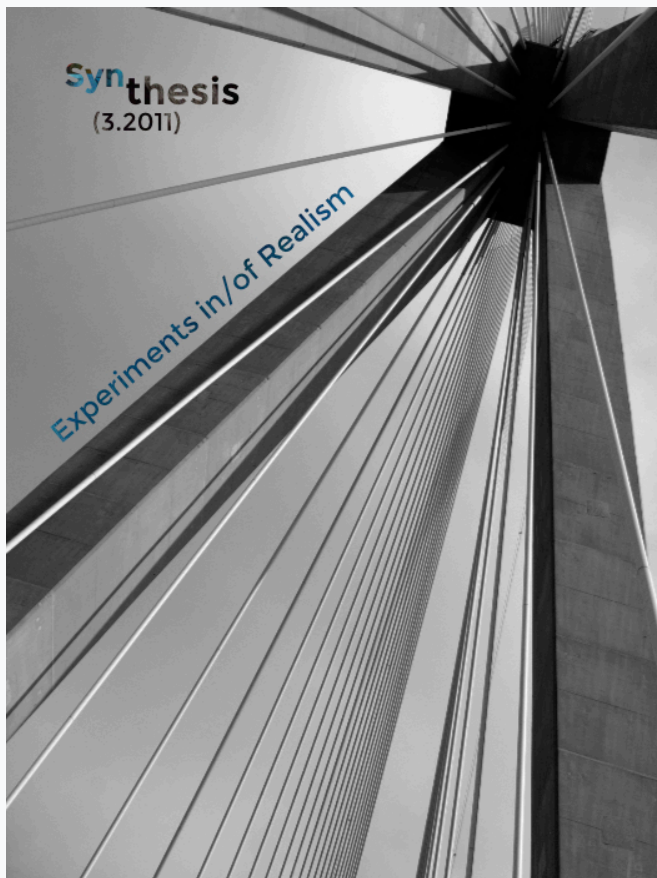


Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 3 (2011)

Experiments in/of Realism



Beaumont Matthew (ed.), Adventures in Realism.

Sylvia Karastathi

doi: [10.12681/syn.16960](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16960)

Copyright © 2011, Sylvia Karastathi



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Matthew Beaumont, ed. *Adventures in Realism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Pp. 280. £65.00 (Hb.).

At the time of writing, *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen is being hailed by newspaper reviewers as the new great American novel, written in a style that abandons the tradition of postmodern experimentation pioneered by Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo and inherited by David Foster Wallace. How else but realist can Franzen's multi-character novel be described? A novel that is concerned with the state of the nation and presents the travails of a large set of characters in a linear, flowing, readable narrative. Franzen's family epic reads new, yet familiar, traditional, yet timely in capturing the contemporary tragedy of too much choice and its potential hampering of human happiness. Such an example from the literary production of the first decade of the twenty-first century indicates that the term 'realism' is in need of urgent renewal, in order to adequately address the variety of ways with which the authors themselves embark again and with renewed enthusiasm upon the realist project.

Adventures in Realism serves just this purpose. It offers a re-introduction to realism for the twenty-first century, presenting its history and complexities and stressing its continuous fascination for authors and artists. The collection comes at the end of a century that can be broadly characterised as anti-realist. As the volume often reminds us, much of the twentieth century was dominated by the intellectual climate arising from theories of modernism and post-modernism, which had established themselves by undermining the aesthetic, philosophical, and political achievements of the realist project. In his introduction to the volume, Mathew Beaumont takes his cue from precisely these sources. He reads introductions to post-modernism in order to showcase their off-hand dismissal of realism and its supposed advocating of an unproblematic relationship between reality and its representations. Many of the essays agree that attacking realism for its assumed naivety is now largely *passé*, although at its time invigorating and perhaps necessary (Beaumont, Small). Realism in the present collection is the object to be demystified, and its aesthetic priorities need to be re-examined. This rich collection, in names and topics, seeks to approach realism "as a force field in which political, philosophical, and practical questions, as well as aesthetic ones, can be thought out" (10). It aims at restoring interest in the historical significance of realism but also at exploring the multiplicity of realisms. For a large part, the volume reveals and evaluates realism's aesthetic endurance during times of modernist avant-garde, which formed its reactionary character against the doctrines of a realist naiveté. Its most significant contribution, nonetheless, is that it offers an impressively comprehensive view of the kind of realism that has been bequeathed to the twenty-first century.

