

Realisms in Contemporary Culture

linguae & litterae 21

linguae & litterae

Publications of the School of Language & Literature
Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies

Edited by

Peter Auer · Gesa von Essen · Werner Frick

Editorial Board

Michel Espagne (Paris) · Marino Freschi (Rom)

Ekkehard König (Berlin)

Michael Lackner (Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Per Linell (Linköping) · Angelika Linke (Zürich)

Christine Maillard (Strasbourg) · Lorenza Mondada (Basel)

Pieter Muysken (Nijmegen) · Wolfgang Raible (Freiburg)

Monika Schmitz-Emans (Bochum)

Editorial Assistants

Aniela Knoblich

Sara Kathrin Reiter

21

De Gruyter

Realisms in Contemporary Culture

Theories, Politics, and Medial Configurations

Edited by

Dorothee Birke and Stella Butter

De Gruyter

ISBN 978-3-11-030751-1
e-ISBN 978-3-11-031291-1
ISSN 1869-7054

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2013 Walter de Gruyter GmbH, Berlin/Boston

Printing: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Germany

www.degruyter.com

Contents

<i>Dorothee Birke (Freiburg)/Stella Butter (Mannheim)</i>	
Introduction	1
<i>Pam Morris (Aberdeen)</i>	
Making the Case for Metonymic Realism	13
<i>Georgia Christinidis (Berlin)</i>	
Truth Claims in the Contemporary Novel: The Authenticity Effect, Allegory, and Totality	33
<i>Nick Turner (Manchester)</i>	
Realism, Women Writers and the Contemporary British Novel	49
<i>Gesine Drews-Sylla (Tübingen)</i>	
Ousmane Sembène's Hybrid 'Truth' – Social(ist) Realism and Postcolonial Writing Back	70
<i>Elizabeth Allen (London)</i>	
More is Less: Representing the Planet	90
<i>Reinhard Hennig (Bonn)</i>	
Ecocritical Realism: Nature, Culture, and Reality in Icelandic Environmental Literature	109
<i>Zuzanna Jakubowski (Berlin)</i>	
Exhibiting Lost Love: The Relational Realism of Things in Orhan Pamuk's <i>The Museum of Innocence</i> and Leanne Shapton's <i>Important Artifacts</i>	124
<i>Janine Hauthal (Wuppertal)</i>	
Realisms in British Drama since the 1990s: Anthony Neilson's <i>Realism</i> and Gregory Burke's <i>Black Watch</i>	146
<i>Ulrike Garde (Sydney)</i>	
Reality and Realism in Contemporary German Theatre Performances	178

Heike Schäfer (Mannheim)

The Parodic Play with Realist Aesthetics and Authenticity Claims in
Cheryl Dunye's Black Queer Mockumentary *The Watermelon Woman* . . . 195

Guido Isekenmeier (Stuttgart)

Visual Event Realism 214

Appendix 227

Notes on Contributors 231

Introduction

The fortunes of realism have been mixed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While critics such as James Wood praise realist literature for its nuanced portrayal of the individual, proponents of postmodernism join ranks with modernist writers who saw realism as outmoded at best, and ideologically insidious at worst.¹ At the same time, despite its dismissal by many critics, fiction that can be described as realist still makes for the greatest bulk of literature published and read today, as can be seen in the bestseller lists regularly featuring popular genres such as crime novels or thrillers (for example those by Patricia Cornwell and John Grisham). Such ‘commercial realism’ is attacked by those who deride realism as a mass cultural commodity lacking sophistication and literary value. This “negative-image problem”² may help to explain why critical books on contemporary realism have been few and far between. As a subject of literary study, most scholars tend to focus on realism as a mode of canonical nineteenth-century fiction.

Recent years, however, have seen an upsurge of critical interest in realism in the contemporary arts – research that questions cut-and-dried assumptions as to what counts as a realist work.³ This research focus cuts across dif-

¹ See Matthew Beaumont, “Introduction: Reclaiming Realism”, in: Matthew Beaumont (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Realism*, Malden, MA/Oxford 2010, pp. 1–12, p. 2; Pam Morris, *Realism*, London/New York, 2003, p. 37; Luc Herman, *Concepts of Realism*, Columbia, SC 1996, pp. 1–7.

² Rachel Bowlby, “Foreword”, in: Beaumont (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Realism*, pp. xiv–xxi, p. xvi.

³ For publications dominantly dealing with contemporary forms of realism in the arts see, for example, Christine Baron/Manfred Engel (eds.), *Realism/Anti-Realism in 20th-Century Literature*, Amsterdam/New York 2010; Anita Biressi/Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, London 2005; Henry Glade, *Vom kritischen zum kapitalistischen Realismus: Deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur in sowjetisch-russischer Sicht*, Mainz 1995; Anne Jerslev (ed.), *Realism and ‘Reality’ in Film and Media*, Copenhagen 2002; Susanne Knaller (ed.), *Realitätskonstruktionen in der zeitgenössischen Kultur: Beiträge zu Literatur, Kunst, Fotografie, Film und zum Alltagsleben*, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2008; Robert Rebein, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction after Postmodernism*, Lexington, KY 2001; Sebastian Richter, *Digitaler Realismus: Zwischen Computeranimation und Live-Action. Die neue Bildästhetik in Spielfilmen*, Bielefeld 2008; Bruno Zerweck, *Die Synthese aus Realismus und Experiment: Der englische Roman der 1980er und 1990er Jahre aus erzähltheoretischer und kulturwissenschaftlicher Sicht*, Trier 2001.

