

# Realism(s)

## Lecture 11: Conclusion

### 1) Looking Back and Looking Forward

### 2) Matters of Fact and Matters of Concern

### 3) Two Recent Fictions of Realism(s)

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### 1) Looking Back, Looking Forward

#### Course Overview:

##### I. Realism(s): Basic Coordinates

26 <sup>th</sup> April	Lecture 1	Introduction
3 <sup>rd</sup> May	Lecture 2	Imitation – Mediation – Representation

##### II. Literary Realism

17 <sup>th</sup> May	Lecture 3	The Rise of the Novel
7 <sup>th</sup> June	Lecture 4	The Realist Synthesis
14 <sup>th</sup> June	Lecture 5	The Turn of the Novel

##### III. Visual Realisms

21 <sup>st</sup> June	Lecture 6	Painting & Photography
28 <sup>th</sup> June	Lecture 7	Realism in Film (Amir Taha)
5 <sup>th</sup> July	Lecture 8	Documentary Realism
12 <sup>th</sup> July	Lecture 9	Realism in Television Series (Erwin Feyersinger)

##### IV. Current Debates

19 <sup>th</sup> July	Lecture 10	Objectivity and Constructivism
26 <sup>th</sup> July	Lecture 11	Conclusion

Poor old realism. Out of date and second-rate. Squashed between the freshness of romanticism and the newness of modernism, it is truly the tasteless spam in the sandwich of literary and cultural history. [...] Realism normally comes stuck with one of a set menu of regular adjectival accompaniments, and whether it's gritty, or vulgar, or kitchen-sink, or photographic, the standard formulations reinforce the way it is seen as itself formulaic, something we already know about and need have no interest in exploring: it is predictable and simple [...] Nowhere is this clearer than in the scorn for realism's crudely 'linear' narratives, its naively 'omniscient' narrators, and – worst crime of all – its facile assumptions of linguistic 'transparency', all of these being qualities that are quite untransparent and unanalyzed in their own meaning but essentially damning in their aim.

(Bowly 2010, xiv-xv)

Merely as speaking, conversing animals [...] we are already 'in' realism, living a life that includes ongoing attempts to represent it 'like' it is to others and to ourselves. Thinking about 'real' realism can help us to reflect upon this predicament.

[...]

It is time for realism to be put back into the critical picture, center-stage.

(Bowly 2010, xxi)

## The Reality Effect (Barthes) / The Mimesis Effect (White)

### Roland Barthes:

Hence, there is a break between the ancient mode of verisimilitude and modern realism; but hence, too, a new verisimilitude is born, which is precisely *realism* (by which we mean any discourse which accepts 'speech-acts' justified by their referent alone).

Semiotically, the 'concrete detail' is constituted by the *direct* collusion of a referent and a signifier; the signified is expelled from the sign, and with it, of course, the possibility of developing a form of the signified, i.e. narrative structure itself. (Realistic literature is narrative, of course, but that is because its realism is only fragmentary, erratic, confined to 'details', and because most realistic narrative imaginable develops along unrealistic lines.) This is what we might call the *referential illusion*. The truth of this illusion is this: eliminated from the realist speech-act is a signified of denotation, the 'real' returns to it as a signified of connotation; for just when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do – without saying so – is *signify* it; Flaubert's barometer, Michelet's little door finally say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of 'the real' (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity.

(Barthes 2006, 233f.)

**White:**

I have long thought that the relation between literary discourse (where writing is supposed to be free and even abandoned) and historical discourse (where factuality, realism and rational commonsense are supposed to prevail) provides a microcosm of modern Western thought's effort to relate imagination (the vision of what might be), and commonsense (the thought of what is the case, what goes without saying). In trying to show the literariness of historical writing and the realism of literary writing, I have sought to establish the 'mutual implicativeness' [...] of their respective techniques of composition, description, imitation, narration, and demonstration. Each in its way is an example of a distinctly Western practice, not so much of representation as of presentation, which is to say, of production rather than of reproduction or mimesis. That is why I have subtitled this collection of essays *Studies of the Mimesis Effect*.

