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Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age's Ethos

JONATHAN D. FITZGERALD | NOV 20 2012, 11:21 AM ET

A recent hipster-hating New York Times column got this pop-cultural moment exactly backwards.

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Cultural critics love hypothesizing about hipsters. And certainly hipsters make for useful lab rats if you're interested in the culture of young, gentrifying, trendy, affluent, and white college graduates. But it's easy to let this hypothesizing go too far, and you get into trouble when you try to charge hipsters with representing the "ethos of our age." They're just kids making their way from young adulthood to the rest of their lives.

Yet that's exactly what Princeton professor Christy Wampole does in her recent *New York Times* op-ed, titled "How to Live Without Irony." She tells us, with disconcerting certitude, that irony is the ethos of our era, and she knows because, I mean, just look at those hipsters with their ironic mustaches, record players, and trombones, right?

If hipsters aren't convincing enough, Wampole offers a second proof that we live in the "age of Deep Irony": advertisements. Not a specific advertisement, mind you, but, she writes, "an ad that calls itself an ad, makes fun of its own format, and attempts to lure its target market to laugh at and with it." You know, that one. That's irony, she says, and because she's raised the specter of an unidentified advertisement, along with the unidentified hipsters, we're supposed to believe that the overwhelming ethos of our time is irony.

But you can't determine the ethos of an entire age by looking at a sub-sub-sub-sub-culture. Rather,

Across pop culture, it's

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become un-ironically cool to care about spirituality, family, neighbors, the environment, and the country.

the "New Sincerity."

If that phrase sounds familiar, it may be because Professor Wampole brings it up toward the end of her essay as an example of an attempt to banish irony. She notes that the New Sincerity has been around since the 1980s, and is a response to "postmodern cynicism, detachment and meta-referentiality." She's right about that, and the examples she cites—David Foster Wallace, Wes Anderson, and Cat Power—are right too. But the New Sincerity failed, she tells us. She wants us to take her word for this, even though each of her examples still wield a great deal of cultural influence and continue to model the New Sincerity even, in the case of Wallace, posthumously.

Now, I'm not one of those "irony is dead" people (otherwise I wouldn't be having so much fun with irony here), and I really don't like the descriptor "post-ironic," which came to popularity in the wake of September 11, 2001. Rather, I like how Jesse Thorn, host of the PRI show *Bullseye* and an early promoter of the New Sincerity, describes the ethos as a joining of irony and sincerity. He [says](#) it better: "Irony and sincerity combined like Voltron, to form a new movement of astonishing power." Irony is not dead—it's (ahem) a useful rhetorical tool—but it's certainly not the ethos of our age.

Looking back all the way to the 1950s and tracking the trajectory of pop culture, I do see an over-emphasis on irony for sure, but early in the aughts I see a change. Maybe it was September 11, and maybe it was that combined with the pendulum swing of time, but whatever the case, around 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. And pollsters find this same trend in the up-and-coming generation from which Wampole culls her hipsters, Millennials. 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. For those in Generation X, family was still important, but the second priority was not spirituality—it was making a lot of money. Clearly, a change has been underway.

Wampole agrees that there's been a shift, but she sees it in reverse. She thinks that for Millennials, "Irony is the primary mode with which daily life is dealt." In her telling, the '90s were the height of sincerity; looking back, she writes, the '90s "now seems relatively irony-free." And to a certain extent she's right when she brings

there are far more prominent indicators like, for example, a society's cultural output. Take that into account, and a different picture emerges. The success of filmmakers like Judd Apatow, the increasing popularity of ultra-sincere indie artists from Arcade Fire to Vampire Weekend, and the proliferation of wholesome, though not traditional, family-centered television shows like *Modern Family* point to a rise in what some call

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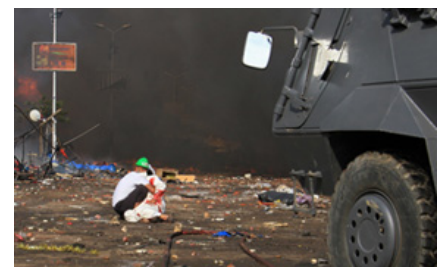


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up the "grunge" movement; the roots of the New Sincerity are there. But she doesn't see the disconnect when she describes the apathy of the '90s, the slacker archetype, the anger and the melancholia. That's how I remember it too; the only thing I'd add is ironic detachment.

