

Realism(s)

Lecture 6: Painting & Photography

- 1) Realist Vision
- 2) A Matter of Perspective
- 3) A Brief History of Photography
- 4) Authorship and Autography
- 5) Implications for Realism(s)

1) Realist Vision

[R]ealism is almost by definition highly visual, concerned with registering what the world looks like. We tend to believe – and centuries of philosophical tradition stand behind the belief – that sight is the most objective and impartial of our senses. Thus, any honest accounting for the real, in the sense of the appearances of the world, needs to call upon visual inspection and inventory. It needs to give a sense of the thereness of the physical world, as in still-life painting. In fact, realism as a critical and polemical term comes into culture, in the early 1850s, to characterize painting – that of Courbet in particular – and then by extension is taken to describe a literary style. It is a term resolutely attached to the visual, to those works that seek to inventory the immediately perceptible world. And then: to show that the immediate perceptible world and the systems it represents and implies constitute constraints on human agents attempting to act in the world, hard edges against which they rub up.

(Brooks 2005, 16f.)

If realism stood for an approach to the painting of the contemporary world that treated ordinary experience (rather than the doings of the rich and great) as the proper realm of art, then there were clearly abundant inherited materials from which such art could be made. The emergence and growing importance of the independent genres of portrait, landscape, still-life, and genre-painting itself (small scenes from everyday life), in both northern and southern Europe, between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries, was one sign of the fact that painting, like the other arts, increasingly served secular functions.

(Hemingway 2010, 123f.)

[Gustave Courbet (1819-1877): Self-Portraits]
(1843-45) (1845/46) (1848/49) (1872/73)

[“The Stonebreakers”, 1849, Dresden (lost 1945)]

[“Sea”, 1873]

[“The Origin of the World”, 1866]

2) A Matter of Perspective

'Light': a traditional Western metaphor for divine truth which can be objectively measured by means of the applied mathematics of Euclidian geometry, which in turn provides the framework for the ideal of ontologically correct vision



'Perspective': a (early) modern invention which marks "a singular moment when the fine arts made an actual contribution to the history of science" (*Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* 1998)

⇒ putting the observer on the map: object ← → subject

↓
medium / representation

(cf. Guillén 1971, Reinfandt 2000)

The methods of projecting three-dimensional space onto a flat surface are established by convention; the use of color, the abstracting, the simplification of the object depicted, and the choice of reproducible features are all based on convention. It is necessary to learn the language of painting in order to 'see' a picture, just as it is impossible to understand what is spoken without knowing the language.

(Jakobson 1978, 39)

- ⇒ 'objectivity' has to be reconceptualized immanently
- ⇒ materialism / empiricism vs. rationalism / idealism ?
- ⇒ the emergence of a specifically modern, immanently transcendent observer position

[Camera obscura: Athanasius Kircher, *Ars magna lucis et umbrae*, 1646]

camera obscura

ancestor of the photographic camera. The Latin name means “dark chamber,” and the earliest versions, dating to antiquity, consisted of small darkened rooms with light admitted through a single tiny hole. The result was that an inverted image of the outside scene was cast on the opposite wall, which was usually whitened. For centuries the technique was used for viewing eclipses of the Sun without endangering the eyes and, by the 16th century, as an aid to drawing; the subject was posed outside and the image reflected on a piece of drawing paper for the artist to trace. Portable versions were built, followed by smaller and even pocket models; the interior of the box was painted black and the image reflected by an angled mirror so that it could be viewed right side up. The introduction of a light-sensitive plate by J.-N. Niepce created photography.

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Linear perspective gives the observer the illusion [that] he could see without being involved, that he could see without being seen, without changing the observed through observing and without himself being changed by the act of observing: the subject that sees by means of linear perspective installs itself behind the window of a ‘peep-show’ [...], in the position of a secret voyeur invisible to himself and others. Consequently he is an empirical subject only in a very limited sense. While he is *in* the world in the emphatic sense that the things of the world organize themselves according to his perspective (the things in the world appear before and for his gaze, he is at the same time distanced from the world by this very act.

(Lüdemann 1999, 66, Engl. transl. Huck 2010, 90)

Cf. Jay 1988 on “Scopic Regimes and Modernity” and
Crary 1991 on *Vision and Modernity*.

18th-Century Observer Positions:

| | | |
|--------------------|-----|------------------------------------|
| immersion (being) | ← → | distance (representation) |
| participation | ← → | observation |
| touch, smell, hear | ← → | visuality |
| entertainment | ← → | knowledge |
| spectacle | ← → | authority, legitimacy, normativity |
| popular culture | ← → | Culture (religion, science) |
| Subjectivity | ← → | Objectivity |

↓

art

literature

Ned Ward,
The London Spy (1709) ← →
prints by Hogarth
The Spectator
authorial narrators

Daniel Defoe, various non-fictional
works (1724-38)

(cf. Huck 2010, 31-77)

Eighteenth-Century Dichotomies (Ideology):

| | | |
|-------------------|-----|---------------------------|
| femininity | ← → | masculinity |
| indulgent | ← → | sober |
| irrational | ← → | rational |
| private | ← → | public |
| familial | ← → | commercial |
| artificial | ← → | real |
| Colour, ornament | ← → | simple, undecorated dress |
| consumption | ← → | restraint |

↓

Object

↑

'Subjectivity'

← →

← →

↓

Subject

↑

'Objectivity'

(Huck 2010, 119-132)

>>> Observing the World Realistically?

