

# REALIST FILM THEORY AND CINEMA

The nineteenth-century Lukácsian  
and intuitionist realist traditions

Ian Aitken



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FOR MY WIFE: HUA-FANG, LINDA



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## Introduction

*Realist Film Theory and Cinema* is the second in a planned trilogy. In the first part of the trilogy, entitled *European Film Theory and Cinema: The Intuitionist Realist and Modernist Tradition* (2001), an attempt was made to explore the relationship between two major traditions within European film theory and cinema. One of these was referred to as the 'intuitionist modernist and realist tradition', the other, the 'post-Saussurian'.<sup>1</sup> However, it will be more than apparent to the perceptive reader that the chief centre of attention of *European Film Theory and Cinema* was intuitionist modernist realism (rather than the post-Saussurian canon) and, in particular, 'intuitionist realism'. Of the book's nine chapters, only one covers the post-Saussurian legacy, whilst three (and, in part, four) are specifically concerned with realism, four with intuitionist modernism. *European Film Theory and Cinema* was, therefore, a book about intuitionist modernist realism, rather than a conventional 'introduction' to film theory.

In addition to this intuitionist modernist and realist orientation, *European Film Theory and Cinema* also attempted a twofold stratagem of recuperation and elision. The effort at recuperation was influenced by a conviction that, within a context of underscoring the latent consequence of a realist and intuitionist aesthetic, it appeared regrettable that some associated areas of European film theory and cinema (such as, for example, French cinematic impressionism and the film theory of Kracauer) had been relatively neglected within Anglo-American film studies. Of course, critical attention has been applied to these particular areas. However, it remains unclear, even after the intervention of scholars such as Richard Abel, Alan Williams, David Bordwell, Dudley Andrew, Norman King and others, what real interest the general critical community retains in a movement such as cinematic impressionism; and to what extent the 'aesthetic' apparel of the movement continues to consign it to critical oblivion, despite the aesthetic and historical importance of films such as *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance*, and the achievements of directors such as Gance, Marcel L'Herbier, Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein and Germaine Dulac.<sup>2</sup> For example, a relatively

recent intercession, such as that by Robert Ray, which endorses the value of impressionism, still seems to stand rather unaccompanied, and unlikely to spark a substantive critical reconsideration of the area.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, and albeit in necessarily schematic fashion, *European Film Theory and Cinema* did attempt such a reconsideration in terms of the book's over riding concern with intuitionist forms, through viewing French cinematic impressionism within a triple perspective of (1) a general tradition of intuitionist cinematic modernism, (2) a progressive French Romantic tradition critical of bourgeois capitalist culture, and (3) a shift towards the aesthetic and intuition as part of a more general rejoinder to the supposed misapplication of rationality within the societies and culture which had engineered the bloodbath of 1914–18.<sup>4</sup>

Much attention has also, again, relatively recently, been given to the work of Kracauer. However, here, once more, the presence of certain critical partialities requires that another process of recovery is initiated. Almost all of the attention paid to Kracauer in recent Anglo-American writing values the early Weimar work far more than Kracauer's major two works – *From Caligari to Hitler* and *Theory of Film* – whilst the posthumous *History: The Last Things Before the Last* is often disregarded. Here, it is supposed that an 'epistemological shift' can be detected between the superior 'early' Kracauer, 'the phenomenological observer of the everyday and the ephemeral' and the poorer 'late' Kracauer, the 'sociological reductionist' and 'unredeemed humanist'.<sup>5</sup> This distinction between early and late Kracauer is also reinforced in part in Miriam Bratu Hansen's 'Introduction' to the latest edition (1997) of *Theory of Film*, which uses primary sources in order to show that Kracauer's earlier conceptions of the book were superior to the final version (though Bratu Hansen does contend that these earlier conceptions also form a *link* between the Weimar writings and *Theory of Film*). Bratu Hansen's view, in particular, is that the completed book relinquishes the concern for historical specificity so evident in the Weimar and immediate post-Weimar writings and, in place of such a concern, adopts a more a historical focus on 'medium specificity'. In a highly detailed and illuminating process of research into primary sources, Bratu Hansen contends that the work which Kracauer carried out on the drafts of *Theory of Film* during the early 1940s, in particular, is of singular consequence:

One might say that history disappears from *Theory of Film* in a double repression: on the level of theory, inasmuch as the specifically modern(ist) moment of film and cinema is transmuted into a medium-specific affinity with physical, external or visible reality; and, in the same move, on the level of intellectual biography, in that Kracauer seems to have cut himself off completely from his Weimar persona . . . Had it been completed at a time closer to the stage of its conception, Kracauer's virtual book on film aesthetics [Bratu Hansen is referring to the early 1940s drafts of *Theory of Film*] would have gone a long way to restoring the history that seems to have disappeared in the later book.<sup>6</sup>