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It just goes to show that you can't trust a person who claims that the era in which she or he came of age was the height of anything. Think of aging Republican politicians pointing back to the 1950s as the height of morality, but failing to mention that it was also the height of inequality. Wampole admits that perhaps her memory is "over-nostalgic," and I'm right there with her: I have a half dozen Spotify playlists dedicated to music from 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.

It's obviously difficult—and arguably impossible—to define the ethos of an age. But that doesn't excuse Christy Wampole for missing the mark so dramatically. She let her distaste of hipsters—of which she makes no secret—blind her to the larger culture in which they exist. Those hipsters, with their funny facial hair and too-tight T-shirts, will grow out of the hipster phase and realize that their stable upbringing, college education, and life-long consumption of popular culture informed by the New Sincerity has made them well-adjusted and productive members of society. Maybe they'll even join us in scrutinizing the behavior of the next generation of hipsters. As for that next generation, I know that there's a good chance its members could shift back toward the ironic detachment that Wampole thinks she sees today. But let's at least recognize and enjoy this New Sincerity moment while it lasts.

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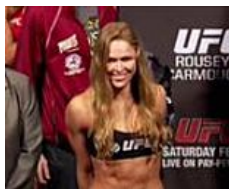


JONATHAN D. FITZGERALD is the author of the forthcoming *Not Your Mother's Morals: How the New Sincerity Is Changing Pop Culture for the Better* and the editor of *Patrolmag.com*.

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Luke Morgan · 9 months ago

Among the sincere artists operating today you could certainly throw in Kanye West, who's known for his absolute honesty and doing and saying what he believes to a fault, obviously. Your magazine's essay on him is a pretty good example:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/mag...>

7 ^ | v Reply Share



Nathanael Yellis · 9 months ago



But what about SNARK?!

<http://thoughtcatalog.com/2012...>

^ | v Reply Share ›



Jonathan Flanders · 9 months ago

My wife and I were watching a Fish Called Wanda last night, and it struck me how deeply John Cleese's sincerity in the movie resonated with me. All the other characters, while funny, just didn't grab me. Very nice.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



Han · 9 months ago

I think it's pretty easy to come up with examples of ironic ads -- they're over the top in an intentional, knowing, nudge-nudge-wink-wink we get it way. For example: Geico ads, Flo from Progressive, Burger King...the list goes on and on.

Perhaps Irony isn't even the correct word, but the NYT article does point to something -- it could be called 'feigned self-awareness' as a defense mechanism to preempt criticism. Since people are not trying to be serious about art/humanity/sincerity, they can always shrug and say "well it's all just a joke, isn't it?" To tell someone to stop being so serious is a great way to subvert genuine attempts at socio-political change.

To argue that culture/nature it always the same or is cyclic is quite fallacious. The reductio ad absurdum would be to argue that our pre-human ancestors had cultural constructs like irony and sincerity too.

22 ^ | 1 v Reply Share ›



Keiran S → Han · 9 months ago

Your reductio ad absurdum strikes me as rather absurd. I suppose you could argue (as you are) that nothing is cyclical if it has a beginning, but that strikes me as a useless definition of cyclical, as then the word could not be used to describe anything, except perhaps the universe (if the universe does exist in a cycle of contractions and expansions). Any assertion that culture is cyclic or unchanging holds in the implicit assertion that it has been that way from some unnamed starting point.

5 ^ | 1 v Reply Share ›



Han → Keiran S · 9 months ago

Yes. I think you've right about the absurdity.

"Any assertion that culture is cyclic or unchanging holds in the implicit assertion that it has been that way from some unnamed starting point."

So the upshot is that one must be open to the possibility that the temporarily cyclic or constant phase of history may well have ended, and a new one may have begun.

This is an elaborate way of saying that historical analogies work until they stop working.