ferent genres and media; it includes not only the mainstay of classic realism, the novel, but also audiovisual art such as drama, film, photography and painting. 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. These conventions are correlated with specific traditions of thought, as outlined by Pam Morris in her contribution to this volume. 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.⁴

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

⁴ See, for example, Beaumont, "Introduction", p. 2: "Realism [...] can briefly be sketched as the assumption that it is possible, through the act of representation, in one semiotic code or another, to provide cognitive as well as imaginative access to a material, historical reality that, though irreducibly mediated by human consciousness, and of course by language, is nonetheless independent of it." See also Morris, *Realism*, p. 6; Claus-Michael Ort, "Was ist Realismus?", in: Christian Begemann (ed.), *Realismus: Autoren – Epochen – Werke*, Darmstadt 2007, pp. 11–26, p. 11.

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.

The contributions to this volume do not restrict themselves to a single one of these usages of the word, or aim to provide a single answer to the question what realism is. Most of them are most interested in realism in the sense of (c), as an evolving form, but they also pay attention to the ways in which the works they engage with might be interpreted as realistic in the sense of definition (d). Each contribution explores a different facet of 'realistic representation' as a contested and often evaluative label – the plural form used in this volume's title pays tribute to the fact that what comes into view is not so much a single phenomenon as a range of diverse, but interrelated, phenomena.

The three terms in the subtitle – theories, politics, and medial configurations – name the aspects which complicate understanding and usage of the label. 'Theories' highlights the different theoretical frameworks informing the articles, and thus their engagement with currently much-discussed concepts that are shaping notions of realism (the significance of four of those concepts – authenticity, documentarism, thing theory, and self-reflexivity – will briefly be discussed below). 'Politics' names a second way of complicating the discussion of 'realism': many of the articles discuss the socio-political functions a 'realist' work is especially suited – or particularly disqualified – to fulfil. Finally, to consider realism in the light of 'medial configurations' means to be aware of its media-specific forms and traditions. Put simply, one needs to keep in mind that 'realism' in the theatre does not necessarily mean the same as 'realism' in film or in the novel – at the same time, however, evolving notions of what should be seen as 'realistic' in different media can be related in interesting ways.

The volume thus offers a platform for different approaches to realism in contemporary culture – understood here to include roughly the past three decades, although a few of the essays reach back further into the twentieth century. The dialogue its contributions engage in cuts across different disciplines, ranging from literary to drama and media studies and incorporating examples from Africa, Britain, Germany, Iceland, Russia, Turkey and the United States. The different case studies open up a panorama of perspectives, illuminating and critically exploring the role the concept of realism plays in different national, but also media-specific traditions. The volume shows how 'realism' may be employed as a helpful concept in order to identify, describe

and evaluate current trends in cultural production – and, in turn, how cultural production reproduces and modifies the aesthetic strategies traditionally identified as realistic. It aims to contribute to a better understanding of how realism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries functions as a heritage as well as a task, and why it can appear to some as an ideal that can never be attained, and to others as an encumbrance that proves hard to shake off.

The individual articles have been arranged in a way that reflects our interest in the specific medial configurations, and retains a historical perspective insofar as it pays particular attention to the genre that was seen as the mainstay of realism in the nineteenth century, namely the novel. The volume begins with a programmatic article by *Pam Morris*, which recounts the history of the novel's 'literary realism' in its relation to Enlightenment schools of thought. The charges levelled against realism, as Morris emphasizes, target its complicity with Enlightenment ideologies that propagate a solitary and universal self as well as a subject-object dichotomy. In contrast, Morris aims to rethink literary realism by outlining an alternative Enlightenment tradition, which understands the self as relational and embodied. As she shows, such a "revision of realist epistemology" (16) opens up new avenues for reading texts as "articulat[ing] elements of realist utopian praxis within everyday life" (28).

The following articles by *Georgia Christinidis* and *Nick Turner* (summed up in more detail below) then focus on specific American and British novels from (roughly) the past two decades and lay out two different ideas of what should be understood as a realist novel in our times – an approach that has an ethical component in asking for the purpose of fiction writing. *Gesine Drems-Sylla's* consideration of the African writer Ousmane Sembène's novels goes further back into the twentieth century and discusses the novelist's political consciousness in its relation to the frameworks of both socialism and postcolonialism. She links this analysis with a consideration of how today's criticism describes and evaluates the realism of this literary endeavour. *Elizabeth Allen's* and *Reinhard Hennig's* articles engage with the question of how prose narrative is used to explore different aspects of specific contemporary views on space. While Hennig's example already crosses the border into non-fictional narrative, *Zuzanna Jakubowski's* contribution is concerned with a different kind of transition: it describes works of narrative fiction whose realism involves the play with their own materiality, and thus makes visible the contested role of printed books in the contemporary medial landscape.

This self-reflexive interest in the media-specific possibilities of a work to engage with the real world shaping the conditions of its production and reception also informs the remaining four articles by *Janine Hauthal*, *Ulrike Garde*, *Heike Schäfer* and *Guido Isekenmeier*, which deal with the performing arts, film, and TV news. All of them discuss ‘realism’ as a concept that both transcends the boundaries between different media (Hauthal, for example, points to the conventions shared by dramatic and narrative texts) and has aspects that are unique to the respective medium (Hauthal, again, discusses the ‘realistic’ impact of physical immediacy).