Bratu Hansen may well be right on this point, and the argument is an important one because, as she, Gertrud Koch and Heide Schlüppmann have indicated, *Theory of Film* does not directly address important historical events such as the Shoah, and implications are attendant upon this.<sup>7</sup> However, *Theory of Film* must also be understood *in terms of* its focus on medium specificity and realism, rather than on the way that such a focus may exclude, or stand in for, a more historically specific account. The fact that *Theory of Film* is not directly concerned with concrete historical specificity does not necessarily mean that the 'late' Kracauer is not. In addition, whatever the value of the deleted 1940s drafts, it is the final version of *Theory of Film* which exists within the public domain, and that which must be addressed. In any case, the 1940s drafts of *Theory of Film* which Bratu Hansen has so profitably researched neither prove nor disprove her overall account, nor 'explain' the final perspective of *Theory of Film*, because, as will be argued in [Chapter 6](#), evidence always 'underdetermines' theory.<sup>8</sup>

It can also be argued that much recent critical reassessment aspires to recover Kracauer against a backdrop advocacy of postmodernist criticism and phenomenology, rather than realism; and also that it is such theoretical allegiance which leads to the derogation of *Theory of Film* in favour of the Weimar writings, and to a raising up of a postmodernist phenomenological stance over and above the claims of realism. The work of Bratu Hansen, Levin, Koch, Schlüppmann and others is of considerable importance. However, this present book seeks to recover *Theory of Film* in terms of a realist, rather than phenomenological, backdrop advocacy. Like *European Film Theory and Cinema*, *Realist Film Theory and Cinema* also rejects the supposed distinction between a phenomenological and a realist Kracauer, arguing that phenomenology and realism can be discerned within *both* Kracauer's early and late writings, as part of a sustained critique of mainstream cinema as a force for both the reinforcement of abstraction and dominant ideology, and the liberation of the subject.

In addition to such Kracaurian dichotomies, both *European Film Theory and Cinema* and *Realist Film Theory and Cinema* also attempt to reconnect some more general fractures and, in particular, those which have emerged between categories such as 'realism', 'anti-realism' and 'modernism'. In place of such distinctions it is argued that early modernist intuitionist film culture and later practices of cinematic realism form part of one continuous tradition, and that there is, therefore, no abstract partition to be made between realism and modernism *here* (though of course, such partitions can be made elsewhere). Realism, in terms of *this* linked tradition, is as much modernism as realism, and what binds early intuitionist modernism and later intuitionist realism together is a shared *intuitionist* theory, or model, of knowledge. This shared approach to knowledge (an approach which is also, by the way, central to nineteenth-century naturalism and Lukácsian cinematic realism) transcends divergent endorsements of realist and 'non-realist' form within the tradition.

As already mentioned, the intuitionist realist tradition was the principal focus of realist interest in *European Film Theory and Cinema*. However, in the 'Introduction' to the book a number of other important areas of realist film theory and cinema were referred to which could not be accommodated within the remit of the book. These included nineteenth-century realism and naturalism, the realist cinema of Renoir, Visconti and others; and the work of Lukács. In addition, it was also suggested that a more detailed exploration of the relevance of philosophical conceptions of realism to elaborations of cinematic realism should be undertaken. *Realist Film Theory and Cinema* addresses these areas, whilst also attempting to carry out both a more substantive assessment of the shared ideas which link the three main theorists within the classical intuitionist realist tradition, and of the relationship between realist film theory and relevant aspects of contemporary film theory.

*Realist Film Theory and Cinema* explores two traditions of realist film theory and cinema, which will be referred to here as the 'intuitionist realist tradition' and the 'nineteenth-century Lukácsian tradition'. [Chapter 1](#) begins by exploring the origins and characteristics of nineteenth-century realism and naturalism, including the influence of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century determinist philosophical discourses in the writings of Buffon, Maupertuis, Condillac, Helvétius, Saint-Hilaire and Darwin. The chapter then shows how this determinist tradition influenced nineteenth-century French literary realism and naturalism, and explores distinctions between realism and naturalism, focusing on conceptions of representation and human agency within the naturalist movement. The overall objective of the chapter is to elaborate a French nineteenth-century tradition of 'critical' naturalist-realism, distinguish that tradition from more normative forms of realism, and establish its themes, stylistic devices and historical consequence. [Chapter 2](#) follows this tradition into the twentieth century, and explores the influence of the naturalist tradition on early French cinema, covering the pictorialist naturalist school of the 1920s, the cycles of Zola adaptations which appeared between 1902 and 1938 and the 'social realist' cinema of Renoir. The chapter concludes by returning to the model of critical realism elaborated in [Chapter 1](#), and by accounting for Renoir's *La Bête humaine* in terms of that model.

