

The Importance of Being Earnest¹

by Charlotte Taylor

A Response in Earnest²

by Luke Johnson

¹ Marked by or showing deep sincerity

² Of an important or weighty nature

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‘Wal-Mart, Roy Rogers, Chuck Jones, Anvils, Mason Jars of Whiskey, Wizards Disguised as Dogs, Joshua Tree All Stars, Bobcats, (5) Feral Kangaroo Rats, Roadkill, Finite Chances, Dream Catchers, Impossible Wasteland Geometries, Quartsized, Spiral Jetty, Funky Artist Retreats, Military Bars.’ What (10) thread could link such a disparate lot of ephemera? The answer can be found in the December 2004/ January 2005 issue of US magazine The Believer, in the form of an (15) article about Andrea Zittel’s ‘High Desert Test Sites’. The Believer habitually prefaces its features with a list of apparently unconnected words and phrases, under (20) the heading ‘Discussed’. Part of the pleasure of reading the magazine, the gesture suggests, is to watch the emergence of unexpected relations among apparently (25) unrelated things.

The attitude that The Believer cultivates might be called one of ‘intellectual whimsy’. Whimsy is (30) not unique to that magazine, nor even to the McSweeney’s empire of which The Believer is part, though they do exemplify it and have undoubtedly fostered (and capitalized on) its popularity. But intellectual (35) whimsy is a widely shared attitude, at least among a certain segment of youngish writers and creative types. It is, as Susan Sontag once wrote of camp, a common sensibility, a brand of taste that unites (40) those who have it against the norm. If, in Sontag’s words, ‘the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural’, the essence of whimsy

(45) is its flirtation with the insignificant and random. Flirtation though, not love, because unlike, say, Dada, whimsy triumphs when the import of the apparently insignificant and the relevance of the (50) random are discovered.

Noting the resemblances between whimsy and camp can help prevent the confusion of whimsy (55) with another currently prevalent sensibility: ironic kitsch. Like camp, intellectual whimsy is not best understood as ironic: it places a premium on unabashed (65) sincerity while at the same time treading a fine line of self-parody. It often signals this self-parody by appropriating typographical and design conventions from the past, a tendency that has drawn objections from some quarters. In its (70) inaugural issue the new journal *n+1* takes a stand against Dave Eggers for leading what the editors call a ‘regressive avant-garde’. In (75) typography and tone the Eggersards adopted old innovations, consciously obsolete manoeuvres from earlier moments of creative ferment’, they write; in their eyes (80) ‘the Eggersards’ have drained such radical gestures of their significance. The provocation or unexpected become the precious.

For the editors of *n + 1* whimsy (85) signals a dismaying lack of conviction and encourages the conspicuous squandering of energy on trivialities rather than issues of substance. But whimsy’s earnestness can be measure by its fondness for the visual conventions and editorial tone of the Victorian (90) periodical. Examples range from

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(95) the subtle (Cabinet magazine) to the overt (early issues of *McSweeney's* or the very popular *Schott's Original Miscellany*) to the exaggerated (visit the web page of Lord Whmsy, author of *The Affected Provincial's Almanac*, who styles himself a dandyish, late Victorian Poor Richard).

(100) The 19th-century periodicals from which contemporary editors and designers take their inspiration were, by and large, sympathetic to the Arnoldian proposition that educating oneself about culture is an urgently serious endeavour. Every new insight (110) into art and literature helped one grasp the universal moral and spiritual order that it was humanity's duty and destiny to discover. These days it's hard to sustain (115) the hope that the world is ready to be put on the right spiritual and moral track by culture. Recall that *McSweeney's* was founded to publish stories that had been (120) rejected by established magazines. Whimsy's affinity with the Victorian bespeaks a hope that culture may regain its bygone influence, but its note of self-parody indicates a defiant readiness to court (125) irrelevance.

(130) In narrative, whimsy emphasizes the unexpected links that connect disparate ideas or events, but the connections must be meaningful. Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (1991) is not whimsical because it never proposes that the links between its scenes are (135) anything more than incidental. It embraces insignificance and

(140) ponders the possibility of elevating apathy into anarchy. Wes Anderson's films are whimsical because their unexpected juxtapositions are imbued with sentimental significance. As a visual mode, whimsy favours busy frames and compositions that distract viewers from the centre. It rewards those (145) willing to explore the edges with jokes buried in marginalia or Dalmatian mice sniffing around in the corner of an elaborately composed shot. In all cases whimsy (150) values the ability to appreciate the aesthetic harmony possible among myriad incongruent objects. It draws attention to the act of perception and the sensibility of (155) the perceiver.

(160) This is why intellectual whimsy can readily become grating – it invites you to be pleased by the innovations of another person's taste. In the 19th century publishers churned out collections of famous people's 'wit and whimsy'. The two are close cousins because (165) both are understood to reveal the unique charms of their author. If the author fails to enchant, his whims come off as self-indulgence.

