

Scandinavian Takes on Mediated Authenticity

Anne Jerslev, **Vi Ses På TV - Medier og Intimitet (See You on TV - Media and Intimacy)**. Gyldendal, 2004.

Anders Johansen, **Talerens Troverdighet: Tekniske og Kulturelle Betingelser for Politisk Retorikk (The Speaker's Credibility: Technological and Cultural Conditions for Political Rhetoric)**, Universitetsforlaget, 2002, 283 pp.

Reviewed by
Espen Ytreberg
Oslo University

Really being Oneself

Few challenges of understanding today's culture and mentalities can be more central than those associated with understanding authenticity. Sincere persons speak so as not to betray others, says Lionel Trilling, while authentic persons speak so as not to betray themselves. The virtue of "really being oneself" and being "true to oneself" in the face of "mere role playing" seems an extremely pervasive one. Perhaps this is a Western notion, perhaps a Protestant one: certainly it seems dominant where the two coincide, as they do in the U. S. and in Scandinavia. Anders Johansen relates the anecdote that Norwegians tend to be stricken by bad conscience when saying "How are you?" to a stranger. Given that we do not really want to know how the other person truly feels, it feels as if that the right thing would have been to just shut up. Although this is a light-hearted swipe at the stereotypical Norwegian (silent, boorish, suspicious of mannerisms) it also points toward a more serious insight. By demanding that one's actions must spring directly from one's inner feelings, authenticity causes difficulties both in our relations to ourselves and to others.

At the same time, authenticity is highly valued nowadays. It has been installed in culture as a working premise, shaping communications processes both mediated and non-mediated. The ideal of really being oneself seems as pervasive in individual self-understandings as it is in public debate. Both "ordinary people" and national politicians seem to judge behaviours according to whether they are "real." And they seem to judge realness in terms of whether the person is in touch with his or her true inner feelings. In short, the concept of authenticity seems to describe a communicational climate, a certain current mentality. It is closely intertwined with other concepts that have been used to diagnose current mentalities: "intimacy," "conversationalisation," "informalisation," "feminisation,"

Although it is not often considered as such, the study of authenticity, its history, forms and importance to society and culture, could be seen as a strand within media and communication studies. Its seminal figures include the likes of Richard Sennett and Joshua Meyrowitz. Arguably its foremost Scandinavian exponents are the Danish scholar Anne Jerslev and the Norwegian Anders Johansen. In her book *See You on TV*, Jerslev focuses on authenticity in the performances of ordinary people in the media. Johansen's *The Speaker's Credibility* deals with the rise of authenticity as a rhetorical ideal for public speakers, in and outside of the media. Both works cover more ground than this: For instance, Jerslev

offers a comparison of intimacy in high and low cultures, Johansen an outline history of public speaking that runs back to antiquity. This review concentrates on their contributions to the task of accounting for the logic, causes and consequences of mediated authenticity. It is a rave review in that its mandate has been to pick among the best of what Scandinavian-language scholarship has to offer, explain why it is good stuff and what it may contribute in a wider media and communication studies context.

Politicians Showing (off) Souls

A high point in *The Speaker's Credibility* is Johansen's rhetorical analysis of Norwegian socialist politician Erik Solheim's rhetoric of authenticity. In the 1980s and '90s, Solheim established himself as a successful media politician by projecting a media persona of honesty and vulnerability. For instance, he would announce in advance of an election campaign that he intended to stay away from talking about things he did not know much about. When asked by a journalist whether this sort of honesty was actually smart, Solheim replied: "When it comes to honesty I have no choice. I can't lie without everyone noticing, so I might as well not." The key point here is not that Solheim considered it wrong in principle to lie, but that he considered himself unable by nature to pull one off. He was compelled to speak the truth about himself, says Johansen. That compulsion becomes the primal truth, more fundamental than truths about factual matters. "Speaking the truth is nothing compared to *being* true," goes one of Johansen's felicitous phrases.

This rhetoric on the self relegates facts and arguments to a secondary status. Sometimes it may even obscure vital facts. One of Johansen's examples is the "Great Communicator," Ronald Reagan. Reagan was the perfect Mr. Nice Guy, says Johansen. His appearance was easygoing and low-key. He sounded reliable, in an ordinary, non-bureaucratic and non-expert kind of way. When it turned out he had misinformed Congress about illicit support to the Contras guerrilla, Reagan defended himself by saying that his heart and best intentions told him he had acted rightly even when evidence said otherwise. So the rhetoric of authenticity can be used to push issues of what is true to one side, in favour of issues of what is felt. By accepting the ideal of authenticity pretty much wholesale in our current politics, we inherit these tendencies for soul-baring to obscure the abstractions of fact, argument and competence, says Johansen. Politics enters into a confessional mode, and you can't really argue against a confession.

