attention to aesthetic detail that is rarely seen in mainstream film. In "Wes Anderson: a 'smart' director of the new sincerity?," Buckland notes that Anderson directs his characters to act in a flat, disengaged way, which really acts to reveal an emotional vulnerability underneath. Anderson tells the story of the Royal Tenenbaum family, all of the children of which have unlikely backstories as former child geniuses, which builds up to various mental breakdowns and suicide attempts over the course of the film. The daughter, Margot (played by Gwyneth Paltrow), for instance, appears to be detached and absurdly unemotional throughout the film, speaking in a monotone voice and rarely smiling. This makes the reveal of her love for her adopted brother, Richie (played by Luke Wilson) even more emotional by contrast. The film culminates in Richie's suicide attempt at the climax of the film, which is sharply contrasted with the "quirky" development of his character, which consists of montages of his life as a tennis prodigy, prior to this scene.

The characters seem detached and flatly “character-like” up until this point, particularly due to their cartoonish costume design, showing that sincerity and the appearance of detachment may go hand-in-hand. In “Wes Anderson, tone and the quirky sensibility,” MacDowell also describes that Anderson uses “quirky” tone and “silly” characters to highlight an aspect of emotional seriousness. Owen Wilson’s character, Eli, is the most “quirky”, dressing in a cartoonish cowboy outfit. Chas (played by Ben Stiller) has an iconic look, as well, with his red tracksuit and afro. Richie’s headband and sunglasses, and Margot’s thick black eyeliner and fur coat are iconic. It is unexpected for characters in live-action films to dress so cartoonishly and stereotypical to their character; the adult themes involved in this film are unexpected, but enhanced by this. This is further illustrated in the *Royal Tenenbaums* with the emotional moments that Margot and Richie share together in a tiny yellow pup tent that Margot has had since childhood. It is a child’s tent, so the image of two oversized adults sitting in it is absurd, but also enhances the effect of sentimental childhood nostalgia.

Anderson uses a combination of irony and sincerity; the motion between the two has a profound effect. *The Royal Tenenbaums* explores “important” issues like suicide, dysfunctional families, and loss of innocence, but is a fast-paced, whimsical, black comedy, making the topics at hand more enjoyable to consume and more accessible to mainstream audiences. There are bright colors and costumes, which contribute to a child-like delight. However, Anderson’s films have these cynical elements, which give way to an underlying sentimentality. *The Royal Tenenbaums* is critically acclaimed, likely because it tackles core humanity. It recognizes that people are cynical, but that beneath it lies sincere emotion. The irony and dark humor present in his films work to soothe the audience of any mistrust that they may have of something that seems

too wholesome, but it cloaks an underlying sincerity that is believable. This shows that New Sincerity is likely a reestablishment of irony, combined with underlying sincerity, to create a believable, refreshingly warm mode.

The difference in production between “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood” and Wes Anderson’s films shows that sincerity in entertainment is relative. Anderson’s obsession with symmetry, color, and overall precise world-building makes his films no less sincere than Rogers’ work, which focuses less on production. If the audience finds emotional value in either person’s work, and their work represents a true human feeling in a sincere way, created for the benefit of the audience, to better humanity, then both are valid in the New Sincerity genre. Rogers cares for his audience with kind words, and Anderson shows care through meticulous attention to detail that delights the human eye.

Anderson takes time with his characters, and is not afraid to show vulnerability with his seemingly-dark, detached characters. All of the characters convine at the news that their patriarch, Royal Tenenbaum, has stomach cancer, which is actually a scheme to bring the family together. It results in various heartfelt moments. Chas has a confrontational moment with his father, Royal, in front of Chas’ late wife’s gravestone, which reveals the emotional impact he carries as a result of her death. Royal takes Chas’ twin sons on an adventure to give them an escape from Chas’ overbearing nature which cloaks the heartbreak that he feels in his fractured family. Royal and his estranged and soon to be ex-wife, the matriarch of the family, Etheline, share pleasant moments together, as well, signifying an end to their animosity. While the family’s reunion is a ruse, it really does bring the family together and brings their deepest emotions to light. There is a clear emotional sentimentality to be found in *Royal Tenenbaums*.

However, by giving them obvious character archetypes, he keeps them nestled within the framework of the fictional film-- they do not make any promise of “being real.” There are various montages depicting their unlikely histories. Margot was a child playwright prodigy who was married multiple times in Africa and Papua New Guinea. Chas was a child business tycoon. Richie was a tennis prodigy before embarking on a cruise around Africa, and so on. Their lives as child geniuses are so absurd and unlikely that the audience never considers them real. We know that Gwyneth Paltrow is not actually Margot, Luke Wilson is not actually Richie, Owen Wilson is not actually Eli, and so on. No one exists like them in real life. *Royal Tenenbaums* is the opposite of hyperreal.

Trump uses his “sincerity” for a specific political purpose, but Anderson uses sincerity to tell a fictional story. There are less consequences involved in Anderson’s storytelling, and while Anderson could be in a position to sell a specific idea, he doesn’t. Anderson does not make any promises to his audience, nor have any underlying political agenda. His work is strictly cinematic, which creates a clear boundary between screen and reality. The detailed world that he creates in the *Royal Tenenbaums* with a specific color palette, symmetry, and enhanced cinematography. Even something as subtle as the film’s aspect ratio indicates that this is a framed picture, a new world that exists purely on the screen. This is the key difference between the hyperreal “sincerity” of someone like Trump, and “New Sincerity” as shown in film. Trump is a media spectacle, a character, but is also a real human who happens to have great political power. Trump creates such anxiety because he bridges the gap between fantasy and reality. His opinions on social media are aggressive, absurd, and entertaining, but threaten to bleed into real

life at all times. Furthermore, Anderson's films are cynical and sarcastic on the outside, and genuine on the inside, while Trump's rhetoric is the opposite.