A corollary is this: to argue that a difference is "merely" a difference in degree and not kind is to forget that differences in degree can often lead to differences in kind -- this is called a phase transition in physics and chemistry.

So the article doesn't really address the possibility of a real qualitative change in pop culture.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



Keiran S → Han · 9 months ago

Yes, then, it is possible to say that things end, but that doesn't make it any less of a cycle. Then again, since history is something being analyzed from within, it does make it hard to say whether a cycle has ended or has entered a period of inactivity. And frankly, this gets to the bottom of why historical

analogies don't work - they're always based on an incomplete understand either of the present or the past. Then again, that's why any historical comparison is impossible.

But, I'm not sure I buy into your argument about differences of kind and degree, but of course that depends on what one considers a difference in kind. It could just be said that the phases are not fundamental changes to the matter, merely changes in the way the matter arranges itself - ice, water, and steam are all the same things arranged in different ways, that seems the very definition of differences in degree rather than kind. Or, at the very least, it's a difference of degree from a certain perspective and a change in kind from another. I'm also not sure that this article's purpose is to address the possibility of a qualitative change in pop culture, but merely to point out the flaws in another article's assertion due to the original article's improper assumptions and perspective.

^ | v Reply Share ›



Han → Keiran S · 9 months ago

It's fun to overthink things...especially pop culture!

But the phase transition point is important to get. A difference in degree leads causally to a difference in arrangement -- this type of discontinuity is one of the most important areas of active study in science.

When water changes to ice -- the only thing that changes is the heat content of the water. So a continuous change in degree leads to a discontinuous qualitative change -- liquid changes to solid.

The social analogy (also problematic/speculative, but all analogies are) is that real change does in fact happen -- there are social discontinuities like revolutions, collapses and so on.

Pop cultural analysis is fun because one can play with a variety of analogies...

So my complaint is that the "plus ça change" style of thinking tends to be oddly conservative and boring, but positing social upheaval and phase transition makes for more imaginative writing.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P...>

2 ^ | v Reply Share ›



Keiran S → Han · 9 months ago

I said this above in my reply to someone else, but the qualitative change in water and ice are only qualitative when viewed as a group of molecules, a single molecule remains changed only in its amount of kinetic energy. From this perspective, it's only a change in degree. By that same notion, Youtube and FunnyOrDie (and other web-vision) seem a qualitative change from the television of the 1940s, but viewed by someone in the seventeenth century, it's simply a change of degree (it could even be argued that it is only a change of degree). My argument is just that perspective matters for what is a change in degree or kind and that being participants in that change makes us extremely unobjective in viewing it.

Also, the social analogy can be bad since some social discontinuities (like, say, the Fall of Rome) are only discontinuities when viewed on a macro-scale. Often, when looking at day-to-day life, especially in the provinces, but also in Rome itself, life was not much different. The social structures remained, the religious situation was basically the same as it had

been the decade before (perhaps more Arians were wandering around). By that same token, to us, on the ground, the internet might seem like a whole new world, but someone looking back at the global political landscape in four hundred years might not think it that important. It's all about perspective.

And yes, pop culture analysis is loads of fun.

^ | v Reply Share ›



Han → Keiran S · 9 months ago

What you say is not wrong, but the physics perspective is about configurations, rather than essences: relative change, rather than absolute existence. If you think the essence of the universe is unchanging matter (leptons and quarks, for instance), then there are no "phenomena" to be interested in, only the inexorable void of eternity. Science is interested in phenomena: change, transmutation, transduction, and transformation of essences/elements. Transformations are always rearrangements of underlying particles whose essences remain unchanged.

So for the physicist (or historian) what is interesting is not the eternal constants, but the ephemeral and changing. The fact that it is difficult to define an entity/epoch/era does not make it impossible -- grappling with this difficulty is how science derives its power. The perspective that only sees the trees and not the forest -- the atoms but not the molecules -- is always correct, but usually useless.

see more

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Keiran S → Han · 9 months ago

Science is interested in change, but a change in kinetic energy is still change, even if only change of degree. I would say a change in kind would be something like Alpha decay, at least if one's looking at it on an atomic level. Sure, from the perspective of a human, phase change is a change in kind, but that perspective isn't the only valid one or even necessarily the best. It works well for certain things, poorly for others.