When saying these things, Johansen at times sounds rather like medium theorists like McLuhan and Postman. Like them, Johansen takes a keen interest in the way that media technologies shape human communication. He emphasises how Solheim and Reagan are products of the mediatisation of politics, particularly its television. Television gives us close-ups of politicians' voices and faces. It exposes the feelings that underlie all arguments, so the politician had better both feel the argument, so to speak, and project that feeling effectively.

The History of Authenticity

However, Johansen is no orthodox technological determinist. He is as interested in the ways that culture and society shapes technology. Above all he is concerned to temper theorising with empirical richness and nuance. It is one of the virtues of *The Speaker's Credibility* to not get bogged down with

theory in order to arrive, as most tend to do, on the middle ground of the society-versus-technology debate. Johansen is more interested in the fine grain of actual cases, producing from them a carefully nuanced history of the rise of authenticity. Particularly interesting are his wide-ranging examples of how a movement toward authenticity in performance was in evidence before the rise of electronic media. In the area of speechmaking, Johansen gives a fascinating account of how Maximilien Robespierre's speeches stood out from those of his more theatrical contemporaries with their simplicity and gravity. To Johansen, Robespierre is an example of authentic political performance well before the advent of electronic media. He applies the same type of argument to Stanislavskian acting. Its demand that actors find resources for their roles within their souls preceded the film medium, whose facilities for close-ups and continuity conventions were perfectly fitted to realize Stanislavskij's principles.

Historically speaking, authenticity rises out from a more "theatrical," stylised rhetorical tradition where dramatic displays of emotion are appropriate, so long as they indicate that the speaker's emotion is animated by the cause he is expounding. In classical rhetoric it is commendable to recruit feeling for the cause from within oneself, but there is no notion that this feeling somehow emanates from a uniquely individual self. This individual is the product of a Western development that breaks to the surface with the French revolution and triumphs in 20th century democracy. In Johansen's account, the rise of an authentic rhetoric in contemporary politics is closely bound up with the rise of democracy. Its emphasis on individuality and ordinariness could hardly have been as successful as it was, if not for the rise of Western everyman's rights and welfare throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Still, Johansen's view of authenticity, as practiced by today's politicians, is a decidedly critical one. He distrusts the ways it lets holders of great power in society pass themselves off as everyone's friendly neighbour. This much is well known, for instance from Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analyses, but Johansen is onto something stranger. He describes as a sort of atrophying process where the rise of democracy and individualism leads to a depletion of the rhetorical resources themselves. Modern politicians strive for a pared down, unassuming style that almost wants to be no style at all, but as the Reagan case illustrates, this does not necessarily mean we are any the wiser when it comes to facts or personal motives. The results are strikingly meagre, both in terms of style and content. Johansen seems to arrive at a rhetorical end-of-history situation, what he himself terms a "rhetorical point zero." There is a paradox here that Johansen grapples with but in the end cannot quite get his head around. *The Speaker's Credibility* thus features a somewhat frustrated end to its impressive journey of insight.

Authenticity in Intimate Media Settings

Anne Jerslev's book *See You on TV* is also all about people who project deep souls and genuine emotions through contemporary media. Otherwise its focus differs from Johansen's in respects that make comparison between them interesting. Where Johansen focuses on established genres dedicated to the mediatisation of politics, Jerslev's book deals with the rising hybrid genre of reality TV and related factual genres. And where Johansen's focus is mainly on trained, professional performers, Jerslev's interest primarily lies in reality TV and foregrounds the performances of participants, so-called "ordinary people." Intimacy, of course, is a matter of the deepest recesses of people's lives. Intimate TV, then, is about going public with really private matters, not doing chitchat in a breakfast TV studio. Still Jerslev does not

want to be confined to a thematic focus. She emphasises that intimacy is just as much a discourse, a mode of communicating, as a set of thematics. Thus there is an intimate mode of address, exemplified for instance by the confessional monologue to camera. There is an intimate style, for instance the jumpy, grainy, close-up style that Jerslev traces in the reality series *Cops* and in a film such as *The Blair Witch Project*. Intimacy is also a strategy that is well suited for the purposes of competing in contemporary TV markets. Jerslev is well aware of this last fact, but her interest does not really lie in markets or institutional strategies. Pointing to the fact that a discourse of intimisation has been on the rise also in contemporary art, she argues that something more general is going on with the way intimacy and selfhood is being understood within contemporary culture.

Center stage in the spaces of mediated intimacy stands the authentic person. Jerslev's take on authenticity in *See You on TV* bears clear resemblances to that of Johansen. They are both careful to describe authenticity as the effect of certain types of performance. Jerslev tends to take a particular interest in the aesthetic and visual aspects of this performance. For example the *Big Brother* contestant will address the camera directly from the designated "confession booth". The direct address to camera, the individuality of gestures, the emotionally inflected telling of a very personal tale: all of these combine to produce an effect of immediate, subjective truth being conveyed – "as if there were no veils, no closed doors, only transparency," says Jerslev.

