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Experiments in/of Realism



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## Introduction: Reflections Faint and Confused—Experiments in/of Realism

Anna Despotopoulou & Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou

If in the nineteenth century realism began as a movement initiating a progressive and drastic shift away from romanticism, aiming to discover radical ways of linking the imaginative with the real, in the twentieth century, conversely, realism was vilified, deemed unashamedly conservative and passé; its ideology was viewed as flawed and its experiments were deliberately forgotten or undervalued.

Oscar Wilde was one of the first writers to initiate this blatant dismissal of realism. In “The Decay of Lying” (1889) he focused on realism’s concern with accurate representation of empirical, external truth and its interest in the mundane and everyday, presenting them as its only rather than its partial preoccupations. “Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself,” he wrote, failing to acknowledge the great realist writers’ preoccupation with the inside. “She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror” (73), he continued, thereby ignoring, on the one hand, realism’s uneasy experiments with representation and mimesis and, on the other, its self-consciousness regarding its ambitions and limitations. Likewise, in his critique of Honoré de Balzac, one of the great realists of nineteenth-century fiction, Henry James in 1901 focused on what he found to be realism’s worst flaw—its objectionable fascination with exteriors: “Things...are at once our delight and our despair; we pass from being inordinately beguiled and convinced by them to feeling that [Balzac’s] universe fairly smells too much of them, that the larger ether, the diviner air, is in peril of finding among them scarce room to circulate” (356). By limiting critical attention to and ultimately rejecting realism’s imperative to “be rigidly bound down to accuracy in the presentation” (in the words of George Henry Lewes, 495), literary critics of the late Victorian period and early modernism trivialised the achievements of the realistic method and helped generate the belief that realist novels were simplistic and that the worlds they presented too factual and superficial in their supposed objectivity. In one of the most damaging dictums of early twentieth-century criticism, Virginia Woolf, in her reviews of writers of her generation who had been influenced by realism, claimed that “The tools of one generation are useless for the next” (“Character in Fiction” 48), urging writers to forget the outside and deal with the inside.

However, by using the metaphor of the veil in order to differentiate his idea of art from the mimetic approach of writers immediately preceding him, Wilde inadvertently referred to a figurative means of viewing and representing reality that had been a literary and critical trope not only in the nineteenth century but also in ancient times. It would be interesting to remember that veils were pronounced focal in art even among the first committed defenders of realism. In an anecdote recorded in Pliny’s *Natural History*, for example, two fifth- to fourth-century BC painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, are involved in a contest over who could paint the most realistic picture. And while at first Zeuxis triumphs when the bunch of grapes he has painted is so ‘real’ that the birds fly down to beak them, the actual winner is Parrhasius, whose picture is not literally veiled, as Zeuxis assumes when he reaches out to draw the curtain he thinks is there covering it, but a picture of a veiled picture.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Wilde’s veil, Woolf’s “semi-transparent envelop surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (“Modern Fiction” 9), and Conrad’s misty art<sup>1</sup> all abandon the idea of reality as a lucid, coherent concept and depict art as nothing but a murky, blurring filter of ‘the real.’ But their seemingly radical vision of reality is not all that distant from Parrhasius’s photographically realistic veil or George Eliot’s fictional veil (in “The Lifted Veil”), which is similarly aimed at confusing narrator and reader about the truth that it simultaneously hides and reveals. For this ancient *trompe l’oeil* curtain declares both that truth can be deceptive and also that art is the imitation of an imitation. Seen in this light, Parrhasius’s veil is an interesting prevision of Wilde’s insistence on surfaces, or the modernist mistrust over an objective reality out there. Zeuxis’s acknowledgement of his defeat—“with a modesty that did him honour he yielded up the prize, saying that whereas he had deceived the birds, Parrhasius has deceived him, an artist” (Pliny 35.36.65-66)—makes evident that realism, even in its crudest, most elemental and apparently unproblematised form, was not about making veils or fourth walls invisible.