While these articles do not, of course, cover the whole spectrum of significant contemporary medial developments, they do show where notions of realism in some key genres connect. The final contribution to the volume, *Guido Isekenmeier’s* article, closes the circle back to the discussion of literary realism in the novel by re-considering a central feature familiar from classical theories of realism – the poetics of the detail – in its significance for the reality effects aspired to by today’s television news. He thereby traces a continuity from literary realism through the daguerreotype to what he terms “visual event realism”. The key characteristic of this visual realism is that it “makes it impossible to decide where its subject matter ends and its formatting begins” (220). Isekenmeier shows how such an undecidability or a “reinscribing [of] the real into the visual representation of the event” (224) is achieved by means of the detail.

Although it will hardly be possible to do justice to the various ways in which the articles intersect and complement each other, we want to use the subsequent brief summaries to highlight some of the most important strands of thought and points of connection that can be grouped under the headings of ‘theories’ and ‘politics’. As already mentioned, in the realm of ‘theories’, four key concepts and approaches can be identified as hot spots of current research on realism in contemporary culture: authenticity, documentarism, self-reflexivity, and thing theory.

Maybe most prominently, authenticity has lately become a much discussed, if highly problematic concept.⁵ In a programmatic manifesto that re-

⁵ See, for example, Ursula Amrein (ed.), *Das Authentische: Referenzen und Repräsentationen*, Zürich 2009; Vincent J. Cheng, *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity*, New Brunswick, NJ et al. 2004; Erika Fischer-Lichte/Barbara Gronau/Sabine Schouten/Christel Weiler (eds.), *Wege der Wahrnehmung: Authentizität, Reflexivität und Aufmerksamkeit im zeitgenössischen Theater*, Berlin 2006; Wolfgang Funk (ed.), *Fiktionen von Wirklichkeit: Authentizität zwischen Materialität und Konstruktion*, Bielefeld 2011; Susanne Knaller/Harro Müller (eds.), *Authentizität: Diskussion eines ästhetischen Begriffs*, München 2006; Charles Lindholm, *Culture and Authenticity*, Malden,

flects typical current concerns, David Shields diagnoses a hunger for ‘the authentic’ in an age saturated by virtual reality, artifice and commodification.⁶ Against this backdrop, *Georgia Christinidis* discusses the development of realism in the novel by focussing on its staging of subjective truth claims or authenticity. While traditional realism rests on the assumption that the workings of the world (objective truth claim) and an individual’s experientiality (subjective truth claim) can be depicted, a clamouring for an aesthetics that rejects objective truth claims in favour of staging radical subjective experiences such as trauma is characteristic for post-9/11 literature. She critically engages with the problems besetting contemporary American novels which in this way try to create ‘authenticity effects’.

Heike Schäfer and Ulrike Garde both discuss a turn towards documentarism as an alternative way of creating authenticity effects.⁷ *Heike Schäfer* discusses the genre of the mockumentary, which has recently become popular, as crossing and re-crossing the line between the documentary as a seemingly unmediated capturing of the real and the work of art as stylized and fabricated. Her case study focuses on the mockumentary *The Watermelon Woman*, a film that engages with three variants of realism in cinema, namely the documentary, the mainstream Hollywood movie and the independent film. She demonstrates how in this particular case, the playful combination and undercutting of visual conventions from these different genres is used for a critical investigation of gender and race politics. Schäfer’s article dovetails with Isekenmeier’s, which is also interested in the ways in which visual representations can code themselves as documentarist (and thus authentic).

In her article on the trend towards ‘Reality Theatre’ in German performance art since the 1990s, *Ulrike Garde* also outlines some strategies that can be classified as documentarist, such as the group Rimini Protokoll’s “endeavour to research everyday realities in an almost journalistic or scientific manner” (181) and their employment of non-actors as “experts of the everyday” (ibid.). She connects these strategies with further destabilizations of

MA et al. 2008; Julia Straub (ed.), *Paradoxes of Authenticity: Studies on a Critical Concept*, Bielefeld 2012; Regina Wenninger, *Künstlerische Authentizität: Philosophische Untersuchung eines umstrittenen Begriffs*, Würzburg 2009.

⁶ See David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, New York 2010; a similar trend is noted by Edward Docx, “Postmodernism is dead”, in: *Prospect*, 185/2011, pp. 36–41.

⁷ For an overview of current research trends on the documentary, see the section on ‘The Documentary Turn’ in: Klaus Stierstorfer (ed.), *Anglistentag 2007 Münster. Proceedings*, Trier 2008, pp. 97–178 and Jürgen Kamm/Richard Kilborn (eds.), *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, 17/2010, 1 (special issue on ‘Documentary Cultures’).

traditional boundaries in the theatre, such as the transformation of ordinary spaces like hotel rooms into performance space. Garde particularly considers the ways in which such strategies “create an instability in terms of audiences’ sense of the real and authentic” (189) and thus demand new forms of involvement.