I'm just trying to point out perspective matters in describing a change in kind verses degree and that I think, in the future, people might look back and maybe recognize the invention of the internet (or whatever) as important, while noting that it took a long time for it to bring about real change. They might look at race relations or feminism and note that changes took place, but when you compare the 2010s to the 1950s to the 1890s, the '50s might look closer to the 2010s than to the 1890s.

And I'm not trying to rag on history or sociology or cultural

see more

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Han → Keiran S · 9 months ago

I think the point I am making is about power and usefulness, rather than truth. It is true that different perspectives give different results. Some perspectives give no results, however.

For instance: a narrow perspective sees every little software update as momentous, whereas an ultra-wide one sees no difference between iPads and Egyptian papyrus.

For social science (or any science) what matters is value: if people do not value change at the 5 to 10 year timescale, they

won't be interested in fashion, trends, and the dynamics of irony in affluent western societies. If they do, then telling them about the thousand-year timescale is like telling children not to play with toys because they will eventually disintegrate -- long after they're dead!.

Presumably the people reading and writing articles on intellectual cultural trends are interested in the sub-decade timescale, and ~~don't accept the idea that the phenomena are illusory. 15 years~~

see more

1 ^ | v Reply Share >



Archdukechocula → Keiran S · 9 months ago

@Kieran_S Would you really argue that there is no difference in both degree and kind between 21st century America and 18th century America? It is fair to describe these things as part of a continuum, but it is also fair to say that certain values and modes of thinking dominate eras. Just because something dominates does not mean it excludes the existence of all else. That is a straw man argument. It only means that, for various reasons, that particular form has taken hold of the time.

To give an example, abstractly saying that the 50's was a more moral time might well be inaccurate, or at least open to easy criticism, but that is largely because a concept like morality is not something concrete but is subject to the views and preferences of the individual making the assessment. Saying that the 50's was a more optimistic, institutional, authoritarian and hierarchically structured time in America however is a more reasonable claim that can be backed by tons of evidence. In the 50's you could see the beginning of a shift in consciousness with

see more

7 ^ | v Reply Share >



Keiran S → Archdukechocula · 9 months ago

“Saying that the 1950s was a more optimistic ... time in America however is a more reasonable claim that can be backed by tons of evidence.” The opposite can also be said based on evidence. Fear of communist infiltration, of nuclear war, and of the potentially horrifying consequences of science were certainly not optimistic, but pessimistic. That you would also call it a more authoritarian time when that same decade saw the birth of beat culture, the first major movements of the civil rights movement, and the birth of nationwide lesbian and gay rights activism seems also slightly contradictory – it seems a time when institutional structures of the authoritarian control of the hetero-normative white patriarchy were beginning to unravel. Might we not call our times more optimistic, with no global enemy and the world no longer having such large scale existential threats as the cold war? Aren't we even more generally in the favor of science as a pure good today than the fifties? And couldn't the War on Terror and all it has brought about make our time seem more authoritarian? You're still probably right about your definition of

see more

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Hudson → Keiran S · 9 months ago

The 50s in America were created by the service men returning from war in Europe and the Pacific. They wanted peace and consumer goods, new washing machines and nylon stockings. The 60s were created by the children of those veterans, who saw Vietnam as a useless war and did not want to be atomized in a

The challenges to the young today are how to make it in an overcrowded world, with fewer good jobs and plenty of irony. Irony is the greatest of the gods and is present in all times and places. believe me.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›



Keiran S → Hudson · 9 months ago

That's a seriously reductive view of how culture and society work. Are you seriously saying that every generation (what is a generation, anyway?) is able to create the culture they live in without regard to what came before it? Every "generation" creates its culture ex nihilo?