Although photographic realism was a major trend in art from the Renaissance onwards (especially

after the discovery of linear perspective), at the moment of its apex, realism went beyond this 'trick the eye' philosophy and past the stage of deceiving or fooling around with the viewer (even if few nineteenth-century narrators can avoid the temptation of deception and games every now and then). Yet, neither did nineteenth-century realism strive to make its means invisible. Take for example Gustave Courbet's *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet* (1854), a seminal painting in his one-man exhibition *Le Réalisme* which opened in Paris in 1855, the year when the term 'realism' actually made its first official appearance. It takes an effort today to appreciate this painting as a revolution in art: to the modern, untrained in academic art viewer, there is nothing unsettling or shocking in its pedantic, everyday theme or its lack of refined poses and striking colours; it is hard, though, not to observe that in its inaugural nineteenth-century appearance, realism dared expose both the self-referential nature of art and its limited potential to represent. Like all representation, realism is illusory (Levine, "Literary Realism Considered" 16) and takes no pains to conceal this. The painter paints himself bearing his painting equipment on his back while greeted by his patron; what else is art then, Courbet's painting suggests, but an incessant mimetic enterprise: the painter in the picture is caught in a moment before the act of painting, discussing perhaps with his patron the painting he is about to begin and which the viewer is actually seeing. Both the painter's casual clothes, moreover, and the burden of his tackle, which appears as an extension of his body, make him a down-to-earth workman, rather than a sorcerer of infinite capability.

However, although a variety of critics throughout the twentieth century tried to shift the critical focus from the empiricism of realism to its inevitable, and largely unacknowledged, self-reflexivity and subjectivity, writers and critics alike continued to frown on canonical realism. The more reality was conceived as an ideological artifact by twentieth-century theory, the more realism was reduced to a mere oxymoron, a term that defies itself, a conceptual impasse. In the years of high postmodernism, realism was unfairly used, in the words of Bruce Robbins, as a "scapegoat term that a given author, text, period, or genre can be shown to rise sophisticatedly and self-consciously above" (227).

In line with current attempts to complicate and expand our understanding of Realism, in terms of its ideology and cultural and formal pursuits, the third issue of *Synthesis* participates in the debate aimed at exploring the multiformity of the term and reformulating our thinking as regards its endeavours. As early as 1858, George Henry Lewes called attention to the subjective aspect of the realistic impulse: the "Representation of Reality," he wrote, "inasmuch as it is not the thing itself, but only represents it, must necessarily be limited by the nature of its medium...regulated by the necessities imposed on it by each medium of expression" (493). The medium, or the "mirror," as George Eliot calls the writer's mind on which experience is reflected, "is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused" (177). Realist writers, rather than positing a solid vision of universal truth, often destroy the illusion of reality through such self-reflexive moments. In the words of George Levine, from his recent book *Realism, Ethics, and Secularism*,

there are inescapable authorial "intrusions" even in the most objective and apparently unself conscious rendering of narratives, and a great part of the history of Victorian fiction relates to the various efforts and devices by which narrators registered their self-consciousness about the partialness of *any* representation. (8)

Such cases of self-consciousness, which astoundingly appear in most realist endeavours, are being reread in the essays that follow as ambitious studies of the act of representation, and the tension between literality and fictionality, which realism allegedly sought to conceal, is brought to the forefront. As Levine writes, realism enacts "the struggle to see from someone else's point of view," and it is this self-consciousness about the impossibility of impersonality that compromises the attempt at objectivity in fiction (8).

In the same vein, the linear plots, supposedly straightforward characters, and omniscient narrators, which had become objects of contempt by critics who wished to sustain an understanding of realism

derived from brief dictionary definitions, are now being destabilised and rescued from facile and scornful labelling. By no means can one downplay the abundance of nineteenth-century wizard-like, omniscient narrators, who are in complete control of the universe they create and have full access to the minds of their characters; or that realism is based, in Pam Morris's words "upon the implicit contract with the reader that there exists an extra-textual real-world and that knowledge of this real-world can be produced and shared" (132). It would be reading only half the story, however, if one skipped over all those subversive moments where the god-like voices that narrate expose the secrets of their craft or plead guilty of misjudgements or ignorance. So, rather than labelling texts, or setting limits to genres, this issue will explore the texts' dialectic engagement with realism, a mode of expression that has been following, recording, probing, assessing, mistrusting, or endorsing the flux of reality. Realism in that sense is not a break from what preceded or what followed; a number of essays here indeed highlight the romantic, gothic, modern, or postmodern components in what are considered to be primarily realistic texts. And since reality, even if only an infinitesimal part of it, is the basis of all creation, one might perceive realism as an all-embracing mode that mutates in endless variations.

