

# Realism(s)

Taking its cue from Salman Rushdie's quip that "unnaturalism" is "the only real ism of these back-to-front and jabberwocky days," this course of lectures will explore claims to realistically represent the world 'as it is' in their various discursive and historical contexts. Beginning with an inquiry into modern notions of objectivity, the lectures will address the dangers of failing to distinguish 'reality' from the reality-effects of its representations. They will investigate traditions of realism in literature and painting against the backdrop of emerging objectivity in the modern sciences and take into account the effects of evolving media contexts which have increasingly opened up opportunities for visual representation (photography, film, television, the internet).

## Lecture 1: Introduction

### 1) Course Overview

### 2) Some Examples

### 3) Definitions

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#### ***Beginning Realism:***

Realism should be easy. It is whatever is real, which we do not need to be told because we already know it: we live it every day of our lives. We all live in the real world, and nobody can tell us any different. We might need help with other 'isms' when studying literature and the arts – Romanticism, Surrealism, Modernism, Postmodernism, for instance, require some kind of explanation – but surely not an 'ism' which sounds as if it is based on our very existence. We may be aware that terms used to describe artistic practices have different meanings from their common usage, but 'realism' as an aesthetic idea surely cannot be too far removed from the way we would talk about something 'real' during the normal course of our lives: 'realism' is surely just the word 'real' made formal, a subject fit for study. What is the fuss about? Why on earth should anybody need to read a book [or listen to a course of lectures] about it?

(Earnshaw 2010, 1)

# 1) 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 (Guest Lecture by Amir Taha, English Department)
5 <sup>th</sup> July	Lecture 8	Documentary Realism
12 <sup>th</sup> July	Lecture 9	Realism in Television Series (Guest Lecture by Erwin Feyersinger, Institut für Medienwissenschaft)

## IV. Current Debates

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

### Course Requirements:

Please note that there will be **no written exam** for this lecture course, **which yields 3 ECTS** as a rule (so it is not eligible for the Wahlpflichtbereich GymPO 4 ECTS slot, which needs a seminar to be filled).

If you need credits outside of the modules offered by the English Department (which combine lecture courses with seminars in oral examinations), you will have to **hand in a portfolio by July 26 at the latest**. For the portfolio you will have to pick a work (text, image, film, sculpture, whatever) and outline in essayistic form how and why it can profitably be read as a realist piece against the backdrop of the lecture course. The portfolio should not be longer than 3 pages (A 4, 1.5-spaced, 12 pt).

Please don't forget to put your name, Matrikelnummer, the title of the course and the degree programme/module for which you want your results to be registered!

## 2) Some Examples

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

[Brick Wall]

**George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859)**

**Book I, Chapter I:**

**The Workshop**

With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.

The afternoon sun was warm on the five workmen there, busy upon doors and window-frames and wainscoting. A scent of pine-wood from a tentlike pile of planks outside the open door mingled itself with the scent of the elder-bushes which were spreading their summer snow close to the open window opposite; the slanting sunbeams shone through the transparent shavings that flew before the steady plane, and lit up the fine grain of the oak panelling which stood propped against the wall. On a heap of those soft shavings a rough, grey shepherd dog had made himself a pleasant bed, and was lying with his nose between his fore-paws, occasionally wrinkling his brows to cast a glance at the tallest of the five workmen, who was carving a shield in the centre of a wooden mantelpiece. It was to this workman that the strong barytone belonged which was heard above the sound of plane and hammer singing – [...]

Such a voice could only come from a broad chest, and the broad chest belonged to a large-boned, muscular man nearly six feet high, with a back so flat and a head so well poised that when he drew himself up to take a more distant survey of his work, he had the air of a soldier standing at ease. The sleeve rolled up above the elbow showed an arm that was likely to win the prize for feats of strength; yet the long supple hand, with its broad finger-tips, looked ready for works of skill. In his tall stalwartness Adam Bede was a Saxon, and justified his name; but the jet-black hair, made the more noticeable by its contrast with the light paper cap, and the keen glance of the dark eyes that shone from under strongly marked, prominent and mobile eyebrows, indicated a mixture of Celtic blood. The face was large and roughly hewn, and when in repose had no other beauty than such as belongs to an expression of good-humoured honest intelligence.

It is clear at a glance that the next workman is Adam's brother. He is nearly as tall; he has the same type of features, the same hue of hair and complexion; but the strength of the family likeness seems only to render more conspicuous the remarkable difference of expression both in form and face. Seth's broad shoulders have a slight stoop; his eyes are grey; his eyebrows have less prominence and more repose than his brother's; and his glance, instead of being keen, is confiding and benign. He has thrown off his paper cap, and you see that his hair is not thick and straight, like Adam's, but thin and wavy, allowing you to discern the exact contour of a coronal arch that predominates very decidedly over the brow.