The collection is composed of fifteen newly commissioned essays by distinguished scholars covering a spectacular array of topics from literature to the visual arts, from psychoanalysis to feminist theory, politics, and philosophy. The reader of the volume encounters a multimedia realism, starting with, but going beyond, literary realism and its history in the nineteenth century in order to address it as a cultural practice that continued well into the twentieth century. It is clear from the outset that two aspects of realism are under discussion here: an aesthetic and artistic movement, first developed and practiced in the nineteenth century, which is subsequently recognised, in J. Hillis Miller's words (in the front matter of the book), as a "perennial motive in literature, art, film and other media" (essays by Levine, Dentith, McDonagh); and a philosophical imperative that involves broader epistemological considerations—of mimesis, truth, verisimilitude, representation of the real (essays mainly by Small and Norris).

Rachel Bowlby in her tour-de-force foreword talks provocatively of "poor old realism. Out of date and second-rate," lampooning the easy downgrading of the term (xi). Her foreword also sets the collection in the current global moment, where the term 'reality' is featured daily in our vocabulary in the form of 'Reality TV,' a cultural instance which gives new focus on the question of the representation of reality. The volume, nonetheless, starts with the tradition, namely nineteenth-century realism. It opens with an essay by George Levine who has systematically insisted on "complicating (or re-complicating) critical understanding of literary realism" (230), even at times when this was deemed highly unfashionable (in Levine's *Realism and Representation*, 1993, for instance). His essay maps the transformation of the realist novel in the nineteenth century to a predominantly secular form, where "money becomes the pivot, implicit or explicit, on which nineteenth-century realism turns"

(24). His reading of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* presents a strong case of how realism was continuously self-conscious about the fact of its illusionism, which leads him to pronounce realism an "ambivalent and often self-contradictory mode" (30). Simon Dentith writing about "Realist Synthesis in the Nineteenth-Century Novel" is in dialogue with major works of twentieth-century literary criticism on realism, such as Georg Lukács's *Studies in European Realism* (1972) and Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution* (1961). His essay, focusing on George Eliot's paradigmatic *Middlemarch*, presents the realist novel as a historical possibility "in which the complexities of social and personal life are held together in meaningful relation" (49).

But in this volume, "realism is no longer automatically taken to mean classic realism," or literary realism, as equal weight is given to considerations of realism in other media (229). The essay by Andrew Hemingway on "The Realist Aesthetic in Painting" concentrates on the transition of the realist aesthetic from fiction to painting, a transition that bequeathed a set of the strongest interart/intermedial relations. Hemingway supports that the novel had given aesthetic validation to modern themes and motifs, which were then taken up in the visual arts. He turns to painterly realism in the French setting and its relation to power structures and the bourgeoisie, explaining how the Second Empire Regime espoused an "official realism"—a kind of "consensual realism" that paid tribute to industrial progress (108). To this he contrasts the painting of Gustav Courbet, who proposed an art grounded in the direct observation of natural and social realities and insisted on rendering the physiognomic particularities among his working-class subjects. Looking at Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1849-50) today, we can clearly see it as a subversive force working against the tendency towards idealisation of previous art. Hemingway's is the first essay to tackle in somewhat aphoristic terms the political history of realism in the twentieth century:

The appropriation of realism by the Bolshevik left in the twentieth century came to entail a fundamental recasting of the doctrine, namely a stripping away from it of the principle of art's for art's sake and the romantic conception of artistic individualism, which had been necessary correlates for many of its nineteenth-century exponents, and its transformation into a crudely instrumentalist creed for the most part. (115)

The pursuit of this transformation is the focus of the middle section of the collection, where realism is approached by many contributors not only as a term "profoundly ideologically charged" but also clearly politically marked (104). The volume does not shy away from addressing the political history of realism in the twentieth century, and in fact a large section raises issues regarding its relation to propaganda and the Soviet Union. Brandon Taylor offers a wide-ranging introduction to socialist realism, a field largely unknown by scholars who do not work on Russian literature and art, but undoubtedly an important part of the realism we have inherited. Taylor communicates effectively the optimistic rhetoric of the October Revolution, where reality was seen in its revolutionary development, and socialist realism oscillated between offering documentary accuracy (things as they are now) and rendering revolutionary impulses (future potential). He also sketches the pressures on artists who had pioneered avant-garde practices before the Revolution and who were initially asked to combine stylistic modernity with Soviet-style subject-matter, only to be forced later to abandon individualism all together for a hegemonic Party "method."