Even for those who try to be methodologically alert, it still may come as a sort of epistemic shock to realize how recent is the broad common assumption of historical time as a 'natural' condition – a common medium stretching to infinity 'in' which individuals exist and events take place. It is an epistemic shock to realize that this historical convention is not only completely absent in ancient Greece or medieval Europe, it is by no means commonly held even in 1800.

The construction of historical time in nineteenth-century Realist narrative corresponds precisely to that construction of space in realist painting achieved several centuries earlier. In both cases, the apparent focus on realist objects and subjects has distracted attention from the fact that what such art represents are the media of modernity, neutral time and neutral space.

(Ermarth 1997, 70)

['The narrator'] is really a sort of administrative function in narrative. The term narrator suggests, comfortably but falsely, that the narrative hindsight can be referred to an individual, and it thus seems to call attention to and validates the individual perspective. In fact such a reading of the narrative function in question trivializes it, and masks the existence of a perspective *system*, with its manifold abstract powers. Identifying the system by its specifying function alone ('the narrator'), obscures the system's most powerful function, which is to render time neutral, homogeneous and infinite. This time [...] is the medium of modernity.

(Ermarth 1997, 76)

3) A Brief History of Photography

- 1839 Louis Daguerre's 'Daguerreotype'-process draws on forerunners in optics (*Camera Obscura*, 15th/16th c) and chemistry (bleaching ↔ exposure to light, interaction of heat, air and light); William Henry Fox Talbot's 'Calotype'-process producing 'negatives' from which an unlimited number of 'positive' prints could be made
- 1851 Frederick Scott Archer's 'Collodion'-process speeds up exposure times
- 1871 Richard Maddox introduces the use of Gelatin instead of glass for the photographic plate, thus establishing the dry plate process which makes development much quicker
- 1884 George Eastman introduces the flexible celluloid film
 - ▶ photography becomes ever more convenient, the taking of pictures needs less and less specialised knowledge
 - ▶ a highly popular/democratic medium

**[The first successful photographic image, produced by Nicéphore Niépce with over eight hours exposure time in 1827:
a view from the Niépce family house in Gras, France]**

[The earliest permanent paper negative known, produced by William Henry Fox Talbot. It is small and of poor quality. However, unlike the daguerreotype images, it is reproducible. Created from paper soaked in silver chloride and fixed with a salt solution, it depicts the lattice window in the South Gallery of Lacock Abbey (1835)]

[Daguerreotype taken from Louis Daguerre's window, Boulevard de Temple, 1830s (exposure time: 9 ½ hrs)]

[William Henry Fox Talbot: *The Pencil of Nature* (1844): Photograph of a Haystack]

**Photography and Modernism:
e.g. Edward Weston**

- 1911 portrait studio in Tropic (now Glendale), CA, working in the popular soft-focus, romantic pictorialist style
- contact with modernism through articles and illustrations in publications such as *Camera Work*, *Broom* and *The Little Review*
- 1918ff. increasing concern with abstraction and flatness, first sharp-focus photographs
- 1923ff. in Mexico, Weston hones his modernist style, focused upon simplification and abstraction in portrait heads and nudes as well as in images of toys, toilets and tree trunks
- 1926ff. back in CA, Weston explores shells, peppers and nudes in high modernist fashion, as well as juxtapositions of incompatible objects and scales, dream-like scenes, ultimately embracing a looser, more gestural style

[examples]

4) Authorship and Autography

- “photography confronts authorship with autography” (North 2001, 1379)
- subjectivity is confronted with the possibility of reality seemingly representing (writing/painting) itself, as it were, which opens up an unprecedented recourse to ‘objectivity’
- the emphatic subjectivity of Romanticism is counterbalanced by the impersonal/objective programmes of realism and modernism

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| romanticism | authorship |
| realism | reality inscribes itself (into a medium) |
| modernism | autography |

Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” (1821)

The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements [of poetry and art], have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society, which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.

The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave.

A man cannot say, “I will compose poetry.” The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is like a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within [...] Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline.

The functions of the poetical faculty are two-fold; by one it creates new materials of knowledge; and power and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good.