Moreover, the materiality that modernist writers so vehemently criticised in the past is no longer being read as a means towards objectifying the representation of reality and achieving a more accurate truth; on the contrary, the choices and exclusions which help compose this materiality bring to the forefront the subjectivity of the vision that attempted to reproduce reality. The excessive factuality and visuality of realist fiction can, therefore, be perceived as rhetorical strategies aimed at questioning the very act of seeing (the distortions of perception) and even challenging the social ideologies that dictate this very act of seeing. On such an ideological level, while the rhetorical conventions of realism were long thought to normalise and justify socio-political hierarchies and injustices, they are now re-viewed and re-evaluated by the contributors of this special issue for their dialogic potential and for the politically subversive effect that they often hide within the seemingly hegemonic discourse that they employ. Thus, realist texts are not by definition absorbed by and complicit with the socio-political context in which they are produced. Cautious readings of what are characterised as canonical novels have made it clear that the faith in transmitting an objective reality does not exclude the possibility of adopting a critical attitude towards it. Catherine Belsey's renowned attack on realism, in her *Critical Practice*, on the basis that its insistence on intelligibility forces it to conceal contradictions in the governing ideology it represents, falls apart as soon as the ambiguities, contradictions, and paradoxes in these novels are given their due attention.

Let us consider, for instance, Dickens's description of Coketown, his fictional version of the first industrial towns in the mid-Victorian period, in *Hard Times*:

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. (28)

There is no doubt here that Dickens's god-like and authoritative narrator records one of the most crucial facets of industrial England, and he does so with precision and meticulousness: he refers to an indubitably recognisable reality associated with colour, smell, sound, smoke, chimneys, machinery, and pollution. Yet this factual, objective voice runs parallel with, or is perhaps superseded by three impossible (almost) metaphors, which force facts out of their literal/plain meaning, when industrial England is imagined as the colonial other. The "face of a savage," the "serpents of smoke," and the elephant-in-musth metaphors, suggest here that home has become the unhomely through a strange process of 'devolution.' The infinite spirals of smoke are both choking Coketown and transforming it

into a massive network of stories. What is perhaps the most intriguing story of all in this passage is the story told by the elephant in a state of melancholy madness, which in factual terms is a periodic condition in elephants, characterised by a large rise in reproductive hormones and accompanied by highly aggressive behaviour.

And that for Dickens is progress: steam engines turned oddly into mammoth generators of corruption and ungovernable sexual potential. That is Dickens's way of enveloping objective reality into fiction and transforming it, like a conjurer, into ambiguous polyphony. The identification of home with 'the Other' may seem at first to defy logic, as 'a is not a,' home is not home, but it may also be read as an interesting tautology: 'not a' sustains 'a,' for it was the colonies after all that financed industrialisation, the ivory extracted from innumerable elephant heads that fertilised nineteenth-century Britain and was partly the fuel of steam engines. This simultaneous multiplicity of genres in *Hard Times*, on the one hand, anticipates literary cubism; or, one could argue reversely, modernist innovative writing is a 'rehabilitation,' a redefinition and broadening of Dickens's nineteenth-century form.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, it unsettles the nineteenth-century political economy in ambiguous ways. The novel distorts factual reality and supplants it, in Jamesonian terminology, with the "exoskeleton" of the text (Jameson 137); if the material reality dies, form takes over, and social meaning emerges, as Jameson argues in *The Political Unconscious*, from the discontinuities and rifts of texts, which will acquire meaning only if the reader bothers to work them out.

By having kept up with a rapidly changing reality, and by making ideology visible, the realist text exposes what otherwise would remain silent or unnoticed and so pass unchallenged. Realism is evidently not the conformist other to innovative art or avant-garde experimentalism. As Raymond Tallis convincingly argues in his defence of realism, and as the essays in this issue have aspired to show, it can be "politically, morally, epistemologically" interrogative (184). Moreover, new poststructuralist approaches go as far as unearthing and highlighting the 'proto-postmodern' elements of nineteenth-century realistic texts. For what could be more postmodern (and metafictional) than Charlotte Brontë's ending of *Villette* (1853) which stops abruptly ("Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said" [451]) and encourages the readers to choose and imagine for themselves the ending picture of a "union and a happy succeeding life" or a shipwreck that destroys the dreams of the hopeful lovers (451)? In her uncompromising novel, Brontë interrogates the power of the author/narrator to forge reality not with a less experimental attitude than Ian McEwan, who, with an uncannily similar narrative twist, ends his *Atonement* (2001) thus:

But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicæmia...or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year...