Also, your picture is very disturbing. About 16 million Americans served in WWII - those 16 million people dictated what all of US culture was, them and them alone? It also makes me wonder why the US was at war from 1950-1953 if the US culture was dominated solely by individuals who wanted peace. And why the US began sending military advisors to Southeast Asia in that same decade if peace was foremost on their minds. I also wonder, if the Cold War was only of concern to the people who dictated the culture of the 1960s, why was HUAC doing its part to stamp out Communism in the 1950s, why were films like "Invasion of the Body Snatchers," "Invaders from Mars," and "I Married a Communist!" (that last one actually from 1949) indicative of 1950s sci-fi?

Frankly, your view is nostalgic and is not even attempting to critically look at the culture of the 1950s or '60s.

^ | v Reply Share ›



Hudson → Keiran S · 9 months ago

I gave the barest of thumbnail sketches. I grew up in post-war suburbia, so I know whereof I speak. My father survived the worst air combat in history. Why shouldn't he want peace when he got home? I liked "Invasion of the Body Snatchers." People who lived 7/24 in Hollywood Fantasyland over-estimated the ennui of the 50s. After Guadalcanal, was life in the burbs so terrible? And there were Commies in Hollywood. They thought it was all part of play time at the movies.

^ | v Reply Share ›



Keiran S → Hudson · 9 months ago

But can you explain what the US was doing in Korea if everyone wanted peace? Can you explain why the US began sending military men to South Vietnam through peace?

I'm also not trying to condemn "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" or those two other films, but they and others like them were allegories for the terrors of Communist infiltration ("I Married a Communist" wasn't an allegory, it WAS such a story). Why did the public devour so many films about this topic? Or, moreso, if peace and prosperity were the driving forces of that culture, why did that culture create works of art about the fear of Communist infiltration?

And yes, there were Communists in Hollywood, but so what? If the culture was not one that was terrified of Communism and the existential threat it posed to America, then why did they need to be hunted down and black listed? if peace was the only end that mattered, why should anyone care what party a film producer or actor was a part of?

^ | v Reply Share ›



Hudson → Keiran S · 9 months ago



I'm trying to paint those times with a broad brush in a few strokes. You could bring up the duck-and-cover school drills on the 1950s, which I remember well. We all understood the Bomb and what it could do to us.

Hollywood never accepts responsibility for anything it does in the real world. However, to the generation that fought WWII, Communism was a serious threat just as Nazi Germany had been, and it needed to be dealt with seriously.

Enjoy your Thanksgiving Day!

^ | v Reply Share ›



Vigilarus → Keiran S · 9 months ago

Korea was not a popular war- read David Halberstam's *The Coldest Winter*, it explains how domestic political considerations contributed to an underallocation of initial forces to Korea, how trigger-happy red-baiting MacArthur could be fired by Truman without significant political implications beyond the usual mutterings of the right, and how returning veterans were basically ignored by a public that didn't want to know about a war that they didn't really want to wage. The reactionary rhetoric was a mile wide and an inch deep. Pushed far enough, both the public and the establishment had had enough- think of the "At long last" speech at the HUAC hearings. Eisenhower was a moderate who sought to deescalate where possible and to keep the far right elements of the Republican party appeased but at arm's length. It's also important to remember that Communist expansionary policies were very real, fueled by a Sino-Soviet rivalry for authenticity where Mao sought to one-up the Soviets for popular international acclaim as the most revolutionary Marxist leader even as the Russians would've preferred to tend to their own sphere.

^ | v Reply Share ›



Mark Jackson → Hudson · 9 months ago

The 1960s can easily be overgeneralized. Most students and young people didn't protest the Vietnam War. There were entire state university campuses where students remained oblivious to politics. And the 1960s was also the decade in which the Goldwater/ Reagan wing of the Republican Party began to gather strength; viz. Reagan's winning the governorship in 1966.

^ | v Reply Share ›



Hudson → Mark Jackson · 9 months ago

Sure, and in a different context I might make the same arguments. However, if you were in school at the time of the Vietnam War, the war did catch your attention. And the love summer of 1967 did roll across the country from California with considerable force.

^ | v Reply Share ›



Mark Jackson → Hudson · 9 months ago

My mother always swore she didn't notice any of these things until around 1972, because they just weren't talked about very much in her little corner of Tennessee.