The idle tramps always felt sure they could get a copper from Seth; they scarcely ever spoke to Adam.

The concert of the tools and Adam's voice was at last broken by Seth, who, lifting the door at which he had been working intently, placed it against the wall, and said, "There! I've finished my door to-day, anyhow."

The workmen all looked up; Jim Salt, a burly, red-haired man known as Sandy Jim, paused from his planing, and Adam said to Seth, with a sharp glance of surprise, "What! Dost think thee'st finished the door?"

"Aye, sure," said Seth, with answering surprise; "what's awanting to't?"

A loud roar of laughter from the other three workmen made Seth look round confusedly. Adam did not join in the laughter, but there was a slight smile on his face as he said, in a gentler tone than before, "Why, thee'st forgot the panels." [...]

### **James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922) [beginning]**

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft and intoned:

--INTROIBO AD ALTARE DEI.

Halted, he peered down the dark winding stairs and called out coarsely:

--Come up, Kinch! Come up, you fearful jesuit!

Solemnly he came forward and mounted the round gunrest. He faced about and blessed gravely thrice the tower, the surrounding land and the awaking mountains. Then, catching sight of Stephen Dedalus, he bent towards him and made rapid crosses in the air, gurgling in his throat and shaking his head. Stephen Dedalus, displeased and sleepy, leaned his arms on the top of the staircase and looked coldly at the shaking gurgling face that blessed him, equine in its length, and at the light untousured hair, grained and hued like pale oak. [...]

### **[ending]**

[...] a couple of lbs of those a nice plant for the middle of the table Id get that cheaper in wait wheres this I saw them not long ago I love flowers Id love to have the whole place swimming in roses God of heaven theres nothing like nature the wild mountains then the sea and the waves rushing then the beautiful country with the fields of oats

and wheat and all kinds of things and all the fine cattle going about that would do your heart good to see rivers and lakes and flowers all sorts of shapes and smells and colours springing up even out of the ditches primroses and violets nature it is as for them saying theres no God I wouldnt give a snap of my two fingers for all their learning why dont they go and create something I often asked him atheists or whatever they call themselves go and wash the cobbles off themselves first then they go howling for the priest and they dying and why why because theyre afraid of hell on account of their bad conscience ah yes I know them well who was the first person in the universe before there was anybody that made it all who ah that they dont know neither do I so there you are they might as well try to stop the sun from rising tomorrow the sun shines for you he said the day we were lying among the rhododendrons on Howth head in the grey tweed suit and his straw hat the day I got him to propose to me yes first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth and it was leapyear like now yes 16 years ago my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today yes that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is and I knew I could always get round him and I gave him all the pleasure I could leading him on till he asked me to say yes and I wouldnt answer first only looked out over the sea and the sky I was thinking of so many things he didnt know of Mulvey and Mr Stanhope and Hester and father and old captain Groves and the sailors playing all birds fly and I say stoop and washing up dishes they called it on the pier and the sentry in front of the governors house with the thing round his white helmet poor devil half roasted and the Spanish girls laughing in their shawls and their tall combs and the auctions in the morning the Greeks and the jews and the Arabs and the devil knows who else from all the ends of Europe and Duke street and the fowl market all clucking outside Larby Sharons and the poor donkeys slipping half asleep and the vague fellows in the cloaks asleep in the shade on the steps and the big wheels of the carts of the bulls and the old castle thousands of years old yes and those handsome Moors all in white and turbans like kings asking you to sit down in their little bit of a shop and Ronda with the old windows of the posadas 2 glancing eyes a lattice hid for her lover to kiss the iron and the wineshops half open at night and the castanets and the night we missed the boat at Algeciras the watchman going about serene with his lamp and O that awful deepdown torrent O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and the pink and blue and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibraltar as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

### Philip Larkin, "Here" (1961)

Swerving east, from rich industrial shadows  
And traffic all night north; swerving through fields  
Too thin and thistled to be called meadows,  
And now and then a harsh-named halt, that shields  
Workmen at dawn; swerving to solitude  
Of skies and scarecrows, haystacks, hares and pheasants,  
And the widening river's slow presence,  
The piled gold clouds, the shining gull-marked mud,

Gathers to the surprise of a large town:  
Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster  
Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water,  
And residents from raw estates, brought down  
The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,  
Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires -  
Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,  
Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers –

A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling  
Where only salesmen and relations come  
Within a terminate and fishy-smelling  
Pastoral of ships up streets, the slave museum,  
Tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives;  
And out beyond its mortgaged half-built edges  
Fast-shadowed wheat-fields, running high as hedges,  
Isolate villages, where removed lives

Loneliness clarifies. Here silence stands  
Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,  
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,  
Luminously-peopled air ascends;  
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance  
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach  
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:  
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

(for a full reading of the poem cf. Reinfandt 1997)

### 3) Definitions

OED, 3rd ed., 2008 [online]:

'real' (< Anglo-Norman / Middle French 1283ff.)