This description of authenticity is inspired by John Dovey's notion of contemporary TV as a "first-person medium." However Jerslev adds important dimensions to Dovey's diagnosis. She does this by taking a performative approach to intimacy, focusing on the embodiment of trauma and what she terms "affective intensities." For Jerslev, the authentic performances of reality TV and other intimate media arenas are quite literally done with the body. With great acuity and sensitivity Jerslev zeroes in on the bodily experiences of the intimate realm. Emotions such as guilt, pity, and fear stamp themselves on performers' exteriors. An obvious example is the format *Fear Factor*, but the tendency is a more general one. Most reality formats seem to place a premium on people who are able to project the subjective experience of having undergone some intense and often harrowing experience; for instance experiencing infidelity, or being socially ostracised. Reality TV programs are in the business of delivering such affective intensities, trying at the same time to generate and contain them for the purposes of entertainment.

Authenticity and the Mediated Self

The reality TV participants' attempts to look authentic can seem like a paradoxical, almost impossible exercise. Jerslev notes the ritual invocations of participants who keep claiming to "be themselves" and "be real" even in thoroughly constructed and artificial settings like the *Big Brother* bunker. Jerslev's analysis of this format unravels some key complexities of mediated authenticity with great subtlety. Putting Erving Goffman's vocabulary to good use, she argues that in *Big Brother* there is no real back region where performers can have time out from their performer roles. On the face of it, this would involve them in (self) deception. By claiming that they "are real" and "are being themselves" they would seem to be in denial about the permanent constructedness of their performance. However Jerslev is on the trail of an authenticity that is not external to the constructions of reality TV settings, but instead intrinsic to them. Precisely against a backdrop of artifice can authenticity stand out in a new way.

Authentic *Big Brother* participants are able to project a strong sense of "being themselves" while also adopting a role facade appropriate to the social situation at any given time. Here, "the authentic self is a mobile self," says Jerslev. The most efficacious attitude is being flexible about roles and committed to them at the same time. As reality TV comes of age, participants become more and more reflexive about these mechanisms. Disguising one's real self is clearly bad for reality TV participants, but discussing that self can be quite consistent with authenticity. Jerslev's case is the Danish 2001 *Big Brother* contestant Pii. She stood out from the crowd of participants by explicitly verbalising issues of casting and self-distancing. However that season's winner Jill was carried to a sympathy victory on the back of a confessed rape trauma earlier in her life. Reflexivity, it seems, takes second seat to the intensity of subjectively experienced trauma.

See You on TV proclaims that it is in the business of understanding mediated intimacy, not defending or attacking it. And it delivers on that promise by taking seriously what it is the performance does for participants and their sense of selfhood. Jerslev follows the approach of Dominique Mehl's fine book *La télévision de l'intimité* in seeing the performances of intimate television as a means of coping with contemporary society. One of the most absorbing chapters in *See You on TV* is a study of school assignments where Danish teenagers discuss *Big Brother*. Not surprisingly, opinions are divided and a critical attitude is not uncommon. However, certain premises of the media-saturated society seem to be generally accepted. The desirability of fame is one; the necessity of standing out from the crowd is another. It seems that these youngsters are actively attuned to living in a world where authentic selfhood gets built in mediated and public environments. "Everyone wants to be *on*," as one of them says.

Exhausted Pros and Amateurs on the Offensive

The authentic performances of Anders Johansen's professional speakers and Anne Jerslev's amateur reality participants are both successful and both dominant, in terms of their contemporary discursive status. For both Andersen and Jerslev, "authenticity" involves a soul, an emotionally inflected subjectivity, that is made present through a communicative performance. There are also differences in their discussions of authentic performances, and some of them seem to come down to basic role requirements. The professional performer needs a facade that works to convey institutional authority. It also needs to be usable for a great number of performances. These are reasons not to make the performance too overtly subjective and individual. The non-professional participant, on the other hand, speaks for no one else, and often relies precisely on the subjective and individual element.

However, there is another type of difference in how the two authors present the current situation of their respective types of authentic performer. Johansen's speaker has stagnated rhetorically in the midst of success. Current authentic political rhetoric is increasingly depleted in terms of style and not much soul gets bared after all. The sense of exhaustion and depletion contrasts strongly with Jerslev's reality participants. They are a horde ready to beat down television's doors. They do not seem to be holding back; on the contrary, they want in on the media action. Their performances actively lay bare the subject, they are brimming with emotion and intensity. Their vulnerability is striking, but so is their eagerness.

Read together, then, Jerslev's and Johansen's books not only provide valuable insights about media rhetoric past and present; they also indicate a possible future. One may speculate that the rise of mediated authenticity involves a tipping of the balance in the direction of non-professional performers who can take soul-baring further than professionals can. Thus we seem to move toward a lowering of the threshold for access to manufacturing mediated authenticity. Somehow the studied-ness of politicians' and celebrities' performances was redeemed by the fact that they knew stuff or were otherwise exceptional. Now that advantage seems to be fading, and the exceptional few may have a harder time standing out from "ordinary people" who know nothing in particular and are no one special. Their hope, it seems, is to *become* that someone special, precisely by mediating themselves.