^ | v Reply Share ›



Han → Archdukechocula · 9 months ago

I think this nails it!

2 ^ | v Reply Share ›



Mark Jackson → Han · 9 months ago

In the mid-1990s I experienced the contrast between irony and literalism on a

in the mid-1990s I experienced the contrast between irony and literalism on a regular basis in that I regularly watched "Seinfeld" with a friend who would respond to an obviously absurdist scene by saying "That wouldn't really happen!". As if there's no generic difference between the way "Law and Order" depicts, say, habeas corpus, and "Seinfeld"'s depicting whether or not "doing the opposite" is an effective way to get the girl, get the job, etc.

2 ^ | v Reply Share ›



herbert hendrickson · 9 months ago

Perhaps a point is that irony has gotten so mainstreamed that lots of people are no longer quite clear on whether they 'like' something or like it. I think of all those kitten videos that I've watched on YouTube.

I mean, I'll do it again. You know?

5 ^ | v Reply Share ›



Keiran S · 9 months ago

Yes, that was something I did not understand about the original article. If "hipsters" find sincerity to be anathema, then why do "hipsters" consume so much sincere media. In my imagination, "hipsters" love Wes Anderson and they certainly love sincere "indie" artists like the above mentioned Arcade Fire and Vampire Weekend. I did not understand how both could be true of the same group. Then again, the article also decries "hipsters" for their references to pop culture, unaware that this is something that young people (the primary consumers of pop culture) do in general and which I always thought was more specifically applied as a stereotype of nerd/geek culture (with their stereotypical references to Monty Python, Star Trek, and Star Wars) than anything else.

I also feel like we could change around some of the language and direct the original article at Diderot and Voltaire - enough with the irony and cool detachment, we get it, you think you're better than everyone else - or Petrarch and Machiavelli - enough with the nostalgia and constant references.

4 ^ | v Reply Share ›



Natalija Milicevic · 9 months ago

I agreed with this article, but thought that more attention could have been paid to the existence of irony and the transition from apathy to the New Sincerity. And so I went on to write a blog post: <http://yetanotherdrop.blogspot...>

^ | v Reply Share ›



Tim_Sims · 9 months ago

Since we're using pop culture as a barometer of sincerity vs irony as an ethos of generations, I nominate Alanis Morissette as evidence that misunderstanding irony is the ethos of generation X.

2 ^ | v Reply Share ›



Keiran S → Tim_Sims · 9 months ago

Did she misunderstand irony or was she using meta-irony? No, it couldn't have been meta-irony, that's too hipster.

^ | v Reply Share ›



Mark Jackson → Tim_Sims · 9 months ago

For the sake of accuracy, she was originally going to use the phrase "Doesn't it suck?" But then the artiste in her decided that didn't sound as good, and that most of her audience wouldn't know what the word "ironic" meant anyway, and those who did know would realize that pedantically telling everyone "you know, Alanis is using 'ironic' incorrectly" would make them look like squares. She's winking at us.

^ | v Reply Share ›



HorseyFace · 9 months ago

It's like seeing a bunch of white people forget about Dre.

9 ^ | v Reply Share ›



T AA · 9 months ago

Voltron is not the correct analogy - there are two many parts and he's too powerful a



votrons not the correct analogy - there are two many parts and he's too powerful a being -- I'd rather use Chandler Bing. On the outside he has tough shell made of sarcastic wit with put downs to spare developed from the years he spent with his cynical mother, but deep down inside he is a keen, bromantic softie to his true and genuine friends. Remember before there was Judd Apatow, there was Joey, Chandler and Ross.

6 ^ | v Reply Share ›



Lee Viola · 9 months ago

Yawn This is so No-MoPoPo-Post-Modern.

BTW, what's a "hipster?"

6 ^ | v Reply Share ›



McGillicudy · 9 months ago

Is Wes Anderson really that sincere? Since Royal Tenenbaums everything has felt to some extent like an emotionally guarded, stylized toybox of a movie. I think he sincerely likes to make movies in that style, but they don't come across as expressing particularly sincere emotions or concepts to me. I still love Bottle Rocket and Rushmore though, those to me were sincere, in part because of Owen Wilson's co-writing influence.

