

REALISM

Pam Morris

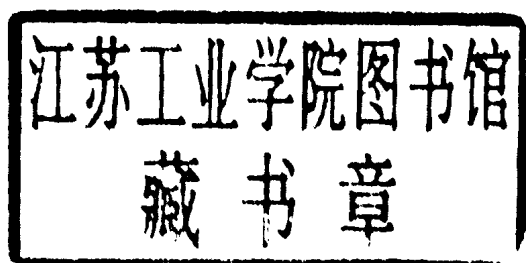


the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM



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For Vicky

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

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INTRODUCTION

What is Realism?

'John MacNaughton was nothing if not a realist.' Imagine you have just opened the first page of a novel in a book shop. What expectations about the character will have been raised by the final word of the sentence? Would you be inclined to put the book back on the shelf or take it to the till? Very sensibly, you would probably read a bit more, but let us assume you are an impulse buyer. In which case, you may have thought: 'Now, here is a character I can fully sympathise with as pursuing a clear-sighted, unromantic approach to life. Whatever problems the fictional John MacNaughton meets in the course of the story I shall enjoy the way he responds rationally and practically, overcoming difficulties by an accurate evaluation of all the facts of the situation that avoids self-indulgent whimsy and sentimentality.' On the other hand, you might have rejected the book as featuring a protagonist who will lack vision and high idealism; you may feel that literature must aspire to truths and values beyond the everyday mundane. The approach to life indicated by the first response is most briskly encapsulated in the advice to 'Get real!' and perhaps its most uncompromising fictional advocate is Mr Gradgrind, in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, who insists: 'Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life' ([1854] 1989: 1). To which, a non-fictional Victorian contemporary of Gradgrind might well have responded severely, 'It is a fact, sir, that man has a material body, but the only true reality that concerns man is his spiritual soul.'

What is demonstrated here is the slippery nature of the related terms realist and realism and the difficulties involved in defining them in any precise and unambiguous way. In the first place, the terms realism and realist inhabit both the realm of everyday usage and the more specialist *aesthetic* realm of literary and artistic usage. As we can see above, in ordinary speech situations there is frequent traffic between these two realms. Inevitably our judgements about fictional characters and novels are generally influenced by our attitudes to non-fictional reality. It is impossible to draw absolute boundaries separating the meaning and values of the terms as they are normally used from their evaluative meaning as used in critical discourse. Related to this is the entanglement of realist and realism with a series of other words equally resistant to clear-cut definition: factuality, truth, reality, realistic and real. Sometimes these words are taken to have roughly the same meaning as realist but equally they are sometimes used to stake out the opposite. This points to the third area of problem: the term realism almost always involves both claims about the nature of reality and an evaluative attitude towards it. It is, thus, a term that is frequently invoked in making fundamental ethical and political claims or priorities, based upon perceptions of what is 'true' or 'real'. As such, the usage is often contentious and polemical.

In *Humanism* (1997), Tony Davies describes 'realism' as one of those words 'whose range of possible meanings runs from the pedantically exact to the cosmically vague' (p.3). I cannot offer any exact definition but I will attempt to avoid both undue vagueness and cosmic proportions as to what is considered under the term. Because of its association with claims about reality, the concept of 'realism' participates in scientific and philosophical debates. The visual arts, theatre and film have all developed quite distinctive traditions of realism as a representational form. Due to limitations of space, I shall restrict my consideration primarily to literary realism only drawing upon philosophical and scientific issues where these have direct relevance to writerly forms. I shall also deal pre-eminently with the novel genre since it is within prose fiction that realism as an art form has been most fully developed.

The inherently oppositional nature of the word 'realism' is brought out in one of the definitions offered in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as 'any view or system contrasted with idealism'. Idealism, as a

system of thought that subordinates sensory perceptions of the world to intellectual or spiritual knowledge, is often also opposed to the term 'materialism', which the OED defines as the doctrine that nothing exists but matter, the stuff that constitutes the physical universe. This brings us back again to the central question of what constitutes reality. The debate over this goes back certainly as far as the ancient world but the issue between idealism and materialism came especially to the fore during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the rise of the empirical sciences like botany, anatomy and geology. For the first time the authority of metaphysical and divine truth came under challenge from a secular form of knowledge that claimed to reveal the truth of the material physical world. By and large, the development of the realist novel coincided with and aligned itself to the modern secular materialist understanding of reality. Realist plots and characters are constructed in accordance with secular empirical rules. Events and people in the story are explicable in terms of natural causation without resort to the supernatural or divine intervention. Whereas idealism is grounded upon a view of Truth as universal and timeless, **empiricism** finds its truths in the **particular** and specific. Yet this does not prevent the sympathetic treatment of idealism or of a character's religious beliefs within the narrative. The struggle of an idealist against the hampering materiality of the social world is a structuring device of a great many realist novels. In fact, one could argue that realist forms have given expression to some of the most powerful representations of spiritual conviction and commitment. The character Levin in Leo Tolstoy's (1928–1910) *Anna Karenina* (1875–7), for example, discovers meaning in life only through a religious revelation.