In her survey of realist trends in contemporary British drama, *Janine Hauthal* also includes stage docudrama and verbatim theatre as documentarist trends. What Hauthal’s article also highlights, however, is a further trend in playwriting that she dubs “absurdist meta-realism”: the self-reflexive foregrounding and undercutting of realist conventions on stage. Such works’ intense engagement with realist representation as a problem attests to a current fascination with what David Shields has described as “the lure and blur of the real”,⁸ the desire for grasping reality and a concomitant scepticism about strategies conventionally employed to do so.⁹ Hauthal thus is concerned with an instance in which the self-reflexive tendencies that also play a role in Garde’s and Schäfer’s case studies may be taken as a key criterion for describing a dramatic sub-genre. Self-reflexivity of a different kind, in turn, features prominently in Reinhard Hennig’s case study of contemporary Icelandic environmental writing, which reflects on the value of a realist portrayal of nature for an ecocritical agenda (see below).

While the modernists denounced realism’s extensive description of things in the world as superficial and materialist, the recent rise of thing theory has

⁸ Shields, *Reality Hunger*, p. 5.

⁹ On self-reflexivity in the (contemporary) arts, see Janine Hauthal/Julijana Nadj/Ansgar Nünning/Henning Peters (eds.), *Metaisierung in Literatur und anderen Medien: Theoretische Grundlagen – Historische Perspektiven – Metagattungen – Funktionen*, Berlin/New York 2007. On self-reflexivity and realism see Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, London et al. 1995, p. 13f.: “The self-reflexivity [...], which is taken to be one of postmodernism’s key characteristics, can be discerned in a wide range of otherwise different works. Any talk of realism in the post-war context must acknowledge that a return to the techniques of the nineteenth-century novelists is unlikely to be of much help. This book explores the work of novelists who, on the whole, remain committed to what I shall for now term referentiality but who are profoundly aware of the various ways in which the latter has been called into question by modernism, the avantgarde, and postmodernism. Realism continues to be a presence in the post-war period but not as set of formal techniques. It functions, rather, as a constellation of discursive practices, making it more pertinent to talk of an impulse to represent the social world than of a particular narrative mode.” The idea that realism is mainly characterized by a self-reflexive engagement with the preconditions specific media systems furnish for representation is also a central premise of Daniela Gretz (ed.), *Medialer Realismus*, Freiburg 2011.

taken a more complex view of the role objects play in the constitution of reality.¹⁰ A case in point is Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, which undertakes a radical critique of a clear-cut subject/object-divide with its concomitant attribution of agency solely to the human subject. *Zuzanna Jakubowski* analyzes how contemporary works of fiction stage a notion of reality that corresponds to Latour's 'circulation of reference model' with its emphasis on circulating things and concepts. In her examples, she analyzes an obsession with objects and their circulation that is played out both on the level of the fictional characters and via innovative aesthetic strategies. As Jakubowski argues, the turn towards the substantial and material can also be seen as a way of addressing the contemporary desire for authenticity. Realism thus becomes not only a mode of representation, but also a mode in which the work presents itself as a material object – as a book – in the same world that is inhabited by its readers.

Jakubowski's article forms a complement to *Pam Morris's* theoretical contribution at the beginning of the volume. Where Morris calls for a reading practice that pays special attention to the description of objects not as metaphorical, but as "complex intersections of different meaning systems, social relations, and economic forces" (*sensu* Latour, p. 29), Jakubowski deals with contemporary works of fiction that self-consciously foreground such an understanding of things. The last article in the volume, Guido Isekenmeier's analysis of visual event realism, provides a further example of how the materiality of the medium is used to create a reality effect.

The politics of realism, to finally come to our third key word from the subtitle, loom large in this volume, as a host of contributions highlight different ideological functions realist representations may fulfil.¹¹ Many of the contributors respond to the negative image that has been associated with realism, and in particular the classic realist novel, in the twentieth century. MacCabe's conceptualization of 'classic realism',¹² which was popularized by Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (London 1980), was especially influen-

¹⁰ See, for example, the contributions in Bill Brown (ed.), *Things*, Chicago, IL 2004; James A. Knapp/Jeffrey Pence (eds.), *Poetics Today*, 24/2003, 4 (issue devoted to things), and Hartmut Böhme, *Fetischismus und Kultur: Eine andere Theorie der Moderne*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2006.

¹¹ On the issue what strategic aims the labelling of a work as 'realist' may serve, see Dorothee Birke/Stella Butter, "The Politics of 'Realism': Analyzing Discourses on Contemporary Literature and TV", in: *Anglistentag 2011 Freiburg: Proceedings*, Monika Fludernik/Benjamin Kohlmann (eds.), Trier 2012, pp. 385–396.

¹² Colin MacCabe, "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses", *Screen*, 15/1974, 2, pp. 7–27.

tial in identifying realism as “the accomplice of ideology” due to its alleged establishment of a “harmonious and coherent world intelligible to the reader”¹³ and its concomitant inability to “deal with the real in its contradictions”.¹⁴

Such lines of attack, especially by feminist critics, are discussed by *Nick Turner*, who engages with the question whether conventionalist realist forms can be used to critically represent the position of women in contemporary society. In his spirited defence of modes of writing that criticism has often denounced as trivial and old-fashioned, he explores their aesthetic value and political potential in works by and about middle-class women.