7 ^ | v Reply Share ›



t_lhrh · 9 months ago

Ummmmm...yeah. Irony's golden age, as far as I can recall, was the 1990s. It was the decade when "Seinfeld" and its misanthropy ruled the roost on the basic networks (and in the minds of upper-middle class whites). "Clerks," "Reality Bites" and "My So-Called Life" were the metier of disaffected and disconnected white middle class youth who sought to drop out of the system. Cynicism, nihilism and extreme distrust of authority (which fed the irony in the larger majority culture) typified by the likes of "Public Enemy" and gangsta rap reflected the peaking of a violent crime wave in inner cities and minority neighborhoods in the early 1990s. African-American and Latino cultural output mixed with the then-ascendant misanthropy of white culture to create the ironic stances and attitudes I recall from that period. There were only a few popular artists who wore their sincerity on their sleeves--Tupac, Curt Cobain, and Rage Against the Machine come to mind--but they were few and were held in almost martyr-like reverence.

Nowadays not only do you have "Modern Family" and its ilk, but the likes of Flo Rida in rap--rapping about how God has blessed him in his latest hit single "Good Feeling"--and Lady Gaga in the larger culture. I noticed this change for the more earnest when I heard Christina Aguilera singing about raising self-esteem in "You are Beautiful," a hit song that came out in the 2005 or so. As someone who grew up in the 1990s, that song struck an odd note, in that it was hopeful and full of positivity. Now it pervades the popular culture. I'm enjoying this change in the cultural milieu. Like the author of this article, I hope this "new sincerity" stays around for a while.

8 ^ | v Reply Share ›



a_foreign_film · 9 months ago

i hate to be one of those people that drops into the comments just to complain about why the article was even written, but i feel like i have to on this one. both this piece, and the one that spawned it, drive me completely crazy.

trying to assign some sort of feeling/quality/ethos to any "age" (whatever that means in this case is beyond me) is completely pointless, outside of the desire to drive page views - in that case, you got me. here's the deal: some people do some things, other people do other things. the end.

6 ^ | 1 v Reply Share ›



Guest · 9 months ago

Boring.

4 ^ | 1 v Reply Share ›



Bad Chapters · 9 months ago

Boring



Loving.

1 ^ | 1 v Reply Share >

**Mujokan** · 9 months ago

Irony and sincerity always coexist, it just depends where you're looking in the culture.

Sincerity is I think associated with:

- Modernism
- Optimism
- Cultural homogeneity

You get sincerity more in times of technological progress, economic prosperity, and stable cultural dominance.

Irony comes along with disappointment in the cultural mainstream, economic depression, and technological stagnation.

So overall, the Victorian period is sincere, the period after WW1 is ironic. The Depression period is initially ironic, then it moves towards sincerity with Futurism and Fascism, then postwar Germany is ironic. The 1950s to the Vietnam War are sincere, the later hippie period and the 1970s are ironic. The early 1980s are sincere, the end of the Eighties to the mid 1990s are ironic. But if you look at black culture in the 1950s, it is ironic -- subversive R&B for example. It depends where you look in each case.

By this theory, we ought to be moving towards irony now, but I am not so sure. If I had to pick I would say we're becoming more sincere. Somehow the rhythm broke during the Bush years, maybe.

5 ^ | v Reply Share >

**Vigilarus** → Mujokan · 9 months ago

Maybe the internet and social media have created enough like-minded spaces for people to feel connected and empowered instead of alienated regardless of how actually alienating and disempowering the larger mercenary culture is.

1 ^ | v Reply Share >

**rp** · 9 months ago

I was in agreement with this article...until it's author turned around and made the same mistake that Wampole did:

"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. For those in Generation X, family was still important, but the second priority was not spirituality—it was making a lot of money. Clearly, a change has been underway."

Just another spurious conclusion, drawn from a bit of cherry-picked data, taken from a very limited sample.