[Chapter 3](#) then establishes how Lukács appropriated the nineteenth-century realist tradition, and explores two central aspects of Lukács's theory: the notion of alienation, and the model of the intensive totality. Lukács's writing on cinematic realism is also considered, and it is argued that the inherent logic of Lukács's position on film leads him, however reluctantly, to espouse the type of naturalist/impressionist realism which, in his writings on literary realism, he largely rejected. [Chapter 4](#) then applies Lukácsian models of literary and cinematic realism to an analysis of Wajda's *Danton* and Visconti's *Senso*, and it is argued that, whilst *Danton* is at variance with Lukács's models of 'classical'

and ‘democratic-humanist’ realism, *Senso* can be considered as a work of ‘inverse democratic humanist realism’, rather than ‘classical realism’. The chapter concludes by arguing that Lukács’s theory of filmic realism can be associated philosophically with a naturalist, phenomenological model of cinematic realism.

Chapter 5 then explores intuitionist realism in the work of Grierson, Bazin and Kracauer, in relation to two key concepts: the ‘problem of modernity’, and ‘totality’. Finally, Chapter 6 commences with a recapitulation of the key themes of nineteenth-century realism, and of Lukács’s model of cinematic realism. The chapter then goes on to establish the central themes and characteristics of an intuitionist realist model of cinematic realism, and to relate intuitionist and Lukácsian cinematic realism to more general philosophical concerns of realism, and other forms of contemporary film theory which bear upon the question of realism. This study of cinematic realism concludes by assessing the significance of the nineteenth-century Lukácsian and intuitionist realist traditions in relation to the general and pressing question of the importance of realism, and by suggesting ways forward for the further development of studies into theories and practices of cinematic realism.

## Notes

- 1 Aitken, Ian, *European Film Theory and Cinema: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001). The original title, ‘European Film Theory and Cinema, the Intuitionist Realist and Modernist Tradition’, was rejected by the publisher on the grounds that it would reduce the market for the book.
- 2 Bordwell, David, *French Impressionist Cinema: Film Culture, Film Theory and Film Style* (New York: Arno, 1980); King, Norman, *Abel Gance* (London: BFI, 1984); Abel, Richard, *French Cinema: The First Wave 1915–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Williams, Alan, *Republic of Images: A History of French Film-making* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1992); Andrew, Dudley J., *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- 3 Ray, Robert B., ‘Impressionism, Surrealism and Film Theory: path dependence, or how a tradition in film theory gets lost’, in Hill, John and Church Gibson, Pamela (eds), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 67–76.
- 4 Aitken, pp. 85–8.
- 5 Petro, Patrice, ‘Kracauer’s Epistemological Shift’, in Ginsberg, Terri, and Thompson, Kirsten Moana (eds), *Perspectives on German Cinema* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), p. 97.
- 6 Bratu Hansen, Miriam, ‘Introduction’, in Kracauer, Siegfried, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. xiii–xv.
- 7 Ibid., p. xiv.

- 8 The ‘underdetermination of theory by evidence principle’ argues that any theory can resist refutation by the test of evidence by reformatting its ‘theoretical network’, and that there are always a number of different theories which will fit any given ‘fact’. The concept is derived from analytic philosophers such as Mary Hesse, W. V. O. Quine and F. Duhem, whose ideas will be discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

## **From the 'true style' to the 'art-form of the bourgeoisie': the origins, characteristics, and theoretical foundation of the nineteenth-century French realist, and naturalist tradition**

During the 1970s and 1980s, when anti-realist film theory dominated much of the critical agenda, the nineteenth-century realist tradition was habitually regarded with misgivings by those intent on the development of a progressive, critical film practice. This was partly as a consequence of the adoption of nineteenth-century realist aesthetic models by a totalitarian culture within the Soviet Union, and the emergence of state-endorsed 'realist' film cultures in fascist Italy and Germany between 1920 and 1945 – both of which could be associated with the nineteenth-century realist heritage. It was this perceived association between totalitarianism and realism, in conjunction with post-1968 post-structuralist, anti-realist partialities, which led some critics to renounce nineteenth-century realism on the grounds that, as an aesthetic practice, it was founded on implicitly directive, manipulative principles, and could not serve as a model for a progressive film practice in the twentieth century.

This sceptical attitude towards realism in general, and nineteenth-century realism in particular, was, in addition, also influenced by a belief that the latter could be considered as, in some way, the cultural and ideological correlative of a newly enthroned and hegemonic bourgeois capitalist order. For example, Fredric Jameson has characterised what he called the 'moment of realism' in the nineteenth-century in terms of the 'conquest of a kind of cultural, ideological and narrative literacy by a new group or class',<sup>1</sup> whilst, in similar vein, Colin MacCabe has argued that the nineteenth-century realist novel carried through 'ideological tasks . . . undertaken for the bourgeoisie'.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Brian Winston has criticised the British documentary film movement on the grounds that its advocacy of realism could be compared with the development of a conservative realist tradition in the nineteenth-century.<sup>3</sup> Arguments such as these can also be found in a number of other critical writings within media studies, and this, in turn, has led to the emergence of a substantial degree of accord over the issue. However, this perspective on nineteenth-century realism rests on some fundamental misconceptions concerning the historical role and

character of the realist movement. For example, realism cannot be considered, in an indiscriminate fashion, as the ideological articulation of nineteenth-century French bourgeois values and, in fact, was often overtly antagonistic to the development of bourgeois power and ideology during the periods of the Restoration, July Monarchy, Second Empire and Third Republic. Whilst it may be the case that realism emerged during a period in which the bourgeoisie wrested political and ideological hegemony from both the conservative aristocracy and the representatives of the radical urban proletariat, this chronological parallelism does not necessarily entail that realism served to articulate and disseminate dominant bourgeois ideology, or serve the interests of the new ruling class.