The political potential of realism is also dealt with by *Elizabeth Allen*, who raises the question of whether realist forms of representation may be used to depict a globalized world with its interpenetration of the local and the global. Like Nick Turner, Allen draws on Raymond Williams’s influential conceptualization of realism as combining a focus on an individual’s experience with the depiction of the socio-economic structures shaping his or her world. While she is dissatisfied with the simplistic portrayal of globalization as a threat in the contemporary European detective novel, she welcomes the more complex transformations of the realist tradition for a “serious engagement with more troubling and contested concepts of globalisation” (103) in the works of J. M. G. Le Clézio and Christa Wolf.

A realist tradition that is usually discussed in terms of ideology rather than aesthetics is that of Soviet-style socialist realism. *Gesine Drews-Sylla* focuses on the work of the Senegalese author Ousmane Sembène as an example of how socialist realism is employed in the cause of a postcolonial writing back. Her article offers a comparison of the different notions of realism in Western and Eastern European academia. She shows how different preconceptions about the characteristics and purposes of realist writing in those two camps have shaped the reception of Sembène’s work. An awareness of the one-sidedness of both perspectives makes it possible to recognize Sembène’s hybrid combination of African oral traditions and elements of Soviet-style realism.

A further inroad into the politics of realism is opened by *Reinhard Hennig* in his article on environmental writing. As Hennig shows, ecocritics have tended to favour the realist forms of traditional nature writing as allowing for a “bonding to [pre-discursive] nature” (112) and a concomitant wish to preserve the environment. After outlining the realism debate in ecocriticism, he

¹³ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, London/New York 1980, p. 73, p. 75f.

¹⁴ MacCabe, “Realism and the Cinema”, p. 16.

turns to a contemporary work by an Icelandic writer that offers a critical comment on the nature-culture dichotomy underlying the notion of ‘realist’ representations of nature.

Since the many cross-currents between theories, politics and medial configurations are a central field of interest explored in this volume, the reader will find comments on the politics of realism also in other articles. *Schäfer*’s focus on the role of gender and race in her case study was already mentioned. While *Hauthal* discusses a play with an openly political message as an example of documentary realism, *Garde* emphasizes the socio-political dimension of contemporary postdramatic theatre by focusing on the ‘politics of perception’. *Christinidis*, to name a further example, makes a plea for a form of (new) realist literature that serves a political function by analysing “how the world works” (47).

What constitutes one of the problems when using ‘realism’ to conceptualize contemporary medial representation – the frequent conflation of descriptive and evaluative aspects – can, then, also become an asset: a conscious engagement with this complication provides a starting point for gauging cultural functions of the arts in contemporary society and their response to the fast-changing modern world of plural realities. The contributions in this volume testify to the vitality of the ongoing debate on realisms in contemporary culture.

And the debate should go on – much more, obviously, remains to be said about the complex intermedial relations and political functions that can only be analysed in an exploratory manner here. In particular, it seems to us that the contemporary politics of different realisms should be the subject of more detailed investigation. The gender politics of realism have already received a fairly large share of attention, especially in feminist debates, and are further explored in this volume in the contributions by Nick Turner and Heike Schäfer. Other significant areas remain largely uncharted; one such area is the interplay between the Eurocentric traditions of realism and cultural practices from other parts of the world (Gesine Drews-Sylla’s contribution could be understood as one building block in such a larger project). The class politics of contemporary realisms – a much-discussed subject with regard to nineteenth-century culture – also constitutes a promising subject for sustained analysis.

Finally, work remains to be done on further contemporary medial forms of realistic representation. With its main focus on prose narrative, this volume aims to show how the vocabulary and theories developed to discuss the nineteenth-century novel may be helpful for analysing realistic trends in other genres and media, even seemingly unlikely candidates such as TV news. While

the contributions offer reflections on the specific realisms in a wide range of different medial forms, as well as on the many cross-currents connecting them, our volume does not presume to cover all areas in which realist formats are currently burgeoning. So-called ‘Reality TV’ is one obvious and much-debated example. The dialogue with visual arts studies about the significance and status of realisms in the realm of contemporary photography and painting has also only just begun (a notable contribution is the 2008 collection of articles edited by Susanne Knaller). We hope that our own volume can offer impulses and building blocks for further research in these directions.

* * *

Almost all contributions in this volume are based on papers that were presented at a conference held at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) in September 2010. We would like to thank all those who participated in the conference and contributed to the discussions which have found their entry into the articles – in particular, our thanks go to Nancy Armstrong, Moritz Baßler, and Michael Butter for insightful commentary. Warm thanks also go to the FRIAS, its director Werner Frick and LiLi school research coordinator Gesa von Essen for making this conference and volume possible. Anika Brunck, Heidi Liedke and Katharina Thalmann have provided invaluable help with proofreading and formatting the manuscript. Anielia Knoblich and Sara Kathrin Reiter have been competent guides through the final stages of the editing process. Last but not least, we would like to thank two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful comments on the project as a whole, and this introduction in particular.

Works Cited

- Amrein, Ursula (ed.), *Das Authentische: Referenzen und Repräsentationen*, Zürich 2009.
- Baron, Christine/Manfred Engel (eds.), *Realism/Anti-Realism in 20th-Century Literature*, Amsterdam/New York 2010.
- Beaumont, Matthew, “Introduction: Reclaiming Realism”, in: Matthew Beaumont (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Realism*, Malden, MA/Oxford 2010, pp. 1–12.
- Belsey, Catherine, *Critical Practice*, London/New York 1980.
- Biressi, Anita/Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, London/New York 2005.
- Birke, Dorothee/Stella Butter, “The Politics of ‘Realism’: Analyzing Discourses on Contemporary Literature and TV”, in: *Anglistentag 2011 Freiburg: Proceedings*, Monika Fludernik/Benjamin Kohlmann (eds.), Trier 2012, pp. 385–396.
- Böhme, Hartmut, *Fetischismus und Kultur: Eine andere Theorie der Moderne*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2006.