#### A. *adj.*

I. That actually exists, or relates to this.

- 1.a. Having an objective existence; actually existing physically as a thing, substantial; not imaginary. [1325ff.]
- b. *Philos.* Designating whatever is regarded as having an existence in fact and not merely in appearance, thought or language, or as having an absolute and necessary, in contrast to merely contingent, existence. [1603ff.]
2. Actually existing or present as a state of quality of things; having a foundation in fact; actually occurring or happening. Also: expressing a subjective relation to a person; actual, significant; able to be grasped by the imagination. See also REAL LIFE *n.*, REAL WORLD *n.* [1550ff.]

[...]

6. *Physics.* Of an image: such that the light that is forming it actually reaches it, so that the image can be captured on a surface. Opposed to VIRTUAL *adj.* 4c [1692ff.]

#### II. Relating to immovable property.

7. *Law.* Opposed to PERSONAL *adj.* 3 [1434ff.]

#### III. That corresponds to or expresses what exists.

8. Corresponding to actuality; true. Freq. in real facts, real story. [1440ff.]
- 9.a. That is actually and truly such as its name implies; possessing essential qualities denoted by its name; genuine, undoubted. Also as intensifier: veritable. [1535ff.]
- b. Esp. of a precious metal, stone, or similar material: natural, as opposed to artificial, imitation, or depicted. [1602ff.]

[...]

- 10.b. That is actually present or involved (as opposed to *apparent*, *ostensible*, etc. [1607ff.]

[...]

### **B. n.**

- 2.a. A real thing; something having (or conceived as having) a real existence. Freq. in *pl.* [1615ff., *pl.* recently replaced by indefinite article]
3. With *the*. That which actually exists (contrasted with something abstract, imaginary, counterfeit, or otherwise insubstantial, or with something ideal). [1637ff.]

### **C. adv.**

1. Modifying an adjective: really, genuinely. Also more generally in later use: very, extremely (orig. *regional* [...] and subsequently also *colloq.*) [1645ff.]

## **'realism' (< German *Realismus* 1781 in Kant, 1798 with reference to literature)**

### **I. Philosophical Uses**

- 1.a. The doctrine that matter as the object of perception has real existence (*natural realism*) and is neither reducible to universal mind or spirit nor dependent on a perceiving agent [*idealism*] [1797ff.]
- b. A philosophical theory reacting against 19th-cent. Idealism which, while agreeing in affirming that external objects exist independently of the mind, differs in accounts of appearance, perception, and illusion; (more recently, opposed to *verificationism*): the theory that the world has a reality that transcends the mind's analytical capability, and hence that propositions are to be assessed in terms of their truth to reality, rather than in terms of their verifiability. [1906ff.]
2. The doctrine of the real existence of universals, independently of the mind (opposed to CONCEPTUALISM *n.* 1) and as more than mere names (opposed to NOMINALISM *n.* 2) (now chiefly *hist.*). Also in later use: the attribution of objective existence to a subjective conception. [middle ages ff.]

### **II. General and other specialist uses**

- 3.a. Inclination or attachment to what is real; (hence) the attitude or practice of accepting a situation as it is and being prepared to deal with it accordingly; any view or system contrasted with idealism. [1817ff.]
- b. The principle of giving priority to practical subjects of education. Cf. REALSCHULE *n.* Now *rare*. (1836ff.)

[...]

- 4.a. Esp. in reference to art, film, and literature: close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise details of the real thing or scene. Also: an instance or example of this. [1856ff.]

While realism in art is often used in the same contexts as naturalism, implying a concern with accurate and objective representation, it also suggests a deliberate rejection of conventionally attractive or appropriate subjects in favour of sincerity and a focus on the unidealized treatment of contemporary life. Specifically, the term is applied to a late 19th-cent. Movement in French painting and literature represented by Gustave Courbet in the former and Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert in the latter.



