

# Sincerity and the Media of Appearance

ENGL 8155-02 Graduate Seminar

**Professor Jennifer Fay**

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## **Course Description:**

Sincerity is the promise that we know what we think and mean what we say. It names an encounter with a speaker whose exteriority faithfully expresses her interiority, whose outer and inner natures are the same. Often taken as a synonym for truthfulness and authenticity, sincerity is predicated on the body as a reliable image that can be acknowledged, and it is pinned on the promise that there is an autonomous and knowable self at the heart of language. Given widespread challenges to ascertaining the sincerity of speech as an act or performance, how can we approach the sincerity of such disembodied forms as film and the digital image? And why should the sincerity of media concern us at all? For some, words and images help us to believe in the world and to act in politically meaningful ways. For others, the truth claims of images and bodies are a gateway to a violent form of knowledge. This course aims to excavate theories of sincerity in relation to theories of media in order to understand what it means to “mean what you say” across different platforms and against the exigencies of a cynical political culture which both fetishizes and fundamentally undercuts seriousness.

The course will revolve around four sets of interlocking critical problems.

- 1) Philosophical and literary meditations on sincerity and its related terms of subjectivity, candidness, theatricality, and the body as a medium of affect and affectation; speech act theory; and “ordinary language” philosophy.
- 2) Select theories that struggle with the truth claims of literary, cinematic and digital mages. What does it mean to “appear” in different media? How may virtual and even virtuous digital-being recommit us to some kind of world belief? How may it betray the truth of the very bodies whose affects are now free floating?
- 3) The political necessity of performance, masquerade, and dissimulation as not only modes of world critique but bodily survival. The politics and poetics of hypocrisy and lying.
- 4) Skepticism and sincerity as modes of scholarly critique.

## **Required Books:**

\*E-books must be accessed through the Blackboard site so that multiple users may read the text at the same time. Go to “E-reserves.”

1. Lionel Trilling *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Harvard UP, 1971. \$25  
Available as an e-book via Blackboard.
2. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*. Enlarged Edition. Harvard UP, 1979 \$28
3. Henry James, *The Bostonians* with Introduction by Richard Lansdown. Penguin Classics, 2000. \$10
4. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*. U of Chicago, 2015 \$18.  
Limited availability as an e-book via Blackboard.
5. John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. University of Chicago Press, 2005. \$17
6. J.L. Austin, *How Do To Things with Words*, Second Edition. Harvard UP, 1975. \$23

7. Boris Groys, *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media*. Columbia UP, 2012  
Available as an e-book through Blackboard.
8. Nella Larson, *Passing*. (1929) Penguin Books 2009. \$9

### **Assignments:**

**Discussion Prompts:** At least twice in the semester, you are asked to post a substantial (minimum 500-word) response to the texts for the week in *advance* of our Monday discussion, Sunday by 6:00 p.m. Part of your response should be a summary of the reading (as best you can manage). The balance may focus on one particular detail of an argument or narrative turn, or work out some of the ways texts may be connected, or query a problem or underlying assumption in a text or texts (when there are multiple readings). Ideally, this reflection will be formulated as a substantial question or set of questions followed by your own tentative answer. You might also briefly explain how you arrived at this question. These writings will be the prompts for our in-class discussions and may inspire ideas for your seminar paper. These will also give me an opportunity to respond to your ideas and writing. You are encouraged to use the Oak discussion board more than twice! But I will circulate a sign up sheet to ensure that everyone makes use of it *at least twice*.

**Seminar Paper:** You have three options. All seminar papers should engage texts from this class. You are welcome, indeed encouraged, to introduce other materials, and you may read the seminar materials within the context of your interests and areas of specialization.

1. Option one: A 20-25 page seminar paper due Wednesday December 12<sup>th</sup>, 12:00 (midnight)
2. Option two: Two 10-15 page papers. The first due Friday October 14<sup>th</sup> 12:00 (midnight), the second due Wednesday Dec. 12 (midnight).
3. Option Three: One 10-15 page paper due October 14<sup>th</sup>, which you then expand into a longer seminar paper due on Wednesday Dec 12 by 12:00 (midnight).