- Bowlby, Rachel, "Foreword", in: Matthew Beaumont (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Realism*, Malden, MA/Oxford 2010, pp. xiv–xxi.
- Brown, Bill (ed.), *Things*, Chicago, IL 2004.
- Cheng, Vincent J., *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity*, New Brunswick, NJ et al. 2004.
- Docx, Edward, "Postmodernism is dead", *Prospect*, 185/2011, pp. 36–41.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika/Barbara Gronau/Sabine Schouten/Christel Weiler (eds.), *Wege der Wahrnehmung: Authentizität, Reflexivität und Aufmerksamkeit im zeitgenössischen Theater*, Berlin 2006.
- Funk, Wolfgang/Lucia Krämer (eds.), *Fiktionen von Wirklichkeit: Authentizität zwischen Materialität und Konstruktion*, Bielefeld 2011.
- Gasiorek, Andrzej, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After*, London et al. 1995.
- Glade, Henry, *Vom kritischen zum kapitalistischen Realismus: Deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur in sowjetisch-russischer Sicht*, Mainz 1995.
- Gretz, Daniela (ed.), *Medialer Realismus*, Freiburg 2011.
- Hauthal, Janine/Julijana Nadj/Ansgar Nünning/Henning Peters (eds.), *Metaisierung in Literatur und anderen Medien: Theoretische Grundlagen – Historische Perspektiven – Metagattungen – Funktionen*, Berlin/New York 2007.
- Herman, Luc, *Concepts of Realism*, Columbia, SC 1996.
- Jerslev, Anne (ed.), *Realism and 'Reality' in Film and Media*, Copenhagen 2002.
- Kamm, Jürgen/Richard Kilborn (eds.), *Journal for the Study of British Cultures*, 17/2010, 1 (special issue on 'Documentary Cultures').
- Knaller, Susanne (ed.), *Realitätskonstruktionen in der zeitgenössischen Kultur: Beiträge zu Literatur, Kunst, Fotografie, Film und zum Alltagsleben*, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2008.
- Knaller, Susanne/Harro Müller (eds.), *Authentizität: Diskussion eines ästhetischen Begriffs*, München 2006.
- Knapp, James A./Jeffrey Pence (eds.), *Poetics Today*, 24/2003, 4.
- Lindholm, Charles, *Culture and Authenticity*, Malden, MA et al. 2008.
- MacCabe, Colin, "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses", *Screen*, 15/1974, 2, pp. 7–27.
- Morris, Pam, *Realism*, London/New York, 2003.
- Ort, Claus-Michael, "Was ist Realismus?", in: Christian Begemann (ed.), *Realismus: Autoren – Epochen – Werke*, Darmstadt 2007, pp. 11–26.
- Rebein, Robert, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction after Postmodernism*, Lexington, KY 2001.
- Richter, Sebastian, *Digitaler Realismus: Zwischen Computeranimation und Live-Action. Die neue Bildästhetik in Spielfilmen*, Bielefeld 2008.
- Shields, David, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, New York 2010.
- Stierstorfer, Klaus (ed.), *Anglistentag 2007 Münster: Proceedings*, Trier 2008.
- Straub, Julia (ed.), *Paradoxes of Authenticity: Studies on a Critical Concept*, Bielefeld 2012.
- Wenninger, Regina, *Künstlerische Authentizität: Philosophische Untersuchung eines umstrittenen Begriffs*, Würzburg 2009.
- Wood, James, *How Fiction Works*, London 2009.
- Zerweck, Bruno, *Die Synthese aus Realismus und Experiment: Der englische Roman der 1980er und 1990er Jahre aus erzähltheoretischer und kulturwissenschaftlicher Sicht*, Trier 2001.

Pam Morris (Aberdeen)

Making the Case for Metonymic Realism

Until the mid-twentieth century, literary realism enjoyed an enviable reputation. Critics, as divergent in their views as Georg Lukács, Erich Auerbach, and F. R. Leavis, celebrated its achievements, although they differed as to what these were.¹ All three critics, however, were in agreement that the distinguishing features of literary realism consist in richly particularised individual characters and a detailed, carefully observed representation of a whole social world. These two defining features are undoubtedly the realist novel's inheritance from the age of Enlightenment, in which the genre found its form. During the eighteenth century, a strictly religious view of human nature gave way to a more secular inquiry into what constituted individual identity. A scientific approach to consciousness, rationality, and the passions aimed to emulate the achievements of new discoveries in the fields of natural philosophy.²

Latterly, these Enlightenment grand narratives of the emergence of individualism and the triumph of empirical science have themselves come under attack, first from critics of the Frankfurt school, like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and more recently from anti-humanists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.³ What these critics point to is the dangerous separation Enlightenment discourse effects between a glorified individualistic subject on the one hand, and, on the other, an object world to be systematised, exploited and mastered. This triumphalist perspective, it is claimed, alienates human beings from their own materiality and the physical necessities that bind us together in commonality and has, moreover, brought the earth to the edge of ecological catastrophe. This wide-ranging critique en-

¹ Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, trans. by Edith Bone, London 1950; *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1962; Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Princeton, NJ 1953; F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1972.