## ***Encyclopædia Britannica 2002:***

### **realism**

in the arts, the accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life. Realism rejects imaginative idealization in favour of a close observation of outward appearances. As such, realism in its broad sense has comprised many artistic currents in different civilizations. In the visual arts, for example, realism can be found in ancient Hellenistic Greek sculptures accurately portraying boxers and decrepit old women. The works of such 17th-century painters as Caravaggio, the Dutch genre painters, the Spanish painters José de Ribera, Diego Velázquez, and Francisco de Zurbarán, and the Le Nain brothers in France are realist in approach. The works of the 18th-century English novelists Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett may also be called realistic.

Realism was not consciously adopted as an aesthetic program until the mid-19th century in France, however. Indeed, realism may be viewed as a major trend in French novels and paintings between 1850 and 1880. One of the first appearances of the term realism was in the *Mercure français du XIXe siècle* in 1826, in which the word is used to describe a doctrine based not upon imitating past artistic achievements but upon the truthful and accurate depiction of the models that nature and contemporary life offer the artist. The French proponents of realism were agreed in their rejection of the artificiality of both the Classicism and Romanticism of the academies and on the necessity for contemporaneity in an effective work of art. They attempted to portray the lives, appearances, problems, customs, and mores of the middle and lower classes, of the unexceptional, the ordinary, the humble, and the unadorned. Indeed, they conscientiously set themselves to reproducing all the hitherto-ignored aspects of contemporary life and society – its mental attitudes, physical settings, and material conditions.

Realism was stimulated by several intellectual developments in the first half of the 19th century. Among these were the anti-Romantic movement in Germany, with its emphasis on the common man as an artistic subject; Auguste Comte's Positivist philosophy, in which sociology's importance as the scientific study of society was emphasized; the rise of professional journalism, with its accurate and dispassionate recording of current events; and the development of photography, with its capability of mechanically reproducing visual appearances with extreme accuracy. All these developments stimulated interest in accurately recording contemporary life and society.

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## **Realism: capital 'R' and small 'r'**

The term 'realism' tends to be used in two ways. The first use of the term identifies a literary-historical period, namely those years in the second half of the nineteenth century where there was significant production of a type of literature, which often identified itself as 'realist' (or 'naturalist'), or which can be regarded as such. It is synonymous with the novel genre [...] When referring to this usage I will give Realism a capital 'R' [...] The second understanding of realism is a more general one [...] whereby there is a tendency or aim in a work of literature to reproduce a faithful copy of the world, though the works are not necessarily just to be found in the literary-historical period of Realism [...] [N]ineteenth-century Realism might be regarded as a special case of this more general realist tendency in art and literature, what I will call the realist impulse.

(Earnshaw 2010, 5-6)

## **Realism in Contemporary Culture**

What makes a discussion of realism in contemporary culture so challenging is the wealth of definitions offered for 'realism'. The conflicting evaluations of realism are not only indications of different ideological stances but also the result of these different conceptualizations.

If one tries to systematize the different ways in which the term is employed with reference to literature, one can broadly distinguish four usages. In a narrow sense, 'realism' is used to denote an epoch in literary history: it refers to a specific tradition of writing in the nineteenth century, which is most prominently associated with the works of novelists such as Honoré de Balzac, George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, Theodor Fontane, and Anthony Trollope. The realist novel of the nineteenth century features a set of aesthetic conventions for representation, such as complex and psychologically credible characters, a coherent and causally linked plot, and everyday settings. [...] All of these novels rest on the basic assumption that there is a reality independent of the observer which can (though not unproblematically or directly) be communicated via language.

Such a definition of 'realism' as a historically specific phenomenon (we will here label it definition [a]) is transcended in three other frequent ways of using the term. The first one of these (b) is to understand realism in a purely formalist sense, as referring to any pieces of writing using the aesthetic conventions associated with the nineteenth century. In this usage, 'realist' and 'experimentalist' forms are understood as opposing phenomena. A further definition (c) casts realism as an evolving form based on these aesthetic conventions. In contrast to definition (b), it characterizes formal modifications not necessarily as opposed to accustomed realist conventions but as attempts to more adequately represent changing realities. Proponents of definition (c) often emphasize that while the form of realism may change over time, its basic epistemological and ontological premise resembles that of

the nineteenth-century novel. Finally, definition (d) moves away from any ties to specific forms and takes 'realism' to refer to any work of art that is seen to capture reality. In this sense, for example, the modernist novel could be regarded as more realistic than, say, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Of the four usages, this is the one which is most clearly evaluative, 'realistic' here being a positive adjective that denotes the adequacy of a representation.

(Birke and Butter 2013, 2-3)

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