I am a GenXer, born in 1970. I would rank my priorities in a similar fashion: family, and then, somehow, increasing my income. But that is because I have two awesome kids (a funny, feisty 4 year old, and a sweet, nerdy 7 year old) and I live in a house that has plummeted in value by about 100k in the past 8 years. My husband and I think about money *a lot*, but it isn't because we want to drink martinis in hip clubs and rent a house in the Hamptons and buy expensive clothing: it's because we are constantly mindful that we aren't saving enough for our children's college educations. All of my friends want to Berkeley. Most of us have PhD's in the sciences. None of us are doing

[see more](#)

7 ^ | 1 v Reply Share >

**Vigilarus** → rp · 9 months ago

And people wonder why we're cynical.

1 ^ | v Reply Share >

**Standstill Laddy** → Vigilarus · 8 months ago

Speak of the Devil - That is closer to my kind of irony :)

^ | v Reply Share >

**agvs** · 9 months ago

Oh come on, you and Wampole both need to stop pontificating. Sincerely, irony, authenticity, defining ethos—*who cares?* I don't know anyone who doesn't value all of those at different times.

What's really going on is that each generation of adults suddenly realizes that the kids coming of age after them aren't carbon copies of them and are trying to understand why, since obviously they were the best generation to ever grace the face of the earth and it was clear that cultural evolution would stop with them.

8 ^ | v Reply Share ›

**Laurentiu Lunatò** · 9 months ago

This article tries to argue that sincerity, not irony, is the ethos of our age. In doing so, it merely manages to do some rather wild cherry picking: Wallace, Anderson, "Modern Family"(?). For each example of honesty there is at least one of irony. Are we more sincere than our grandparents or are we more ironic? Are there quantitative measures to establish this?

As for books, they do show the same strong sense of morality if you only read books that show a strong sense of morality. Anyone should be able to come up with some examples of such books, from any decade. However, I seriously doubt that morality is what literature is all about.

It is impossible to define the ethos of our age in one word, doesn't matter if the word has five or nine letters. It is as significant an effort as reading the horoscope.

1 ^ | v Reply Share ›

**we here** · 9 months ago

You missed the whole point. It was unfortunate that the original writer had to even mention hipsters [it was an easy target for her, and an easy way to get pageviews and reblogs, but ultimately does nothing for the cause], but if you were born in the 80s/90s like I was (or are aware of cultural trends of this generation), you will know that people who like to 'fistpump' and wear Uggs and Tapout shirts are just as likely to ironically throw up gang signs in photos, give ironic gifts, make ironic sartorial decisions.

Irony is a problem for this generation because it's what's stopping us from connecting with one another on any real level - we are prone to sharing ideas based on layers of referential irony, not earnest interest. One look at the Tumblr internet art community, the fringes of net-rap, or alternative young literature shows how deep this epidemic runs. What's worse is that some people mean to brand figures in these irony-laden communities as bastions of the New Sincerity, e.g. Steve Roggenbuck. It is because of this that we must stay ever vigilant.

7 ^ | v Reply Share ›

**holdmewhileimnaked** · 9 months ago

this is all middle class, middle minded bullshit.

the culture has changed *very* little in the last thirty years. it cant go anywhere cos the edges have been excised to give more room to the mainstream. it cant go anywhere cos the factors--meaning: the people--who create change are no longer allowed to do it, theres always someone less difficult & more like oneself upon who to focus social attention.

you are talking about the difference between flat toothpicks & round toothpicks. & the depth of consciousness floating around the stuff you mention is about the same too.

4 ^ | v Reply Share ›

**Alex Cole** → holdmewhileimnaked · 9 months ago

How can you say there's been very little change in culture in the last thirty years?! We have witnessed one of the greatest technological shifts in human history that has dramatically altered how we all live our lives.

^ | v Reply Share ›

**holdmewhileimnaked** → Alex Cole · 9 months ago

technologically, yes, of course. culturally absolutely not. just think of the different forms of music over the twentieth century. apply this paradigm to the last thirty odd years. & it's exactly the same across all the arts.

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