New Sincere television and film directors now face the glaring risk of appearing as if their goal is to exploit consumers' sentimentality for the sole purpose of making money. New Sincerity art represents the counterculture contemporary ethos of sincerity, yet its presence in the mainstream, unfortunately, faces accusations of commodifying human values. In 2019, the skincare brand "Nivea" launched a marketing campaign called "Rethink Soft," with commercials that promote "softness" as a virtue. Their webpage states, "NIVEA is on a mission to challenge this negative perception of 'being too soft' because soft, both emotional and physical, is what unites us all," which subtly diverges from the purpose of their skincare product to address this cultural issue of being ashamed of sentimentality. The page also contains video stories of people showing acts of kindness, unrelated to skincare. Nivea is an unexpected champion for New Sincerity, but effectively merges sincerity as "softness" into their marketing campaign. Like Mr. Rogers, Nivea promotes positive values, but at the same time, being a company, they run the risk of commodifying human values to sell their product. Theoretically, this is another example of "marketing"; the "softness" campaign is unrelated to the product, which makes the marketing appear less deliberate. That being said, this is a skeptical outlook of the New Sincerity, and likely not the way New Sincerity would read itself. Overall, New Sincerity appears as a way of interpreting cultural objects, and it would seem that contemporary culture leans towards sincere values.

The fact that companies use sincerity as a marketing tactic, and promote positive values demonstrates that they are mimicking values that appeal to the current audience. The prevalence

of sincerity in the media and art in the 21st century shows that sincerity is a vital aspect of contemporary culture, which points out issues of irreality and negativity as seen in existing news and social media. Politicians like Trump utilize the rhetoric of sincerity in the media to market themselves, but also promote violence and negativity. Whereas, there are figures like Anderson and Rogers who promote the New Sincerity ethos, in an attempt to celebrate both sincerity and empathy, as a reaction to the betrayal of honest human virtues.

Conclusion

New Sincerity has been an emergent ethos since David Foster Wallace defined it in the 1990s, but it has evolved since its origins in American literature and appears in waves as technology alters the way people write poetry and otherwise communicate.

Some consider New Sincerity our age's ethos. Some literary writers like Manning with his "Rhetoric of the Rearguard?" article regard the New Sincerity movement "to be met with limited success" because of its inherently paradoxical nature. He says, "... poetic sincerity never ceases to form and perform a wilfully utopian, ideational and impossible gesture: that of the escape from language, all the while demonstrating that such an escape is fundamentally unattainable," and "will now and always remain a rhetorical and enunciative artifice". "True" poetic sincerity may be unattainable because it is futile to unify the ideal self, matching what one says to what one really means, within the realm of language; every poem creates its own language of signs, which means that an "escape from language" is not possible. That is not to say that everything a poet says is untrue, but the reader must know that sincerity does not equal "capital-R reality" and a poet cannot make any promises.

That being said, the “riskiness” and “rebellion” that Wallace spoke of is achievable, and marks contemporary poetry. The short, informal poetry of Alt-Lit or Instapoetry is controversial and sometimes regarded as thoughtless and boring, or too easily accessible to be considered quality poetry, but poets like Mira Gonzalez and David Berman prove that multimodal contemporary poetry has poetic value because they poetically capture banal moments of humanity, which has become a major virtue of contemporary culture. Who falls into the genre of New Sincerity is heavily debated. Some “New Sincerity” writers don’t even consider themselves affiliated with the genre at all, specifically Gonzalez. She points out the issue that the genre is male-centric, and that she is not interested in the lives of privileged men like Wallace. New Sincerity is clearly fragmented as a movement, though it is undeniable that Twitter poetry and the acceptance of “Alt-lit” poetry has offered a creative outlet for many women.

There is a certain level of privilege that comes with technology, and it can be shocking when contemporary poets express such dark themes, sometimes to the point of committing suicide. Though the movement may be controversial for this reason, it shows that even the most privileged cannot survive the affective quality of American culture today.

American news as seen in the media is proven to be negatively affective for consumers, heightening feelings of frustration, particularly in the way political figures manipulate the news. This is best seen in the way corporations target consumers through social media, and President Trump has co opted social media into a hyperreal political platform. Both take on an image of sincerity for monetary gain, taking advantage of Americans through their trust in social media as a place for sincere, informal interactions. Sincerity has become, not just a virtue of literature, but

a human virtue that can be monetized. At the same time, President Trump's misinformation also demonstrates the profound reinterpretation of sincerity in American politics.

There has been a resurgence of media celebrating "true" humanity, like the recent Mr. Rogers biopic, as well as the popular Wes Anderson movies. They seek to restore Americans' faith in public figures, by reassuring them that there is still beauty, kindness, and trust to be found in American media. Wallace spoke of New Sincerity as a reaction to cynicism, and these beloved films do just that-- attempt to soothe cynicism.

The boundaries of the original New Sincerity "movement" are unclear, but sincerity as a virtue remains apparent in our culture today, seen in literature, poetry, music, film, and even advertisements. Associated with the "millennial" era, New Sincerity is a reaction to postmodern and digital age cynicism, though the New Sincerity concept of strong reader-writer, or corporation-consumer, relationship allows for the potential to harness human vulnerability for capital gain. Though New Sincerity has evolved from what David Foster Wallace intended, what still remains is young peoples' attempts to find meaning in the chaotic, hyperreal world of social media. New Sincerity remains as an interpretive mode for the apparent sincere qualities of contemporary culture.

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