If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration...Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love...? It's not impossible. (370, 372)

In both cases the narrator teases the readers' impulsive need to know 'what happened.' And in both cases the narrator, as conjuror, showcases her power as arbiter both of the fiction produced and of the reality that fiction is supposed to reflect, thus veiling and not mirroring truth.

In sum, in contemporary critical studies and in the articles included in *Synthesis* 3, realism, rather than seen as the unfortunate moment in the history of narrative, sandwiched between romanticism and modernism, becomes the focus of attention, and its efforts, achievements, and conscious limitations are re-examined on theoretic, thematic, and stylistic levels.

Matthew Beaumont exposes the blindness and prejudice of twentieth-century critics who with their dismissive attitude unjustly overstated realism's mimetic ambitions and who undervalued its ability to examine its formal limitations. On the contrary, a close reading of self-reflexive moments, like those which abound in George Eliot's fiction, reveals the realist writer's interest not in the stability and linearity of representation but in those disruptive moments in the demiurgic practice during which the

whole fictional edifice based on the consensus that reality is universally knowable collapses. By comparing the literary device of the pier-glass used by Eliot in *Middlemarch* and the anamorphic pictorial device of the skull used by Holbein in *The Ambassadors*, Beaumont originally exposes Eliot's awareness of the anarchic potential of such contingent and arbitrary moments in the act of writing which suggest the inevitable perspectivism and relativism of representation, undermining the objectivity that the omniscient narrator claimed to be master of. The concreteness of realist representation thus breaks down revealing an inchoateness which Beaumont calls "aleatory realism." In the same vein, supporting the experimental side of the realist project, Josie Billington and Philip Davis take a very close look at the grammar and syntax of the realist narrative persuasively demonstrating that rather than limiting itself to conventional forms of linearity, realism honours, most interestingly, those half- or non-events, the lost albeit vital possibilities that rescue reality from being mundane. Through a close reading of novels by Tolstoy, Dickens, Gaskell, and Eliot, they show that intimations of what did not or could not happen affect the construction of the prose text which creates space for this primary human material which goes beyond the knowable reality that realism is supposed to be preoccupied with. Experimenting with the formal means of expressing these fractions of the real, writers reveal their concern not only with story time but also with narrative time. Character, therefore, is read not as straightforward but as an experiment within a narrative of infinite possibility, in which author, narrator, and character are actively involved in this process of thinking out what is and what cannot be. Inadequate to register the secular world, the language of explanation, for which realism has often been scorned, fades, giving way to precariousness and relativism.

Besides achieving the almost impossible task, however, of capturing half- or non-events, a non-materialised reality, realism has also been apt to deal with the fantasticalness of the real, which, in Byron's words, is always "stranger than fiction." Focusing primarily on Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*, Michael Hollington's essay explores how this fantastic paradox is resolved through the self-referential and allusive nature of what Donald Fanger has termed "romantic realism." For writers like Dickens, Dostoevsky, Balzac, and Gogol, Hollington argues, truth is too complex, too multi-layered to fit into predetermined and conventional forms and can only be transferred 'aslant.' In combining methodical observation and detailed journalistic reportage with fantastic or even Gothic elements, Dostoevsky complicates realist aesthetics and creates a "writerly" text in the Barthean sense of the word. The mirror with which the Dostoevskian reader is confronted is cracked, refracting consequently an unrecognisable and distorted reality, which demands the reader's active involvement. Apart from this intricate aesthetic discourse around reality and fiction, moreover, Dostoevsky initiates also a play of *mises en abîmes* between texts, as he offers both returns to texts that preceded (by Dickens for example) and previews of texts that followed (like those of Jean Genet).

Starting from Barthes's basic hypothesis that "there is no *first* reading," Dennis Walder elaborates further on this notion of texts caught up in a series of endless reflections of other texts, and maintains that realist literary texts anticipate the strategies of modern theoretical texts that are often involved in a dialectic relationship. The critical study of such intertextual moments, Walder contends, may open up new perspectives to the reader and disclose connections that exceed the sphere of the anticipated boundaries of realism. By referring to a variety of literary texts from the eighteenth century to our days, Walder makes it evident that reading past novels through each other and through the present exposes the extensiveness of the realist paradigm and allows us access to its complexity.