Another misconception commonly found within the field of film studies is based upon the construction of a distinction between realism and a nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernist movement which appeared to be more overtly aligned against the 'realist' art and ideology of the politically and culturally dominant middle classes. Ironically, this distinction between realism and modernism initially emerged most forcefully in inverted form, within the classical Marxist tradition, when Engels argued that a radical opposition should be made between 'progressive' realism and 'decadent' modernism. Although later writers within media studies were to turn this evaluation on its head, they nevertheless adhered to Engels's belief that a critical distinction must be made between realism and modernism (or, at least, between realism and the modernist avant-garde). However, it will be argued here that no such distinction can be legitimately made, and that advocates of such a distinction have failed to understand the complex intertwined nature of the relationship which existed between realism and modernism during the nineteenth-century. Beyond that, it will be argued that the origins, objectives and central characteristics of nineteenth-century realism have also not been sufficiently understood within the field of film studies, and that this has, in turn, contributed to the institutionalisation of a problematic conception of twentieth-century realist cinema. Before exploring twentieth-century cinematic realism, therefore, it will first be necessary to establish what the origins, objectives and characteristics of nineteenth-century realism were, and how the realist movement was influenced by and interacted with the historical background from which it emerged. These issues will also be addressed through a focus on French nineteenth-century realism, as it is French realism which most keenly encapsulates the key theoretical and historical affinities of the nineteenth-century realist tradition.

### **Origins, influences and characteristics**

The emergence and development of realism must first be understood in relation to both the context of political conflict and turmoil which affected France

during the period and the impact which that context had upon the evolution of politically informed artistic culture. By 1789, that culture was dominated by the neo-classical tradition and, to a degree, the aesthetic origins of realism can be located in the transformations which occurred within that tradition from 1799 onwards. The appellation 'neo-classical' was first applied retrospectively, in the mid-nineteenth-century, as a largely pejorative term aimed at work characterised by a normative and uncritical engagement with the classical heritage. However, that which was later to be designated as neo-classicism initially developed towards the end of the eighteenth century as the 'true style': a committed, principled, engaged *risorgimento* in the arts, which rejected both the aesthetic excesses of the Baroque and Rococo and, perhaps less overtly, the political and social inequalities of the *ancien régime*.<sup>4</sup> Far from being a superficial recapitulation of the classical, the 'true style' played an important role in the culminating, revolutionary phase of the Enlightenment, and gave aesthetic expression to some of the rationalist, secular and egalitarian values of contemporary progressive thought.<sup>5</sup> That expression appeared in the field of sculpture, in the work of Antonio Canova, and in architecture, in the work of Claude-Nicolas Ledoux and Benjamin Latrobe. However it appeared most significantly in the tradition of painting which developed within the framework of the true style and, most particularly, within the work of Jacques-Louis David.

The philosophical discourse of the 'true style' was influenced in part by the 'providential' vision of 'man' and reality advanced during the early period of the Enlightenment. Here, it was claimed that man was a creature whose character was shaped by 'natural benevolence', whilst the world and all within it had been brought into being by an act of divine, providential will.<sup>6</sup> This 'providentialist' position was elaborated most distinctively in Pope's influential poem *Essay on Man* (1733), in which it is asserted that the apparent discord and conflict evident in the world disguises an underlying beneficent order, and that, consequently, 'whatever is is right'.<sup>7</sup> This belief in the existence of an underlying providential order is one source of the Enlightenment concept of 'natural law': the doctrine that universal natural and ethical truths exist within the world, and that those truths could be comprehended through the power of reason. Similarly, the belief in a providential order also influenced the emergence of the idea of 'natural religion': the notion that the work of God could be found expressed in an intrinsically benign natural environment which also encompassed the human social order. As Pope put it in the *Essay on Man*: 'The state of Nature was the reign of God'.<sup>8</sup> This belief in a concord between God, society and 'Nature' found expression in numerous Enlightenment texts, including Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), in which Montesquieu argued that the 'rules of society and the duties of humanity' were in accord with a divine plan;<sup>9</sup> and Morelly's influential *Code de la nature* (1755), which similarly

endorsed the affinity between God, Nature and the social order. Such sentiments were predicated also upon a belief in historical progress as the outcome of a greater understanding of the natural order of things and, even as late as 1794, such beliefs in the natural *bienfaisance* of man, and inevitable advance of progress, could still be found expressed in Condorcet's widely read *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, in which the author asserts that progress is assured by the fact that all men are endowed with 'rigorous and pure principles of justice . . . an active and enlightened benevolence, [and] a decorous and generous sensibility'.<sup>10</sup> By 1794 these providentialist views on human nature, reason and progress had, in addition, also become incorporated into the political programme of the French Revolution, which, in the eyes of Condorcet and other *philosophes*, stood as the embodiment of the Enlightenment enthronement of reason and justice.<sup>11</sup>