John Roberts's essay turns to the complex case of propaganda and partisanship in the period of the early avant-garde, examining it as "part of a wider discussion of the debate between modernism and realism" (161). He focuses on photo-text books of the 1920s, works influenced by montage and advocating the disruption of temporal unity, producing "a partisan, appellative speech" (162). According to Roberts, montage and the photographic archive are thought of as the initial meeting between realism and modernism. In this essay, Roberts offers an original glimpse at a transitory time, when realism and modernism were allowed to "infect and redefine each other" (174). As he argues, in the context of photo-books such as *Kriege dem Kriege* and *Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles*, it is "hard to talk about 'modernism' and 'realism' as discrete categories at all" (172). But after sufficient critical exposition of the ways realism has been politically inflected for most of the twentieth century, Helen Small towards the end of the volume identifies in the current moment "an attempt to resist the idea that realism must be, in itself, politically motivated or motivating in some ways and not others" (233).

Roberts's contribution, on realism and photography, shares common ground with Nancy Armstrong's essay when he stresses that "the cognitive impact of photography's indexical relationship to the world shatters realist painting's fictive reinventions and disruptions of the real" (163); "this penetration of photography into the real...represents a huge ideological shift and cognitive transformation in how realism is theorized and defended in the first decades of the twentieth century" (164). Photography's means of presenting the possibility of a new realist aesthetic is also the issue in Armstrong's contribution, which focuses on human subjects in ethnographic photography but in an earlier period, that of the Victorian Empire. She writes of a time when images were thought to be unmediated, when their fidelity was not to be disputed, and when photography became the only visual medium that could serve as direct evidence of a crime. The last part of her essay, "On the Terrain of Images," is one of the most illuminating and lucid pieces in the whole volume, setting "the debate between modernism and post-modernism in terms of where each stands in relation the mimetic fallacy" (98). Armstrong writes about Victorian England, but by the end of her essay she clearly looks to the future: "What is at stake is not access to reality itself, whatever that may be, so much as the authority to say whose realism will prevail, whether violence is the work of zealous martyrs, or the result of US imperialism" (100).

The discussion of visual media continues with an essay by Laura Marcus, on its own an excellent short introduction to the history of cinema. Marcus is concerned with the way the debate on realism, during the era of high modernism, was transferred from literature to the cinematic image and to its capacity to produce unmediated reality. The positions of André Bazin (who in 1951 wrote that "the problem before us is that of realism. This is the problem we always end up with when we are dealing with cinema" [cited in Beaumont 177]), Stanley Cavell, and Siegfried Kracauer on cinema and realism are considered in a clear and accessible manner. Marcus moves from Italian Neo-Realism to the social problem films of the 1960s in Britain, to Hollywood's mainstream illusory realism, and to the Danish "Dogma 95" cinema. She identifies that after almost a hundred years from the emergence of cinema there is "a marked critical desire to capture and comprehend the 'uncanny realism' of film at its birth" (190).

A number of essays are concerned with the unnatural and violent schismatic break between realism and modernism. Josephine McDonagh ("Space, Mobility and the Novel") in discussing questions of mobility, a condition of modernity, finds it to be the "concealed provocation and secret subject of realism" (66). Esther Leslie ("Interrupted Dialogues of Realism and Modernism"), coming from another angle, focuses on twentieth-century alternative histories of realism, which did not promote a hardening of opposite camps, as did socialist realism or Lukács's "Kafka or Mann" dilemma. Leslie identifies areas, especially in the visual arts, which offered nuanced exchanges between realism and modernism. Brecht's dramatic realism and especially the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) are such occasions. Two contributions (Ledger's and Jameson's to a large extent) focus on Naturalism as a unique moment in nineteenth-century literature, which is crucial to an understanding of the *fin-de-siècle* European culture and its contribution to the formation of what is subsequently considered as a cultural avant-garde.

