

Lars Ole Sauerberg

Fact into Fiction

Documentary Realism in the Contemporary Novel

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in the Contemporary Novel

LARS OLE SAUERBERG

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MACMILLAN

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Preface

This book presents the results of a research project growing out of a course which I offered at Odense University in the spring term of 1987. The subject of the course, entitled 'Faction and Docudrama', was nonfiction 'fiction' in print and on the screen. As the course progressed it became increasingly clear to me that narratives, written or filmed, categorized as faction, docudrama, New Journalism, etc., gave rise to an endless range of critical problems affecting general aesthetics, ontology, epistemology, semiotics, and linguistics, which soon proved quite unwieldy. Although the course was duly wound up – students have to sit for exams! – many loose ends were necessarily left untied. I have tried to follow one of what I consider the more interesting threads: The tendency in the contemporary English-language novel to integrate factual elements in what remains, for all practical purposes and effects, narrative fiction.

The poem on p. 104 is reprinted from *In Evidence: Poems of the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps*, by Barbara Helfgott Hyett, by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press. ©1986 by Barbara Helfgott Hyett.

I wish to thank the Humanities Faculty at Odense University for relieving me of teaching responsibilities in the autumn term of 1988, which gave me opportunity to devote much needed extra time and energy to the study. I also wish to thank my colleague, lektor Tom Pettitt, MA, who kindly read the manuscript and offered valuable stylistic criticism, and Charlotte Granly, secretary at the English Department, for her help in the finishing stages of the word processing. As usual, the staff at Odense University Library has been most helpful.

Finally I wish to thank my wife Mette because she was always there to share with in the times of dejection and exhilaration which seem an inevitable part of authorship, also when the writing in process is merely lit. crit. To her the book is dedicated.

LOS

'Men make patterns and superimpose them on nature.'

(Golding 1956: 108)

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1

Introduction: Documentary Realism

Although the traditional realistic novel has been pronounced dead on several occasions since the modernist break-through in the 1920s, it has shown a viability which must be surprising to those who have busied themselves predicting its demise. Traditional realism is the narrative mode of all kinds of entertainment fiction ranging from run-of-the-mill magazine stories written by anonymous authorial collectives to the verbal products intended directly for the bestseller lists by such established 'popular' writers as Harold Robbins, Arthur Hailey, or Barbara Cartland. Furthermore the greater part of 'serious' / 'artistic' / 'literary' fiction employs this pre-modernist narrative mode, which assumes that there is an extra-literary reality which may be verbally communicated, and that it is possible and indeed valid to create self-sustaining fictional universes existing on the basis of analogy with experiential reality.¹

It is a critical commonplace to date the rebellion against realism in English fiction to Virginia Woolf's essay 'Modern Fiction' from 1919, in which she accuses Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy of a materialistic attitude which ignores the spiritual: 'Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end' (Woolf, 1966, p. 106). It should be borne in mind however that Woolf, while calling for positive critical reassessment of Hardy, Conrad, Hudson, and Joyce as the truly new and modern spiritual writers, did not really question realism as a negotiable narrative approach. Whereas traditional realism, without ontological or epistemological qualms, constructs a story from the raw materials of experiential reality (the 'gig-lamps symmetrically arranged'), the modernist narrative – ranging from the symbolic

naturalism of Hardy, Conrad, the early Joyce, and Lawrence to the experimental texts of the Joyce of *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* – calls in doubt the concept of a stable reality, reflecting instead the mental process of the perception itself as the proper reality.² In both cases, however, we have to do with the representation of something unproblematically *given* before the writer gets to work.