The practitioners of the 'true style' were influenced both by providentialist thought and by the millenarian aspirations associated with the French Revolution and, at one level, those practitioners attempted to create aesthetic correlatives of a philosophy based on 'unaltering principles', 'classic perfection', 'peaceful universalism' and 'rational humanitarianism'.<sup>12</sup> However, those same practitioners were influenced also by some of the more disturbing aspects of the period which they lived through, and this was also to shape the evolution of the 'true style'. By the time that the 'true style' came to prominence in the 1780s, for example, the heroic providentialist ideals of the early Enlightenment had already come under serious critique. The source of that critique was twofold. Providentialist idealism emerged during a period of relative economic, social and political stability in Europe, between 1715 and 1740. During this period no major European war occurred, and social conditions improved generally, if inequitably, across the continent.<sup>13</sup> However, the overall concord of the period was eventually shattered, first, by the War of the Austrian Succession of 1740–8, and then by the Anglo-French Seven Years War of 1756–63. After this a period of endemic political instability and military conflict ensued, which, in France, culminated first in the cataclysm of the French Revolution of 1789 and then in a further period of turmoil which continued relentlessly up to the Bonapartist *coup d'état* of 1799. This context of unremitting political and military strife was interpreted by some as an inevitable consequence of the struggle to bring a new harmonious society into being, but it did, nevertheless, further undermine the faith in the future of progress and reason expressed in the works of Pope, Condorcet, Morelly, Montesquieu and others. At the same time that historical events began to challenge such faith, the providential belief in the existence of a changeless inviolate world, brought into being by the hand of divine intercession, was also thrown into doubt by scientific discoveries in the field of geology which revealed the existence of a far-reaching, and often far from providential evolutionary history. These discoveries, which entered general intellectual

discourse through the work of writers and philosophers such as Buffon, Diderot, Rousseau, Chastellux and d'Holbach, suggested that nature was grounded in brute materialist factors of 'chance mutation' and 'flux', rather than order and reason; and that the origins of 'man' may have been bestial, rather than divine.<sup>14</sup>

Neo-classicism emerged at a point when criticism of early providentialist Enlightenment theory was circulating widely within liberal intellectual discourse and, whilst adhering to some strains of providentialist idealism, the true style also incorporated the more ambivalent questioning world view of the later Enlightenment into its discursive framework. The aesthetic system which emerged from this confluence of influences was 'classical' in that it was founded on principles of harmony, 'rational humanitarianism' and high-mindedness; but also other than classical in its adoption of a style which could be characterised as grave, mysterious and conceptually diffident. Neo-classicism developed to a considerable extent in repudiation of what was perceived to be the inconsequential concerns and stylistic excesses of the Baroque and Rococo. One consequence of this was that neo-classical painters adopted a severe, spare style of painting, which, far from expressing a rose-tinted providentialist view of the human condition, sought to express universal moral truths in a manner both trenchant and ascetic. Consequently, whilst formal technique in neo-classical painting is used to depict ideal 'classical' form and compositional harmony, the subject matter in many paintings is preoccupied with the representation of such decidedly non-providentialist themes as compromised heroism, fatalistic encounters, tragic circumstance, perverse logic, bad fortune and injustice.

This subject matter was largely derived from the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles, but was also influenced by certain themes derived from Roman stoicism. During the 1780s stoicism, and the writings of Marcus Aurelius in particular, became an important exemplar for republican reformers, revolutionaries and progressive neo-classical artists, all of whom valued the stress which the stoics had placed on the worth of civic virtue and egalitarian polity.<sup>15</sup> However, although influenced by such themes, neo-classicism was influenced also by less directly political stoic ideas, for example the notion of fatalistic predetermination, and belief in the inevitability of suffering and injustice as a precondition for the ultimate exercise of virtue.<sup>16</sup> Whilst neo-classicism's endorsement of stoic egalitarian values was consonant with the republican/revolutionary sentiment of the 1780s and 1790s therefore, and although neo-classicism itself was adopted as the official art form of the Revolution after 1789, the work of Jacques-Louis David, Philippe-Auguste Hennequin, Fulchran-Jean Harriet, Pierre-Narcisse Guérin and François Gérard also exhibited elements which went beyond a confirming expression of republican sentiment or dominant mores to portray a far more paradoxical vision of the human condition.