² For an account of this, see Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, London 2003.

³ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming, London 1997; most of Derrida's and Foucault's writings articulate this critique, but see Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass, Chicago 1981; Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, London 1972.

compasses the forms of philosophy, empiricism, and idealism which underpin the whole Enlightenment project. As the literary genre coming to maturity during the age of Enlightenment, realist fiction, too, has forfeited critical esteem and been condemned for complicity with these ideologies.

The empiricism of John Locke (1632–1704) posits a subject who gains knowledge solely by means of sensations received from a world other to the perceiving self.⁴ One naïve type of epistemology, deriving from this subject/object relation, takes the form of cataloguing, of registering all that is perceived by the observing subject. This view of knowledge is affiliated to a correspondence theory of language and truth in which words are understood as labels for things and artistic representation is judged in terms of its one-to-one match with external reality. The world understood in this way is necessarily actualist. It comprises only what is there to be perceived or experienced. An actualist account of the world is therefore one which offers no alternative – it lacks transformative potential. This perspective underpins those ideological discourses that claim, in the name of realism, the necessity of accepting ‘the facts’, that insist there is no choice or that options are prescribed and limited.

Many realist novels do seem to convey an actualist view of reality. More than other genres, realism documents the thingness of the world. A classic realist text, like Balzac’s *Cousin Bette* (1846), does indeed offer us a vast catalogue or inventory of the material substance of early nineteenth-century Paris. Such art seems to invite judgement based upon a correspondence theory of truth; it demands recognition of its exhaustive verisimilitude. Roland Barthes dismisses such representative plenitude as a “reality effect”, the means by which the writer imposes the illusion that art offers unmediated access to a real world.⁵ In *S/Z* he analyses the textual codes of Empirics and of Science to further demonstrate the constitutive strategies of realism. The accumulative effect of these codes scattered throughout the text is to “form an oddly joined miniature version of encyclopaedic knowledge, a farrago [...] [of] everyday ‘reality’”.⁶ This encyclopaedic effect not only appears to guarantee a one-to-one correspondence between the textual and non-textual worlds, it also imposes an actualist sense that this is life as it is, that there is no alternative. The ideology of a non-negotiable status quo is further underpinned by plot structures in which those characters refusing to accept the

⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, with introduction by Peter H. Nidditch (ed.), Oxford 1975.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller, Oxford 1990, p. 182.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184f.

irrevocable actuality of their milieus are inevitably punished and their rebellions defeated. Such narratives equally affirm the subject/object opposition in which individual interiorities consisting of hopes, desires, fears and despairs are pitted against a crass materiality.

The intense modern focus upon interiority, in turn, was largely stimulated by the eighteenth-century idealism of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant. They relocated knowledge and truth away from the material world, situating them instead in the transcendent rationalism of the individual mind. Descartes' principle of universal doubt is only resolved by those certainties the self alone can guarantee within its own subjectivity. For Kant, knowledge of the world inheres in pre-given structures of the mind. Within these idealist modes of thought the privileged form of truth is conceptually totalising. The intellectual and spiritual are elevated above the material and fleshly. For Descartes and Kant, the transcendent self is essentially solitary rather than social, and knowledge acquisition is subjective rather than interpersonal or communal. Therein lies the danger of authoritarianism and absolutism, in which a purely subjective or conceptual universalizing system is imposed upon heterogeneous reality.

Realist novels typically utilize a mixture of empirical actualism and universalizing idealism. If the world of the fiction insists upon the intractable nature of actuality, the central protagonists frequently underwrite the ultimate freedom of the soul. Notably, as anxiety about mass society, perceived by the educated classes in terms of brutish bodies, increased during the later decades of the nineteenth century, novelistic concern came to focus largely upon interiority. A character's capacity for subjective self-scrutiny, moral discrimination and spiritual development became the most important index of their worth and of the writer's artistic refinement. Those characters lacking spiritual sensibility are often depicted as materialistic, even physically repugnant. Such 'ignoble' characters frequently constitute the forces within the plot against which the protagonist must struggle for self-autonomy and self-enlightenment. In this way, both self-identity and knowledge acquisition are represented as inherently individualistic rather than social. The process of reading most realist novels inscribes the reader also within a view of truth and knowledge as the attainment of a totalised whole in which all particulars are comprehended as parts of a unified conceptual system of meaning. Despite the emphasis upon the hero's or heroine's individualist quest, moreover, the novelistic world as a whole underwrites universalist and normative assumptions as to the nature of human nature.

This critique of the novel's complicity with Enlightenment ideologies has transformed critical understanding of literary realism. Yet, there are limi-

tations to this sceptical approach. It cannot adequately recognise the genuinely radical engagement of novels with the political dialogues of their own times, their articulation of oppositional or emergent discourses, and their percipient insights into issues that continue to trouble the present world. The basic defining condition of any realist discourse, whether philosophic, scientific, or literary, is the implicit assumption that knowledge about the socio-physical world is possible and sharable. For this reason, rethinking literary realism so as to answer the current charges against it has to begin with a revision of realist epistemology, although, in what follows, my emphasis is rather upon the ideological implications of *what* we know about the reality we live within than upon the detail of philosophical schools and debates that consider *how* we know.