The history of the English realistic novel since its rise in the early eighteenth century, with its ramifications into American and other English-language novel traditions during the nineteenth century, is largely a matter of the consolidation of an empirical or positivist realism written for a largely middle-class reading public and by authors of a similar background. It reached its culmination by the mid-nineteenth century and its decline can be divided, roughly speaking, into two stages; the first starting with the modernists' shift of focus from 'external' to 'internal' reality, the second with various postmodernist departures away from a simple epistemological reflection theory towards two positions, both based on the premise of the insufficiency of traditional – realist or modernist – aesthetics.³ Postmodernist writers tend to focus either on 'reality' in a state not to be processed because already edited or processed before the literary imagination gets to work, or on the act of writing itself, and to problematize any authorial or textual authority. Nonfiction 'fiction' supposedly turns into narrative a segment of documentable reality without interfering with it.⁴ In practice the segment in question will often be characterized by a framework identical with the one imposed by the realistic writer but which will be seen by the writer of nonfiction 'fiction' as inherent in his material. In nonfiction 'fiction' the imaginative processing never really concealed in realism is supposed to have been at work at a pre-textual stage. It is often argued that the procedures that go into the making of fiction are inherent in all experience once subject to communication, because the communication process comprises selection and editing according to *a priori* models of which the realistic novel is just another manifestation.

Metafiction, however, questions the very conventions of realistic as well as modernist fiction and proceeds to problematize the sufficiency of language itself.⁵ It works by playing well-established literary elements against each other in order to demonstrate the artificial nature of narrative. However, for such a process of deconstruction to work, metafiction must assume construction in the first place. Thus the realistic text is always present as forcefully as the metafictional

countertext actually printed. The deliberately planned contradictions of metafiction would become complete absurdities without the reader's sense of a predominantly realistic literary tradition. The onslaughts on realism from metafictional and nonfictional writers seeking to expose realism as ontologically and epistemologically unsound, which have been increasingly violent since the early sixties, seem, however, to have been successful to only a limited extent, at any rate in terms of the reception by the reading public. The powerful urge on the part of contemporary readers to naturalize prose narrative in terms of the 'well-made' realistic novel has made experimenting with narrative technique a thankless and, with the possible exceptions of Vladimir Nabokov in the USA and John Fowles in England, a seldom profitable activity. Like the reflection in realism of a phenomenally unambiguous and, in principle, well-ordered world, the metafictional problematization has been inherent in narrative since antiquity; but one of the chief characteristics of realism is precisely its success in almost completely erasing metafictional traces from the narrative.⁶

Traditional realism assumes the fictional universe to be a satisfactory verbal rendition of an intrinsically coherent *analogy* to a reality which is seen to exist 'out there' for us to take in and for our imagination to work on against the background of our general experience. *Documentary realism* in contrast explicitly or implicitly acknowledges borrowing 'directly' from reality, that is, from kinds of discourse intended for nonliterary purposes.⁷ The principle at work in documentary realism can be illustrated by the well-known gimmick of an event or figure of undisputed historical origin suddenly introduced into the otherwise fictitious world of the fictional text, as towards the end of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* where Sarah joins the household of the Rossettis, or as in this situation from Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin* where the narrator, in the company of the enigmatic American Clive and Sally Bowles, is watching a funeral procession:

We all three went out to the balcony of Clive's room. Sure enough, the street below was full of people. They were burying Hermann Müller. Ranks of pale steadfast clerks, government officials, trade union secretaries – the whole drab weary pageant of Prussian Social Democracy – trudged past under their banners towards the silhouetted arches of the Brandenburger Tor, from which the long black streamers stirred slowly in an evening

breeze. (Isherwood, 1966, p. 82)

Another example of the principle at work in documentary realism is illustrated by the following snatch of dialogue between two fictitious senior SIS employees meeting in a London club to discuss a delicate operation. Here it is not only a question of passively witnessing something of an unambiguously factual nature, but also of deliberately integrating the factual into the fictional:

For long moments Sir Graham sat looking through the big open doors to the bar and then he said quietly, 'I didn't hear what you were saying. Too much noise in the bar. Whatever it was, settle it yourself.'

'But . . . '

'No buts, Martin. Just teach the cheeky bastards a lesson.'

'Right, sir. Let's go upstairs and have a bite.'

'Lead the way, my friend. Isn't that V. S. Pritchett over there? Don't know how he does it. Looks younger every time I see him.'

Sir Graham nodded to the author as they walked by. 'Nice to see you, Victor.'

The author obviously had no idea who was addressing him but he smiled back. 'Thank you very much'.