(White 1999, ix)

**“The Future of Reality?” (Brooks):**

I began this book by talking about the human interest in modeling reality: the apparent pleasure we take in making and playing with scale models, at once reproductions and reductions of the world around us [...] I think we need to beware of the fantasies that are marketed to us as realist. Reality may suffer from fictions that have degraded into myths. [...]

How to explain the real if limited fascination of representations that do come close to keeping a record of the everyday, that claim a largely unedited version of experience? We have a thirst for reality even as we suffer a surfeit of reality. Perhaps more accurately, we have a thirst for the reality of others, which may be paired with boredom or pain in our own. [...]

Realism tends to reassert its claims after long periods of time when it has been out of fashion. Hence we may want to say that realism is both a period and a concept [...] and also one continuing tendency of the imagination. [...]

When we indulge in what is no doubt idle speculation about the future of reality and realism in the novel, I think we may want to keep in mind two apparently contradictory phenomena. One is the inward turn of the novel with the coming of modernism, its increasing concern with states of consciousness. Even the popular novel today tends towards a good deal of psychologizing, and has taken up Joycean streams of consciousness as entirely natural and ready to hand. On the other hand, postmodern culture tends to be predominantly visual [...]

How do you find the perspectives necessary to give a sense of a world viewed and understood? [...] There is no way out of pretending: you are writing fiction. It is how you pretend that counts.

## 2) Matters of Fact vs. Matters of Concern

- from 'Being' to 'Doing'
- from ontology to constructivism
- from 'Being' to 'Doing'
- from 'mimesis of reality' to 'mimesis of process'
- from 'matters of fact' to 'matters of concern' (Latour 2004)

[A] certain form of critical spirit has set us down the wrong path [...] The question was never to get *away* from facts but *closer* to them, not fighting empiricism, but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism. (231)

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles [...] the one who offers [...] arenas in which to gather [and] the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution. (246)

[Matters of fact are] partial [...] polemical [and ultimately] political renderings of matters of concern [...] a subset of what could be called *states of affairs*. (232)  
[They need to be merged] into highly complex, historically situated, [and] richly diverse matters of concern. (237)

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[We need a new,] *stubbornly realist attitude* [...] dealing with *matters of concern*, not *matters of fact*. (231)

### 3) Two Recent Fictions of Realism(s)

#### **Richard Powers, *Plowing the Dark* (2000)**

(cf. Reinfandt 2002)

#### **Three strands of narrative:**

- 1) Ex-artist Adie Klarpol helping with the construction and implementation of a CAVERN (Computer Assisted Virtual Environ) at TeraSys, Seattle, in the mid-1980s (3rd-person narrative)
- 2) The fate of American Taimur Martin, held hostage in Lebanon (2nd-person narrative)
- 3) Textual stagings of virtual realities in 2nd-person mode

**[Henri Rousseau, *The Dream* (1910)]**

**[Vincent van Gogh's *Room at Arles* (1889)]**

**[Hagia Sophia, Istanbul]**

**[Hagia Sophia, Istanbul (interior)]**

#### **Adie Klarpol:**

And deep beneath her, where there should have been stillness, something moved [...] She fell [...] The mad thing swam into focus; a man, staring up at her fall, his face an awed bitmap no artist could have animated.

#### **Taimur Martin:**

You do not tell them now, though in time you'll have to. They won't be able to make out what you have to say. How you gave in to the final abyss [...] How the moment you broke and fell, you never hit. How you saw, projected in a flash upon the drooping darkness, a scene lasting no longer than one held breath. A vision that endured a year or longer. One that made no sense. That kept you sane. A glimpse [...] [o]f the peace that the world cannot give.

You'll have to say, someday: how the walls of your cell dissolved. How you softlanded in a measureless room, one so detailed that you must have visited it once. [...] A mosque more mongrel than your own split life, where all your memorizes Qur'an and Bible verses ran jumbled together. [...]

Then you heard it, above your head: a noise that passed all understanding. You looked at the sound and saw the thing that would save you. A hundred feet above, in the awful dome, an angel dropped out of the air. An angel whose face filled not with good news but with all the horror of the coming impact. [...] That angel terror lay

beyond decoding. It left you no choice but to live long enough to learn what it needed from you.