Neo-classicism's relationship to the surrounding political context was, therefore, a multifaceted one, and a work such as David's *The Oath of the Tennis Court*

(1791), which depicts the moment at which the representatives of the *tiers état* constituted the National Assembly, is unusual in its explicit endorsement of contemporary governmental ideological imperatives. Neo-classical artists were certainly concerned with the contemporary political context. However, a painting such as Hennequin's *The Remorse of Orestes* (1800) refers to that context metaphorically, rather than directly and, in addition, locates its references within a narrative engaged with issues such as entrapment, predestination and the inescapability of violence and suffering.<sup>17</sup> The same holds true of David's *Marat, at His Death* (1793), which reduces contemporary allusions to a bare minimum, whilst his earlier *Belisarius Receiving Alms* (1780), expresses a 'poignant lament for the transience of human glory, the helplessness of age, combined with a meditation on moral heroism in adversity'.<sup>18</sup> David's most important early work, the *Oath of the Horatii* (1785), the painting which established the dominance of the neo-classical style, is, like his later *Brutus* (1789), also more concerned with universal values of moral heroism, sacrifice and tragic circumstance than with contemporary concerns over nationalism, patriotism or republicanism.<sup>19</sup>

Between the 1780s, and the inauguration of the Napoleonic Empire in 1799, neo-classicism was a relatively autonomous critical aesthetic practice. However, during the Napoleonic period, from 1799 to 1815, and that of the Restoration, from 1815 to 1830, the critical autonomy of neo-classicism depreciated as the movement was commandeered first by the Imperial regime, and then by the restored Bourbon Monarchy, to an extent that had not occurred during the immediate post-Revolutionary period. This decline continued also during the period of the July Monarchy, between 1830 and 1848, when, owing to a combination of increased censorship aimed at curtailing the expression of radical oppositional ideas, the patronage of the Académie, and intervention by the ruling regime, the 'true style' of the late Enlightenment artistic *risorgimento* was transformed into *l'art officiel* of the haut bourgeois Orleanist regime, and into a compromised form of consensual, generic pro-bourgeois historicism.<sup>20</sup>

The fate of neo-classicism is relevant to the study of realism undertaken here because one of the sources of realism – and Romanticism for that matter – can be found in the decline of the neo-classical tradition as a discriminating force from 1799 onwards, and both realism and Romanticism can be understood as critical responses to that decline. Romanticism had initially emerged as early as 1800, in paintings such as Girodet's *Ossian Receiving the Generals of the Republic* (1800–2), as an art-form which emphasised feeling, dynamism, emotion, mysticism and the irrational; and which also discarded both neo-classicism's emphasis on classical pictorial composition and the appropriation, codification and formularisation of the neo-classical tradition which took

place after 1799. This resistance to the neo-classical heritage found, perhaps, its most important expression – in the work of painters such as Anne-Louis Girodet, Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix – in a stress on the need for freedom from the provenance of established rule-governed systems; and this emphasis was given added force from the 1820s onwards, when painters such as Géricault moved outside the established beurocratic structures of the Salon, the Académie and the official processes of reward and prize-giving. It should be borne in mind, however, that, although painters such as Géricault and Delacroix may have rejected what they perceived to be both the rule-bound nature of neo-classicism and its appropriation within dominant ideology, the rules of neo-classicism were originally formulated by no means as part of a project to secure official control over cultural production, but as a means through which universal truths could be explored in a rigorous and analytical manner.

As with Romanticism, the origins of nineteenth-century realist painting can be found also in a critical response to the demise of the neo-classical tradition: a response which included an abandonment of the academy, the founding of an art-form which rejected acquiescence to officially sanctioned, formulaic procedures, and an emphasis on qualities of spontaneity and intuitive response. Realism was also influenced by an intellectual renunciation of the ideology of the Orleanist period and, in both the painting and literature of the 1830s and across the political spectrum, realism emerged as a movement which attempted to represent the shortcomings of the new haut bourgeois hegemony.<sup>21</sup> Far from being the ‘art-form of bourgeois capitalism’, therefore, it could be argued that this form of realism developed as an expression of critical anti-bourgeois sentiment. In the field of literature, for example, a significant form of critical realism emerged in the novels of Honoré de Balzac as a proselytising exploration of the problems arising from the replacement of the traditional culture of the *ancien régime* with one based on bourgeois capitalist values;<sup>22</sup> and, within this, both as a portrayal of the adverse impact of capitalism on a professional petit bourgeois society effectively disenfranchised by the haut bourgeois institutional power structures of Orleanism;<sup>23</sup> and as an attempt to delineate the social institutions and manifestations of lower-middle-class community life which Balzac thought might be doomed to disappear under the rapid pace of capitalist modernisation.<sup>24</sup> However, there are a number of reasons why Balzacian realism cannot be associated too closely with the tradition of critical realism which will be considered within this chapter. In the first place, Balzac’s realism expresses the sentiments of the Catholic/monarchist right, rather than the democratic/egalitarian left. Second, Balzac employs stereotypical representations of working-class types, and a substantial degree of conventionalised plot device and rhetoric. Both of these factors place Balzacian realism outside the central

tradition of nineteenth-century realism considered here; and locate it more appropriately within a form of social 'Romantic' realism which emerged during the 1830s, and which can be associated with the work of writers such as Eugène Sue, George Sand and Victor Hugo.