(Allbeury, 1989, p. 125)

The reference to V. S. Pritchett is qualitatively different from the more or less explicit references to the club paraphernalia drawn on prior to the quotation to evoke the clubland atmosphere, which have grown into a stock device in the specific genre of fiction – secret-agent fiction – of which the work quoted from is an example. The appearance of a famous author is a violation of the unwritten rule that the fictional universe of the realistic narrative may only refer to reality in matters contributing to the background which are either of the vaguest generality (the clubland ethos) or in trivial matters, such as naming of car makes in modern fiction. But the introduction of characters from public life and the reporting of their actions and behaviour are taboo according to the same unwritten rule. The appearance of V. S. Pritchett is obviously intended first and foremost to assure the reader of the authenticity of the action, but there is probably a spin-off effect in the old author's slight confusion which lends an ironic light to the whole situation. This

results from the reader's appreciation of Allbeury's confrontation of the real imaginative writer with a character obviously moulded according to a literary type inseparable from the kind of generic fiction in question, enhanced by the puzzled and wary reaction of the one to the other.⁸

Although such an isolated reference to a historical figure is in principle an instance of documentary realism, it hardly achieves the sustained effect of double reality reference characteristic of documentary realism. The cases of documentary realism to be examined in detail below are all characterized by an explicitly or implicitly signalled meeting of the two different 'reality' levels in the text. The reader will probably not find isolated occurrences, like those just cited, a major disturbance of the otherwise traditionally fictional situation. To draw the reader's attention successfully to the difference between the fictional 'reality' and the verifiable actuality requires a clearly signalled introduction of the unambiguously nonfictional. This is what we find, for instance, in Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) when Kate Brown goes to a London performance of Chekhov's *A Month in the Country*: The narrator appeals extensively through several pages to the reader's knowledge of that play for the elucidation of Kate's midlife crisis. Chekhov's play itself is of course a (realistic) fiction, but its status in the context of Lessing's novel is by way of reference to the nonfictional. The presence of the authentic play in the general fiction of the novel no doubt enhances the sense of immediacy, reflection and involvement that Lessing so scrupulously aims at; as the fictional Kate comments during the performance: 'But this kind of play Kate had always found to be the most filling. Ibsen, Chekhov, Turgenev – the sort of play where one observed people like oneself in their recognizable predicaments' (Lessing, 1975, pp. 145–6). That the quotation also symbolizes Lessing's general sense of mission is another matter.

The integration of the factual into the fictional universe of the realistic novel is not so much a merging of different kinds of discourse as a matter of different terms of discourse reference and textual function. The appreciation of the documentary element in the fictional text requires a reader simultaneously aware of the text as a cultural convention (fiction) and conscious of a factual state of affairs to which the text belongs both as a physical artefact (a book) and as an expression of the ideas and attitudes it contains (a cultural document).

Documentary realism may be defined as a narrative mode which, while adhering in principle to the time-honoured narrative conventions of realistic narrative, draws on verifiable reality to various extents, but invariably in such a way as to call attention explicitly or implicitly to the difference between the fictional and the factual. Documentary realism is a kind of discourse which, like traditional realism, does not violate the kind(s) of discourse conventionally used for the communication of fact, but which, in contrast to traditional realism, relates verifiable events and/or figures. Documentary realism may be found in a variety of manifestations; from the isolated reference to a factual phenomenon (as in the extracts cited above), through the embedding of factual passages of different lengths and in varying distribution patterns, to the fully documented but still recognizably literary narrative (as in nonfiction 'fiction'). Documentary realism is integrated unproblematically in the conventionally realistic text, but appears in narratives deviating from realism as well, in which it may be found to serve both the epistemological interests of modernism and the deliberately ontology-disruptive strategies of postmodernism. The narratives selected for examination in this study share the narrative device of documentary realism, but otherwise they fall into subgroups according to their thematic emphases, and, cutting across this classification, in terms of their respective allegiance to realism, modernism and postmodernism.