**Last sentence:**

“Look! I made this for you.”

**Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (2015)**

(cf. Reinfandt 2017)

2.1 Me? Call me U. [...] (13)

2.2 What do I do? I am an anthropologist. Structures of kinship; systems of exchange, barter and gift; symbolic operations lurking on the flipside of the habitual and the banal: identifying these, prising them out and holding them up, kicking and wriggling, to the light – that’s my racket. When these events (*events!* If you want those, you’d best stop reading now) took place, I found myself deployed not to some remote jungle, steppe or tundra, there to study hunter-gatherers and shamans, but to a business. Deployed there, what’s more, not by the austere dictates of a Royal Anthropological Society or National University, but by the very business to which I’d been dispatched: I was the in-house ethnographer for a consultancy. (14)

6.8 [...] When [Peymann] first hired me, as he shook my hand to welcome me onboard, he fixed me with his gaze and said: U., write the Great Report. The Great Report? I asked, my hand still clenched in his; what’s that? The Document, he said; the Book. The First and Last Word on our age. Over and above all the other work you’ll do here at the Company, that’s what I’m *really* hiring you to come up with. It’s what you anthropologists are for, right? (61)

6.9 [...] [I]t’s exactly the situation you describe, he carried on, that makes *our* era’s Great Report all the more necessary. Shifting tectonics, new islands and continents forming: we need a brand-new navigation manual. But [...] I tried to tell him [...] there are universities... Forget universities! he snorted, interrupting me again. These are irrelevant, they’ve become businesses – and not even good ones. *Real* businesses, though, he said [...] these are the forge, the foundry where true knowledge is being smelted, cast and hammered out. You’re right, U. [...] the Great Report won’t be composed in a study; it will come out of the jungle [...] a brand new genus, flashing, sparkling – *fulgurating* – high above the tree line, there for all to see. I want it to come out of the Company. We’re the noblest savages of all [...] you, U., are the one to write it. (62)

7.10 [...] I felt a fragile, almost epiphanic tingling of *what-if-ness* come across me. What if...? What if just *coexisting* with these objects and this person, letting my own edges run among them, occupying this moment, or, more to the point, allowing *it* to occupy *me*, to blot an soak me up, rather than treating it as feed-data for a later stock-taking – what if all this, maybe, *was* part of the Great Report? What if the Report might somehow, in some way, be lived, be *be-d*, rather than written? [...] *Fulgurate*, Peymann had said. (77)

11.7 [...] I'd begun to suspect [...] that this Great Report was unplottable, un-frameable, un-realizable: in short, and in whatever cross-bred form, whatever medium or media, *un-writable*. Not just by me, with my limited (if once celebrated) capabilities, but fundamentally, essentially, inherently un-writable. (126)

12.3 [...] [A] new spectre, an even more grotesque realization, presented itself to me: the truly terrifying thought wasn't that the Great Report might be un-writable, but – quite the opposite – that it had *already been written*. Not by a person [...] but simply by a neutral and indifferent binary system that had given rise to itself, moved by itself and would perpetuate itself [...] And that we, far from being its authors, or its operators, or even its slaves (for slaves are agents who can harbour hopes, however faint, that one day a Moses or Spartacus will set them free), were no more than actions and commands within its key-chains. The Great Report, once it came into being, would, from that point onwards, have existed always, since time immemorial; and nothing else would really matter. But who could read it? [...] None, of course: none and no one. Only another piece of software could do that. (133f.)

### **Matters of Fact > Matters of Concern in Literature:**

- subjective experience
- language as a medium
- materiality/mediality
- communication
- symbolic condensation: *Satin Island*/*Staten Island* (143-5); *Rosebud* (148)

### **Layers of Narrative and Motifs in *Satin Island*:**

- Turin (shroud vs. hub)
- oil spill
- death of parachutist
- Lévi-Strauss/Malinowski
- Peymann
- Petr (cancer)
- Daniel (visual culture)
- Claudia (material culture)
- Madison (the G8 summit in Genoa 2001)

### **► New Realism?!?!**

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