One of the key influences on the development of the nineteenth-century French realist tradition can, therefore, be located in the existence within some intellectuals and artists of a prevailing sense of displeasure with, and alienation from, the Orleanist regime and its ideology. At one level, dissatisfaction finds expression in the work of Balzac, and in the emergence of both the *bohème* and *l'art pour l'art* movements. However, and more importantly, it finds expression also amongst groups on the artistic left and, as a consequence, provides a foundation for the later emergence of the radical realist movement of the 1840s. In addition to the need to represent forms of social experience excluded from the ruling culture of Orleanism, however, the emergence of realism was influenced also by the appearance of a network of fast-changing contemporary social and cultural conditions, and by a concomitant public demand for images of, and information about, those conditions. This demand was met, in part, by the development of new processes of representation and mass communication, including lithography, wood engraving, photography and more advanced print publishing, to the extent that, between 1830 and 1850, the period of the emergence of realism, an 'image explosion' took place.<sup>25</sup> These images, appearing in new illustrated periodicals such as *Magaziné Pittoresque*, which was founded in 1833, were often composites of existing generic conventions and, accordingly, displayed a marked tendency to ignore established compositional tenets regarding the pictorial representation of reality in their endeavour to depict the complex and frenzied life of the modern city. One consequence of this was that the 'image explosion' of the 1830s also led to the emergence of an 'aesthetic of disorder'<sup>26</sup> which sprang directly from the social experience of the modern city, and this, in turn, would build upon the stress on spontaneity which realism had inherited from the denial of neo-classicism, to form one of the foundations of the realist tradition.

However, in addition to the influence of this iconoclastic 'aesthetic of disorder', the experience of fast-evolving social conditions also generated another factor which was to become crucially important to the realist movement: a desire to represent and understand the *extensive* social totality of modern life. Of course previous generations of artists and intellectuals had also been motivated by such an imperative, but it has been argued that circumstances positioned early nineteenth-century artists and intellectuals quite differently from their predecessors, to the extent that it was only then that they 'were given the geographical as well as historical perspective' to appreciate the extent of the social change occurring around them. As a consequence, 'no previous generation of writers had felt so conscious of living in a shifting environment', and it

was that consciousness which led realists to seek to portray their environment in such a panoramic manner.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the influence of aesthetic, technological, social and political factors, French nineteenth-century realism was also influenced by a number of philosophical and critical discourses, the most significant of which was a determinist tradition of thought which developed antagonistically in relation to the model of subjectivity and rationality which had emerged from the Enlightenment. As already discussed in relation to the impact of providentialist ideas on neo-classicism, that model was premised on the idea of the rational and morally motivated human agent, and placed the cognitive and morally enlightened subject at the centre of knowledge.<sup>28</sup> However, as we have seen, by the 1740s such providentialist beliefs had come under question and, in France, were increasingly challenged by works such as Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* (1749–89) and Maupertuis's *Vénus physique* (1745), which emphasised the immutability and instability of natural phenomena, and La Mettrie's *L'Homme machine* (1747), which stressed the potential irrationality of the world. Despite their differences of approach, these texts shared a common premise that environmental and other factors, rather than an innate rational benevolence, played a substantial, determining role in shaping human thought and agency. One of the most important precursors to this materialist tradition was Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in which Locke argued that all knowledge was received through the senses, and that none was innate. However, Locke shrank back from the full materialist implications of his theory when he argued that the mind nevertheless retained an autonomous ability to process and reflect upon the raw data acquired by the senses. This notion of an 'autonomous faculty' of mind represented an attempt to marry the empiricist theory of knowledge with Christian conceptions of agency and humanist notions of free will. However, Locke's insistence that all knowledge was acquired through the senses nevertheless opened the way for the emergence of more determinist and relativist theories based on the premise that knowledge was largely determined by the 'milieux' of the senses;<sup>29</sup> and the determinism inherent in Locke's ideas was taken considerably further by later theorists in France, two of whom, Condillac and Helvétius, were to have a direct influence on nineteenth-century French realism.