Towards the end of the volume, Michael Löwy takes one step back from the so far uniform focus on the different inflections of the realist project and introduces a new term, "critical irrealism," which describes the absence of realism rather than an opposition to it. His essay is a daring departure and a welcome addition, not distracting from the concerns of the volume but allowing for provocative questions: "Are there not many nonrealist works of art which are valuable and contain a certain powerful critique of the social order?" (193). Here Löwy seems to be speaking directly to Lukács and seeks to present works on realism, such as *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, which have not withstood the test of critical endurance. In the league of daring additions one could also include the contribution by Slavoj Žižek on "Psychoanalysis and the Lacanian Real." The author offers a glimpse from a completely different critical paradigm, guiding us through the Lacanian vocabulary, which has introduced possibly the most characteristic of the twentieth-century alterations to the category of the 'real': the Real as "something traumatic in its breath-taking intensity, something *impossible* in the sense that we cannot ever make sense of it" (222). Žižek through the Lacanian vocabulary offers a crucial complication in which "*reality itself can function as an escape from encountering the Real*"

(222). What also comes as a daring addition is the concluding essay by Fredric Jameson, one of the leading theorists of postmodernism, who takes on the challenge of sketching a possible future for literary realism. He focuses on the novel and suggests that in the nineteenth century, realism gave birth to four new genres: the Bildungsroman, the historical novel, the novel of adultery, and naturalism, all of which subsequently “become targets for the defamiliarizations of the various emergent modernisms” (266). He then goes on to identify two possible futures, open for further evaluation: “the vocation of any realism to explore the hitherto unsaid and unexpressed”; and what he calls “existential realism,” in which “narrative withdraws from the outer person into an impersonal and anonymous confrontation with situations and things, a blank third-person narrative in which only a pure present time and space is registered” (270).

In short, the volume presents us with a complete picture of the new vocabulary on realism that is specific to the twentieth century: Socialist Realism, Anti-Realism, the Lacanian Real, Neue Sachlichkeit, Italian Neo-Realism. The chapters, having been carefully edited and placed, appear in genuine and fruitful dialogue with each other. By cross-referencing to other related essays in the volume, the editor and authors help create a sense of continuity and overlap in the concerns of the volume instead of an insular, finite approach. Browsing through the bibliographies of each chapter one would be afforded with a broad sample of the major publications in the field, and with the help of the names-and-terms index one could select the precise sections of interest. A reader will also find insightful approaches to classic texts, such as Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (Levine), Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (Dentith), Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (Small), Zola’s *L’Assommoir* (Ledger), and see them in the same framework as Friedrich Ernst’s *Krieg dem Kriege* (Roberts) and even E. T. A. Hoffman’s *The Sandman* (Löwy). It would have been interesting to see an essay that examined contemporary explorations in literary realism, but the volume avoids discussions of Latin-American magical realism, for example, which could have been one such alternative, eschewing possible non-European legacies. Finally, the present volume is an exploration of a Euro-centric realism (was it ever any-thing else?) that fruitfully departs from its Anglo-French origins to open up to German, Russian, and Italian transformations. But it is definitely not about global realism—a choice and limitation that is useful and workable in this case, but that could have been better enunciated.

When it was published in 2007, *Adventures in Realism* was a timely intervention disrupting a period of critical neglect. With its impressively diverse and wide-ranging contributions, offering well-balanced essays, clear in scope and aim, it guided readers seeking a new view on realism. Now, three years later, the volume’s contribution to the instigation of a lively debate around realism has designated it a set text, leading Blackwell to republish it as *The Concise Companion to Realism* (2010), with an additional chapter by Terry Eagleton discussing “Fictions of the Real.” Its objectives and invitation “to rethink realism” (10), to start arguing about it again, to value and not sideline its experimental moments, and to identify a possible future for literary realism have since been taken up in academic discourse, as testified by the collection of essays in the present volume of *Synthesis*.

Sylvia Karastathi
University of Cambridge