T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919)

The analogy was that of the catalyst. When [...] two gases [...] are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

experience/passions → “*significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet”

T.S. Eliot, “Hamlet” (1919)

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding and ‘objective correlative’; in other words, *a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events* which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

Photography / Authorship / Readership:

The Anglo-American modernist period marks one of the most dynamic moments in human cultural history, signalling a profound shift not only within the cultural relations between audience and an object, but also within the artistic sensibility, aesthetic understanding, and the material representations of these transformations. While science, literature, and the arts radically revised the world in an attempt to capture the shattered, fragmentary nature of modernity, the aesthetic counterpoint to the ‘shock of the new’ was the large-scale use, development, and dissemination of the photographic image as an emblem of this world. Simultaneously transient, fantastic, and yet utterly mundane [...], the photograph not only embodied the condition of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, but encouraged the emergence of a totally *visual* consciousness.

(Hansom, xiii-xiv)

The photograph collapses all time into the *now* of looking. This, like most other modernist experiments, plays with the immediacy of being and the ways available to us to represent that situation.

(Hansom 2002, xiv-xv)

Like the photographer, the [modernist] author does little more than initiate the process by which phenomena register themselves in permanent form. The authorial function thus becomes merely mechanical, or chemical, and the agency once so necessary to the prestige of authorship is reduced almost to vanishing.

(North 2001, 1379)

It is commonplace now to understand that all texts produced by authors are not products of individual creators. Rather, they are the result of any number of discourses that take place among the writer, the political and social environment in which the writing occurs, the aesthetic and economic pressures that encourage the process, the psychological and emotional state of the writer, and the reader who is expected to receive or consume the end product when it reaches print. Even if not intended for an audience or the publishing marketplace, a piece of writing cannot escape the numerous influences that produce it. All discourse is socially constructed. Yet we continue to maintain the traditional image of the author as an individualist up against a materialistic world, trying to create something pure and unsullied by the rank commercialism of society despite the interference of the system of publication, which requires mediation and compromise.

(Inge 2001, 623)

After more than 170 years of photography, 100 years of cinema, 50 years of television and 25 years of video, there can be no doubt that technological imagery has been making an ever deeper impression on our culture. A prophet of this turn is the Chicago literary critic W.J.T. Mitchell, who proclaimed an 'iconic turn', thereby pinpointing a change of structure in the composition of our culture. According to this concept – if we may speak in terms of neurology – culture has shifted its emphasis from the left, language processing half of the brain to the right, image-processing half. [...] However, if we take a closer look at the image culture of today, it will immediately become obvious that images are very seldom completely divorced from language. [...] What we have here is not replacement but addition, although it must be stressed that each new medium alters our relationship to older media.

(Assmann 2012, 77)

Revolutions in Communication (Kovarik 2011):

1) The Printing Revolution

1455-1814: technology

1814-1900: commercialisation/industrialisation

2) The Visual Revolution

photography/motion pictures/advertising

3) The Electronic Revolution

telegraph and telephone/radio/television

4) The Digital Revolution

computers/networks/globalisation

5) Implications for Realism(s)

Nancy Armstrong, “Realism before and after Photography”:

[M]odernism condemns mass culture for confusing images with objects and fabricating a limited representation of the world as a result. Modernism condemns pictorial representation in particular for having substituted a superficial, bourgeois vision of the world for the world itself. [...] The truth that modernists sought, whether in the material world of objects or in the unconscious recesses of the modern subject, was a truth obscured by visual images. [...]

Modernism set about to stage aesthetic encounters that would shock the reader/viewer into new sensations. One could argue that, in so doing, modernism tried – like each of the various forms of realism I have discussed – to market itself on the basis of its opposition to a false realism. [...]

[However,] [t]hrash, kick and rail against the limits of mass visuality as they might, from a postmodern perspective, modernists were caught in the logic of the mimetic fallacy. On the basis of conviction arguably fostered by photography, they proposed to put us back in contact with an authentic world beyond the surface. [...]

Rather than yearn for a lost object that never existed beyond word and image, at least not in the pure state that modernism imagines, postmodernism relinquishes the *a priori* being of both subject and object. Postmodernism understands that the theater and objective of power has shifted from the material world to what can only be called the terrain of images; it would have us understand that over the course of three centuries, images have become in some sense more primary than the world they represent. Postmodernism acknowledges that under these conditions, the mimetic fallacy is true mimesis after all. Now, as in Austen’s day, the term ‘realism’ still applies to forms of mediation that seemed to offer the observer direct contact with the

object viewed. In our day, however, the term has acquired a secondary meaning of a form of mediation that offers only a symbolic and culturally relative version of the real.

'Realism' in this contrary sense challenges the idea of realism as a mode of representation – invariably containing visual evidence – that accrues to itself the authority to say what is real. As a result, it can be argued, 'realism' is undergoing yet a further permutation whereby the term will refer to mediation that obstructs access to the material world, offering a strategic map instead.

(Armstrong 2010, 116-118)

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Internet Resources:

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http://www.historiccamera.com/history1/photo_history300.html

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Revolutions in Communication: Media History from Gutenberg to the Digital Age.

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