Sheldon George's article on Stephen Crane's *The Monster* returns to the notion of an unimaginable and unnarratable reality, which in the American society of the late 1800s is metaphorised in the racial other. Within the context of a general cultural struggle to establish a consistent and controllable social reality, realism was employed as a genre that would delineate the slippery identity of the African-American population which was at the time reshaping the American scene. Moreover, seen through the prism of psychoanalysis, this capturing of the strange racial other, George claims, coincided with the white slaveholders' endeavour to access pleasure. In *The Monster*, however, while realism makes the other knowable through close surveillance, it simultaneously acknowledges it as the unrepresentable other that defies the white gaze and refuses to be made knowable. By defining

blackness as the performative mimesis of whiteness, Crane's realism exposes the collapse of whiteness as "the master signifier of being and *jouissance*," and confronts authenticity as the mere imitation of an imitation.

Our next essay also examines late nineteenth-century realism through the scope of the French artist Edgar Degas, who, although classified as an Impressionist, resented the term and preferred to be called a realist. His 'corporeal' realism, Dougal Phillips argues, both captures the political and libidinal economies of the bourgeois Parisian world and yields to capitalist desire. As a consequence, Degas's realism becomes disconnected and ambivalent, carrying even further Courbet's and Manet's nineteenth-century realism, and foreseeing twentieth-century realisms that set the real and the image in a shaky relationship built on desire. The self-reflexive character of this kind of realism is evident in Degas's insistence on painting the theatre and the spectacle and delving into the endless coatings of performance. Once again, in one of its most climactic moments, realism proclaims mimesis a labyrinthine process of exposing layers, as the only reality it can ever achieve is a staged one.

The last but not least article in this collection deals with a realism that we confront everyday through the audiovisual media which dominate experience. In an Orwellian period where surveillance has been legitimised and used as a means of entertainment through the popular reality television, which fictionalises fact and materialises fiction, reality is manipulated in the service of economic, ideological, and aesthetic goals. Renée Dickason's article takes a deep look into the various experiments in/of realism in British television from the 30s onwards. In its attempt to comprehend television's constant challenge to "put reality together" through the different socio-political and cultural periods, the article deals with the descriptive and prescriptive potentials of the medium, taking us through the various television trends which aimed at realism on a variety of levels: social, emotional, narrative, and surface. It is therefore suggested that television has been used as a means of constructing reality, a TV reality that reflects partially and subjectively aspects of society that appeal to large audiences. The recent hybridisation of TV programmes (e.g. docu-soaps), achieved through the fusion of techniques, as well as the popularity of reality television, in all its variations, reveal the most radical but also, for the future, most dangerous experimentation with television realism: the gradual blurring of the line between truth and artifice, reality and representation, fact and fiction.

In the featured interview, Bruce Robbins reflects on the definitional difficulties that have hampered the reception of realism in the twentieth century, discussing the limitations of each separate approach (period or convention based) and the misconceptions that led poststructuralist criticism to scorn the mimetic impulse of realism. Realism, in his view, combines a vision of social totality with a self-reflexivity embedded in the narrative, a self-consciousness of the 'as if' that frames the social reality that it aspires to represent. This totalising ambition of realism has been transmuted into the best contemporary fiction nowadays as well as, surprisingly, in some notable efforts of television series such as *The Wire*, which, like the multi-plot Victorian novel, masterfully unite the imperceptible threads connecting different lives and sectors of society. The challenge for contemporary realism, in Robbins's view, is to extend the formal and political experiments of nineteenth-century realism to the global scale of international relations that define the twenty-first-century consciousness. At the same time, however, contemporary realism is confronted by the question of historical responsibility and of whether and how to transcribe historical consciousness rather than merely costume drama.

In this sense, realism destabilises, rather than reinforces, polarities such as inside/outside, closure/indeterminacy, visibility/invisibility, and truth/artifice, more often than not producing a hybrid genre through its experimentation with form and its interrogation of dominant ideologies. All the articles gathered in *Experiments in/of Realism* register a difference, therefore, between the way realism has been theorised and the way it is now seen as having been practiced. The critical and theoretical tools of the late twentieth century which initially led to realism's demise, have now become the instruments of its regeneration.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The aim of art,” Conrad writes in the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus,”* is “obscured by mists...it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature” (1758).

<sup>2</sup> In Milan Kundera’s use of the term, rehabilitation “is not a return to this or that retro style”; its point is to “resist the *reduction* worked by the nineteenth century’s aesthetic of the novel; to give the novel its *entire* historical experience for a grounding” (qtd. in Brenkman 819).

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