My main purpose is to argue that within the philosophical tradition itself there already exists a Counter-Enlightenment discourse offering a very different way of understanding the interactive ensemble of self, world, and knowledge. This counter-discourse spells out a notion of the subject as social rather than individualistic, of self as a materially embodied process rather than transcendent, since the subject is understood as part of, not separate from, the physical world. This world is itself always in process and therefore non-actualist and non-systematizable. Writers of this Counter-Enlightenment share a strikingly similar way of thinking and their language usage foregrounds continuity, contiguity, and interconnection.

For this reason, I call their approach metonymic, utilizing Roman Jakobson's linguistic account of language as determined by two principles: selection and contiguous combination.⁷ The selective principle operates in the choice of words the writer or speaker makes at each point in a grammatical sequence. The choice is governed by rules of similarity since at each point only words with similar grammatical or semantic qualities would be meaningful. Because the process is governed by similarity, Jakobson names discourse dominated by the principle the "metaphoric mode".

The principle of combination operates at the syntactic, horizontal axis of language, governing the contiguous order in which words follow each other in the flow of a meaningful sequence. Jakobson names discourse in which this principle dominates the "metonymic mode" since this trope, also, is determined by recognition of contiguity and combination. I am expanding Jakobson's account to use the term 'metonymic' in a broader epistemological

⁷ Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics", in: Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*, Cambridge, MA 1960, pp. 350–377. For a fuller discussion of Jakobson's ideas see Pam Morris, *Realism*, London 2003, pp. 101–103.

sense to indicate a continuous movement across semantic boundaries, a rational refusal of closure to any identity since it is always understood as part of some further identity or process.

David Hume (1711–76) put Locke's notion of the association of ideas at the centre of his own understanding of human nature. It is no surprise, therefore, that imagery of contiguity and interconnection is recurrent in his writing. Identity for Hume is neither unified nor substantive; the soul he asserts is nothing more than "a train of different perceptions".⁸ He dismisses as "unintelligible" Descartes' claim that identity and truth inhere within the subjective mind.⁹ Neither is rationality a sovereign force for Hume. Passion and imagination exert equally powerful influences upon actions, opinions, and knowledge. "What is man but a heap of contradictions!" he exclaims.¹⁰

Rather than individualism, Hume stresses the co-operative interaction of human existence. "The mutual dependence of men is so great, in all societies", he writes, "that scarce any human action is compleat in itself, or is performed without some reference to the actions of others".¹¹ Even genius, that *sine qua non* of subjective uniqueness, is described by him not as generated within the bounded identity of the individual self but as a metonymic process of interchange between subjects, each of whom is part of the larger social whole. Poetic inspiration contains nothing divine, he declares: "[i]t runs along the earth; is caught from one breast to another".¹² This sense of the incompleteness of identities, together with his pervasive scepticism, makes Hume critical of the totalising conceptions of idealist thought. He warns against the desire to impose order and system upon the plurality of life, "lest we assign causes which never existed, and reduce what is merely contingent to stable and universal principles".¹³ The sovereign self must subject his reason to the materiality of the object world. If only abstract reasoners would "look abroad into the world", he writes, "they would meet with nothing that, in the least, corresponds to their ideas, or can warrant so refined and philosophical a system".¹⁴

⁸ David Hume, *Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature* [1740], reprinted in: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, with introduction by Peter Millican (ed.), Oxford 2007, p. 142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁰ David Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, with foreword by Eugene F. Miller (ed.), revised edition, Indianapolis 1985, p. 188.

¹¹ *Abstract*, p. 64.

¹² *Essays*, p. 114.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 469f.

Adam Smith, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), extends David Hume's account of the non-unitary self. While Hume represents consciousness metonymically as a series of perceptions, Smith argues that self includes the other, that there is a metonymic slide from one consciousness to another. Throughout *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith's emphasis is upon perspective. The terms "observer" and "spectator" are recurrent throughout the work. Smith denies moral autonomy to the subject, arguing that sympathy, justice, and tolerance are acquired socially. "I divide myself, as it were, into two persons", he writes. "The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavour to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me, when seen from that particular point of view".¹⁵ By these means the privileging of individualistic subjectivity is replaced by a social understanding of self that recognises that "we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it".¹⁶

There is clearly utopian potential in this understanding of self as always incorporating the perspective of the other. Smith expands this possibility to suggest a pluralised universalism of multiple perspectives as opposed to idealist conceptual systemization that homogenises the many as the unknowable mass. While our actions may be limited to time and place, the metonymic expansion of fellow feeling is "circumscribed by no boundary, but may embrace the immensity of the universe", he says.¹⁷ Given this view, it is not surprising that Smith, like Hume, is wary of attempts to systematize, to impose a single conceptual perspective upon the multiple particularity of the social world. He warns:

[t]he man of system [...] is so often enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government [...] [that] he seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chessboard.¹⁸

Again like Hume, Smith believes empirical observations and experience are the reality against which all abstract ideas must be tested.

David Hume and Adam Smith took a very broad view of what constituted the domain of philosophy, as, indeed, did most eighteenth-century philosophers. Hume and Smith wrote on social relations, politics, morality, econ-

¹⁵ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Knud Haakonssen (ed.), Cambridge 2002, p. 131.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 158.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 276.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 275.