Since conventional realism and factual accounts such as history, reporting, biography, etc. deploy the same type of expository prose – indeed it is a major convention of realism to pose as reality – the encounter between the fictitious and the factual is discernible in the textual structure only if a specific source is indicated for the latter. In unmarked texts the documentary element can be appreciated only as a consequence of the reader's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction in the linguistically unified texture of the narrative. The experience of reading documentary realism is arguably characterized by an uneasy and ambivalent response to the narrative which results from the inability to allow the imaginative universe to take total possession, as usually happens during the reading of a realistic novel. Documentary realism is in most cases clearly intended to enhance the sense of authenticity of the narrative, but in a minority of cases it is used by the metafictional writer as a device to deliberately disrupt the reader's sense of security in the fictional universe. Documentary realism, however, is not itself the cause of the one or the other, both of which are relative to the

totality of the individual narrative. Although a narrative technique often intended to enhance the realism of a narrative, it may have the opposite effect: Rather than creating the illusion of reality the distinction between two levels of reality reference in the text can simply make the artificiality of realism stand out.

The double-reference technique of documentary realism typically manifests itself either as integration of more or less obviously factual material in the form of quotations or references into the narrative's otherwise quite fictitious universe, or as the adaptation of a wholly factual series of events to a traditionally fictional narrative pattern, and sometimes as a combination of both. Whereas documentary realism of the first kind is a discourse phenomenon restricted to the obviously fictional text as a temporary violation of its ontological status, documentary realism of the second type is characteristic both of established genres such as the historical novel and the biographical novel, as well as of the less established but (since the 1960s) quite prominent nonfiction 'fiction' – all to be dealt with in the course of this study.

There is no escaping the fact that in many cases it is impossible, without consulting an encyclopedia, to determine whether a reference posing as a *bona fide* reality reference actually is one. In Kazuo Ishiguro's brilliant dramatic monologue in prose, *The Remains of the Day*, the soliloquizing butler Stevens regularly mentions a 'Hayes Society' for butlers of the highest rank:

You may not be aware of the Hayes Society, for few talk of it these days. But in the twenties and the early thirties, it exerted a considerable influence over much of London and the Home Counties. In fact, many felt its power had become too great and thought it no bad thing when it was forced to close, I believe in 1932 or 1933. (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 31)

The authenticity of this 'butlers' union' is apparently corroborated by the reference to a periodical entitled *A Quarterly for the Gentleman's Gentleman* (Ishiguro, 1989, p. 32). To this may be added the reference to a meeting between the British Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax and the German ambassador von Ribbentrop in the house of the butler's employer Lord Darlington. Our instinct as readers is to categorize Lord Darlington with the narrator as a fictional figure,⁹ but did a meeting between such two exalted personages nonetheless take place in an English country seat at

the time in question? The society, the periodical, and the meeting are all important for the whole fabric of the fictional universe, but the success of that universe does not depend on whether such phenomena are verifiable. Nonetheless the reader begins to wonder, and the wondering becomes part of the total impression produced by the novel. Belonging to the realm of forgotten social and political history – if indeed authentic – the society, the periodical, and the meeting do not really take the reader out of his absorption in the easily accepted comfort of the usual ‘deceptive’ imaginative universe of the novel, even if giving rise to a certain amount of wondering.¹⁰ In *Passing On* (1989), Penelope Lively refers to a scene in a movie and a TV documentary about the Barnacle geese of the Arctic (Lively, 1989, pp. 35–6). Both have a symbolic value in the novel, but while in the case of the movie familiarity with the scene of the pursued man is more or less taken for granted,¹¹ a certain incident from the documentary about the geese is explained in detail. The author evidently anticipates that readers will be familiar with the movie, but is not so sure about the documentary, and the reference technique is varied accordingly.¹² In Fay Weldon’s novel *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989) the whole atmosphere of the narrative is saturated by the Chernobyl pollution. Chernobyl does not only furnish a background, however, but intrudes as a motivating force into the narrative, whose strange events are more or less attributed to it. Chernobyl is recent history, far from forgotten, and the reader is acutely aware of the reality in which the fiction is embedded. But a comparison between Ishiguro and Weldon illustrates the dynamic nature of documentary realism in respect to reader response: In fifty years’ time, will Chernobyl prompt the same kind of wondering with which we respond to Ishiguro’s Hayes Society and its periodical?