**Robust class participation:** I take class participation seriously as measure of your engagement with the material. Come to every class prepared to ask questions, make claims, and connections.

**Screenings:** I will arrange for screenings of assigned films. You are encouraged to watch the film on a large screen, but they will also be on reserve at the Main Library following our screening.

\* Designates readings that will be posted onto Blackboard.

### **Week 1 (Aug. 29): The True Self**

Read: Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Ch. 1, 2.  
Rousseau, *Confessions*, Books 1-2.\*

### **Week 2 (Sept. 5) Politically Impolite**

Read: Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Ch. 3- 5

Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (excerpts)\*  
Recommended: Davidson, "Revolutions in female manners" \*

### **Week 3 (Sept. 12) The Airs of Sincerity**

Read: James, *The Bostonians*

### **Week 4 (Sept. 19) Freud and The Friedmans**

Read: Freud, *The Ego and the Id* \*

Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Ch. 6

Paul Arthur, "True Confessions, Sort of" \*

Richard Beck, "The Friedmans" in N+1

<https://nplusonemag.com/issue-18/essays/the-friedmans/>

Screen: *Capturing the Friedmans* (Jarecki, 2003, 107 min.)

### **Week 5 (Sept. 26) Ritual and Religiosity**

Read: Seligman, Welles, Puett, Simon, *Ritual and its Consequences*. Intro, ch.1, 4, 5\*

Screening: *Essene* (Wiseman, 1972, 86 min.)

Recommended: Anna Su, "Judging Religious Sincerity"

[http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=267740](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=267740)

### **Week 6 (Oct. 3) The Ethnographic Real**

Read: Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*

Larson, *Passing*

### **Week 7 (Oct. 10) Uttering Sincere.**

Read: Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*

Cavell, "Must We Mean What We Say?"\*

**Paper #1 (Option Two): Due Friday October 14<sup>th</sup> by 12:00 (midnight)**

### **Week 8 (Oct 17) On Image-Making and Lying**

Read: Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers"\*

Arendt, "Truth and Politics."\*

Markovits "The Trouble with Being Earnest" and "Beyond Sincerity" \*

Screen: *Face in the Crowd* (Kazan, 1957 126 min)

### **Week 9 (Oct. 24) A Metaphysical Memoir**

Read: Cavell, *The World Viewed*, Forward, Preface, + p. 1-101.

Screening: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (Ford, 1962, 123 min.)

Recommended:

Bazin, "Ontology of the Photographic Image"\*

Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" 1- 34. \*

### **Week 10 (Oct. 31) The "Candid" Camera**

Read: Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 101-230.

Panagia, "Blankets, Screens, and Projections: Or, the claim of film"\*

Screen: *Vivre se Vie* (Godard, 1962, 80 min.)

### **Week 11 (Nov. 7) Bad Images**

Read: Groys, *Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media*, pp. 1-90, 173-180.

Doane: "The Moving Image: Pathos and the Maternal"\*

Cavell, "Stella's Taste: Reading *Stella Dallas*"\*

Screen: *Stella Dallas* (Vidor, 1936, 106 min.)

### **Week 12 (Nov. 14) Digital Utopias?**

Read: Rodowick, "An Uncertain Utopia—Digital Culture" From *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media*. \*

Hansen, "Introduction" and "Affect as Interface: Confronting the 'Digital Facial Image.'" From *New Philosophy for New Media* \*

Nakaura, "Measuring Race on the Internet" and "The Racio-Visual Logic of the Internet" from *Digitizing Race: Visual Culture of the Internet*. \*

### **Week 13 (Nov. 21) Thanksgiving Break.**

### **Week 14 (Nov. 28) Surface Reading, Or Reading for Sincerity?**

Read: Felski, *The Limits of Critique*

Best & Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction"\*

### **Week 15 (Dec. 5)**

A week devoted to writing.

**Final Papers due: Monday Dec. 12, by 12:00 (midnight).**