(170) Both wit and whimsy are also intended to amuse, a fact that bears remembering before we mount too strenuous an attack on the latter. With its emphasis on perception and discovery, whimsy (175) is perhaps above all suited to journalism. With a few exceptions, artists whose work explores unexpected ways to combine material tend to rely on other principles of (180) association – the subconscious,

(185) conspiracy theory, religious inspiration, coincidence – which suggest greater complexity or offer more expansive horizons. And whimsy’s disregard for the rigours of argument means that it is more suited to appreciation than criticism. But we esteem journalists when they have a talent for discovery and an ability to bestow significance on the incidental. To the

(195) extent that any piece of journalism aims to amuse, to pique interest in the curious and to afford the pleasure of the unforeseen, it may verge on whimsy.

(200) Discussed: High Desert Test Sites, Susan Sontag, Ironic Kitsch, Obsolete Manoeuvres, Lord Whimsy, Matthew Arnold, Elevating Apathy into Anarchy, Dalmatian Mice, Wit, Conspiracy Theory, Pleasure.

A Response in Earnest

by Luke Johnson

Section One: Why Flirting is Good For You

1. Why are people drawn to the Random and Insignificant?

- A. Connections between them reveal new information.
- B. Information provides context for community
- C. Community = Common Sensibility
- D. Common Sensibility unites people against the norm

Examples: Baseball Statisticians, Wine Connoisseurs, Dead Heads

2. What is the difference between Flirtation and Love?

- A. Flirtation
 - 1. Playing within rules of a game
 - 2. Teasing out of information
- B. Love
 - 1. Chemistry
 - 2. Commitment

Motherly Advice: It’s not flirting when you start sleeping with someone.

3. How can flirting be good for you?

- A. Process of self-discovery
- B. Creating connections (+ or -)
- C. Discovering the relevance of the random

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Section Two: Is it Possible to Measure Sincerity?

1. Seriously, is it possible to measure Sincerity?

- A. Yes
- B. Methodology
 - 1. Beats me
 - 2. A topic that interests me enough to pursue further

2. How does Sincerity relate to the Insignificant and Random?

- A. Consequences of randomness
 - 1. Apathy leads to anarchy
 - 2. Alienation of the viewer
- B. Benefits of sincerity
 - 1. Ability to sleep at night
 - 2. Relies on the principles of association
 - a. Greater complexity
 - b. Suited to appreciation



Section Three: The Self-Indulgence of Whimsy

1. Who is an Earnest Artist?

- A. One who understands his/her audience
 - 1. An audience with an above average education level
 - 2. An audience with the ability to make connections
- B. One who understands his/her artistic goals
 - 1. Pique Curiosity
 - 2. Amuse

Examples of the Earnest Artist: Ira Glass, David Sedaris, The Clouds

2. What are the Criticisms of Whimsy?

- A. Taste can be grating
 - 1. Inside jokes
 - 2. Polarization - Like It or You Don't
- B. Disregard for rigors of argument
 - 1. Suited for appreciation
 - 2. Suited towards perception
- C. Sentimental
 - 1. Lacks an edge
 - 2. Twee
- D. Small Goals = Big Failures
 - 1. Does it change lives?
 - 2. Does it seek the truth?
 - 3. Does it embrace suffering?

Inside Joke: My other car is the Millennium Falcon.

3. What are the Opportunity Spaces for Sincerity today?

- A. Prevalence of Cynicism
 - 1. Sincerity rejects irony
 - 2. Self-parody can access difficult topics
- B. Age of Oprah
 - 1. Biographies/Confessions are familiar media
 - 2. Sincerity doesn't take advantage of people
- C. Populous Media
 - 1. Everyone can get involved
 - 2. The sincere artist presents a polished product

Great Quote: "Sincerity needs constant rebooting: never let it get old and predictable. Always keep it radical."



Section Four: Conclusions Between the Two Texts

- (10) **I believe the act of connecting a “disparate lot of ephemera” serves as a metaphor for the creative process. Because there is no formal route to inspiration, designers must have an active approach towards creativity.**
- (22) **To this end, *watching* “the emergence of unexpected relationships among apparently unrelated things” implies a passive process. The active learner engages with all forms of expressions for an idea that is interesting enough to pursue further.¹**
- (38) **A shared attitude creates a common sensibility, and in turn, a community. As a designer, it is important to identify those individuals or communities which are doing work that you admire. This helps to position your craft and define your values.**
- (46) **Flirting precipitates engagement. I believe flirting is good for you because it allows one to rationally tease out information without commitment.**
- (55) **What is truly ironic is that we live in a society that is so willing to reveal personal information yet has trained itself to be so self-conscious.**
- (57) **While irony exposes the contradictions in society, it fails to offer solutions. Self-parody, on the other hand, provides designers with an entry point for difficult subject matter.**
- (89) **I don't know if it is possible to measure a person's sincerity but I believe it is a topic worth investigating.**
- (141) **The use value of a refined sense of humor prevents sincerity from becoming sentimental.**

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Ideas that are interesting enough to pursue further include: adding caffeine to toothpaste, robbing a bank using the affordances of a pneumatic tube tube, measuring sincerity.

STOP

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DO NOT TURN TO ANY OTHER ESSAYS IN THIS BOOK.