No doubt there are many works of narrative in addition to those dealt with below which could have been included in the present study, and ‘texts’ could also have been drawn from nonverbal art forms such as film or painting.¹³ The narratives studied have been selected, irrespective of considerations of literary quality, on the basis of the two criteria of original publication in English (the authors are English, American, and Australian) and thematic relationships: To history (Chapter 4: *Story and History*), to the Holocaust (Chapter 5: *Communicating the Incommunicable*), and to biography (Chapter 6: *Transformations of Dr Freud*). There are two cases of overlap, in that Doctorow’s *Ragtime* is discussed in Chapters 4

and 6 and Thomas's *The White Hotel* in Chapters 5 and 6, as each text illustrates topics dealt with under both the respective chapter headings.

The works have been selected as representative examples of a range of typical manifestations of documentary realism. Critical opinions on their respective literary merits vary. For the present purpose – discussing the possibilities of a narrative device – the point is not to help cement or ruin reputations, but solely to describe specific manifestations of the narrative technique and to weigh the pros and cons of the technique in relation to explicit or implicit aims. This does not mean that critical assessments will be avoided, but that they will be arrived at against the particular background of documentary realism. The language criterion for selection is of course quite arbitrary and a direct consequence of the present author's research specialization; documentary realism is an international phenomenon not restricted to English-speaking countries.¹⁴ The thematic criterion is less arbitrary, since the tension in documentary realism between conventional realism and a discourse more closely approximating to history, reporting, etc. does seem to be especially characteristic of efforts to handle historical material in the form of narrative fiction, material usually thought of as belonging to the domain of scholarship and science rather than artistic creation, with the facts given rather than created by the artist.

Traditional realism, with its predilection for particularized experience rendered in terms of individuals in circumscribed and simplified environments energized by erotic and social dynamics tends to reduce the structureless world of fact – history, including biography and mass suffering – to a more manageable universe of predetermination according to more or less stable plot patterns. Unlike history, historical fiction prefers the foregrounding of a limited cast, as a rule interacting within the confines of sexual entanglements and financial problems. In consequence historical novels are usually generic hybrids, compromising historiography by significant reliance on the romance and comedy-of-manners elements typical of the realistic novel. We need think only of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* or Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* to appreciate this tendency towards romance, and go no further than Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* to find examples of social comedy set against a background of war.¹⁵ Or we may think of the tendency of biographers to structure lives in terms of romance with

its stages of crisis, apotheosis and eventual arrival at a new state of equilibrium. Nor can mass suffering as experienced in modern warfare and genocide effectively be contained in a narrative form to which anonymity and large-scale misery are quite alien. The approach adopted in documentary realism is to attempt the creation of a discourse which refuses to surrender the totalizing vision of traditional realism, but which at the same time prevents the reader from a full and even agreeable immersion in the microcosm of a traditional, realistic novel. This is not to say that documentary realism invariably succeeds as an artistic response to certain kinds of subject matter.

The works discussed here have all been published since the mid-1960s. Although documentary realism, like metafiction, can be encountered in various manifestations antedating the narratives selected, for example in the work of John Dos Passos and Christopher Isherwood, post-1950s writing in particular seems to have taken the technique to its heart as a valid vehicle for the writer's exploration of existence.

The study sets out to delineate and discuss some of the major problems with which documentary realism has to deal, on the basis of a limited number of individual works falling into the three thematically defined categories outlined above. As in the case of metafiction we are dealing, in principle, with a generally available *narrative technique*, metonymically lending its name to the works in which the technique is operative, and beyond that to a whole class of writing. Documentary realism can only be considered a fictional genre if we make certain structural characteristics the basis of generic categorization. The epistolary novel for example is sometimes accorded the status of genre, since the letter device offers an easily recognized pattern. The same sometimes applies to metafiction on account of its equally characteristic self-destructive narrative structure. But even in these cases we may find examples simultaneously belonging to thematically defined genres in a system cutting across the structural classification. The education of Charles in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* exemplifies the possibility of merging structurally defined metafiction with a thematically defined modern-style *Bildungsroman*. Consequently any attempt to lay down strict generic rules would soon run into inconsistencies. But even though, strictly speaking, documentary realism is a result of an always available narrative technique, like rhyme in poetry, no great harm is done by extending the application