In his *Traité des sensations* (1754), Abbé Etienne de Condillac, the leading figure in the 'sensualist' school, appropriated Locke's empiricist theory of knowledge, but rejected his notion of an autonomous faculty of reason, arguing instead that all thought was derived from the senses, and that it was the shaping power of environment which determined human agency. However, and despite the clear trajectory of his arguments, Condillac's role as a cleric made him draw back from a completely materialist conception of human nature, and led him to argue that the degree of reflective autonomy

which Locke had posited in the mind could also be found in the 'soul'. Condillac's materialist approach was, however, taken further by Claude-Adrien Helvétius, who, in his *De l'esprit* (1758) and *De l'homme de ses facultés intellectuelles et de son éducation* (1773), strongly emphasised the influence of milieu on shaping the mind, arguing in a formulation almost revolutionary for its period – that 'the man of genius is only the product of the circumstances in which he has found himself'.<sup>30</sup> In addition to Helvétius and Condillac, both of whom placed emphasis upon the shaping power of environment, a later group of determinist theorists, the *idéologues*, stressed the importance of heredity and physiological processes in determining human thought and characteristics. Whether premised on notions of environment or of hereditary determination, however, this body of ideas within French thought constituted a fundamental challenge to the conception of human subjectivity which had emerged during the early Enlightenment.

This materialist, determinist tradition had a direct influence on French literary realism during the nineteenth-century. Stendhal drew on the ideas of Helvétius and the ideologues in his *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830), and employed one of Helvétius' key terms when describing his novel as a *chronique* of French society. One of the key ideas which Stendhal and other realists took from the ideologues was the notion that people fell into broad categories of temperament and type, and that this was conditioned by both hereditary and environmental factors. Another key idea, promulgated by the leading *idéologue* theorist Pierre Cabanis, was the notion that subconscious inclinations in the individual, determined by heredity and environment, could overcome rational self-interest. This notion of 'conflicting selves' would have a strong influence on later theories and practices of naturalism, and find expression in works such as Émile Zola's *La Bête humaine* (1890) and, later, Jean Renoir's *La Bête humaine* (1938). Whilst Stendhal was influenced by the ideas of the ideologues, Honoré de Balzac was influenced by the evolutionary zoology of Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire and the theories of physiognomy propounded by Johan Kaspar Lavater.<sup>31</sup> In his *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac attempted to apply the theories of Saint-Hilaire and Lavater to a study of human society and, in particular, sought to develop the literary equivalent of two of Saint-Hilaire's central theoretical principles: the principles of 'unity of composition' and of 'balance'. According to Saint-Hilaire, the principle of 'unity of composition' implied that all vertebrate animals evolved from a common ancestor, but that the different environments within which animals found themselves created different species which nevertheless retained traces of the ancestral original. When applied to an understanding of human society, this principle suggests both that the specific peculiarities of individuals must be related to their particular milieu, and that these different environments had modified, yet also retained, the essential traces of an original 'unitary' human nature. Balzac made his debt to

Saint-Hilaire's 'principle' and zoology explicit in the 1841 Preface to the first volume of *La Comédie humaine*, when he argued that:

There is but one animal . . . The animal . . . acquires the peculiarities of its form from the environment in which it develops. Zoological species are the outcome of these differences . . . I saw that in this respect, society resembles Nature. Does not society make from Man as many different men as there are zoological species, according to the environment where his activity takes place? <sup>32</sup>

This 'zoological' approach led Balzac to draw close connections between individual and environment in *La Comédie humaine*. However, those connections are conceived not as static but as undergoing a process of constant change, a process which Balzac understood in terms of Saint-Hilaire's other key principle, that of 'balance'. This is based on the notion that, when certain physical features develop within a particular environment, others atrophy, so that an overall, but constantly evolving, 'balance' ensues. This process of atrophy and development is driven by an inner urge within species to seek the most beneficial equilibrium within a changing environmental context, and it is this urge that causes physical characteristics to emerge that are better suited to such changed circumstance. Again following Saint-Hilaire, Balzac conceived this quest for 'balance' as an essentially competitive process, in which, like a human jungle, individuals struggle for dominance and survival. In *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac, attempted to apply this principle in order to show how different facets of society were constantly moving into new relations of equilibrium and disequilibria, towards or away from a state of 'balance'; and this principle, together with that of the 'unity of composition', provided a methodological framework for the *chronique* of evolving French society which Balzac set out in *La Comédie humaine*.

Nevertheless, Balzac's supposedly 'objective' application of a purportedly 'scientific' methodology derived from Saint-Hilaire was also fundamentally steered by his own political convictions, and these convictions ultimately led him to question Saint Hilaire's conception of contemporary society as a biologically precipitated 'human jungle'. Initially, Balzac viewed the culture and society of Orleanism as illustrative of Saint-Hilaire's tenets of 'balance', competitive individualism, and survival of the fittest. However, later, and under the force of his own strongly held Catholic-monarchist political beliefs, Balzac began to conceive Saint-Hilaire's 'impressive law of each for himself', not just as an inevitable evolutionary-biological reality but as one which was also vigorously – and, as far as he was concerned, disastrously – fostered and cultivated by the culture of Orleanism. Consequently, and as a result of his political opposition to Orleanism, Balzac redefined Saint-Hilaire's concept of 'balance', replacing its emphasis on the imperative of continuous adaptation to a shifting competitive environment with the idea that a more 'balanced' society – one