Yet undeniably realism as a literary form has been associated with an insistence that art cannot turn away from the more sordid and harsh aspects of human existence. The stuff of realism is not selected for its dignity and nobility. More positively, realism participates in the democratic impulse of modernity. As a genre, it has reached out to a much wider social range, in terms both of readership and of characters represented, than earlier more elite forms of literature. In particular, realism, as a form uninfluenced by classical conventions, has been developed by women writers and women readers from its beginnings. Thus, as an upstart literary form, the novel lacked the cultural capital or prestige of

traditional forms like poetry and drama. Novels also were the first literary products to discover a mass market and they made some of their writers a great deal of money. For all of these reasons novels were open to attack as materialist in a pejorative sense by those who felt a need to defend a more spiritual expression of human existence. So, for example, the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909) drew a distinction between ‘prosaic realism’ and ‘poetic reality’. In tracing the debates that have developed around realism as a literary form, it becomes apparent that issues about its relationship to the non-fictional or non-textual world are frequently influenced by fears about mass culture. Novels were perhaps the first popular form to be accused of ‘dumbing down’.

There is one distinction between realist writing and actual everyday reality beyond the text that must be quite categorically insisted upon: realist novels *never* give us life or a slice of life nor do they reflect reality. In the first place, literary realism is a representational form and a representation can never be identical with that which it represents. In the second place, words function completely differently from mirrors. If you think for a moment about a mirror reflecting a room and compare it to a detailed written description of the room, then reversal of images aside, it is obvious that no writing can encompass every tiny visual detail as a mirror faithfully does. Writing has to select and order, something has to come first, and that selection and ordering will always, in some way, entail the values and perspective of the describer. Furthermore, no matter how convincing the prose is in its rendering of social reality, even the most realist of texts deploys writerly conventions that have no equivalent in experiential reality: use of punctuation, denotations like ‘he said’. Indeed, if we accept too quickly or unquestioningly the assumption that realist texts copy reality we tend to overlook a long, impressive tradition of artistic development during which writers struggled and experimented with the artistic means to convey a verbal sense of what it is like to live an embodied existence in the world. This history of experimental prose fiction is one of great artistic achievement. Realism is a technically demanding medium. Part III of this book will explore some of the complex and impressive formal devices that constitute the art form of realism as a genre.

The OED gets nearest to the sense of realism as a representational form in its definition: ‘close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of rep-

resentation, the rendering of precise details of the real thing or scene.' Closely associated with this meaning are the two terms '**mimesis**' and '**verisimilitude**' that often crop up in discussions of realism as an art form. Mimesis is a term that derives from classical Greek drama where it referred to the actors' direct imitation of words and actions. This is perhaps the most exact form of correspondence or fidelity between representation and actuality. As it developed as a critical term, the meaning of mimesis has gradually widened to encompass the general idea of close artistic imitation of social reality, although it is occasionally restricted in use to refer only to those textual passages in which characters appear to speak and act for themselves in contradistinction to narrative commentary. I shall use mimesis in the former wider sense. 'Verisimilitude' is defined as 'the appearance of being true or real; likeness or resemblance to truth, reality or fact'.

The problem with definitions of realism and related terms that use phrases like 'fidelity of representation' or 'rendering of precise details' is that they tend to be associated with notions of truth as verifiability. There is a popular and somewhat paradoxical assumption that realist fiction is to be judged according to how faithfully it corresponds to things and events in the real-world. The more exact the correspondence, the more a one-to-one concordance can be recognised between words and world, the more the realist writer is to be praised as having achieved her or his aim. Realist novels developed as a popular form during the nineteenth century alongside the other quickly popularised representational practice of photography. This coincidence may well have encouraged a pictorial or photographic model of truth as correspondence. We have probably all pointed a camera at a scene or person and been pleased at the likeness reproduced. Yet, as I stressed above there can be no simple identification of verbal with visual representations and both are equally distinct from the actuality they convey. Practised seriously, photography and realist fiction are distinctive art forms that carefully select, organise and structure their representations of the world. The selection and arrangement of verbal and visual codes or languages are governed by very different rules. In fact, as we shall see in Part II, there is little evidence to suggest that the major realist writers of the nineteenth century ever saw their goal in terms of a one-to-one correspondence with a non-verbal reality. Nevertheless, it was this kind of

perception of realism's aims as accurate reportage or 'reflection' that aroused the criticism of idealists who invoked truths that lay beyond the surface appearance of things. During the latter part of the twentieth century, however, realism has suffered a far more radical attack upon its artistic integrity. Realist writing has been caught up in a much larger controversy which has put in question the whole tradition of knowledge and truth as it developed from the eighteenth through to the twentieth century. Within this critique, it is the capacity of novels to communicate any truths at all about human existence in the real-world beyond the text that comes under fire.

From this sceptical, anti-realist framework it is sometimes suggested that the term 'realism' should be confined to the specific period of the nineteenth century when novelists like Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) wrote within a historical context in which the possibility of observational truth about the world was unquestioned. This was certainly the period when realism, especially in France, was most consciously avowed and debated as an artistic form and Part II gives an account of the achievements of realist writers during those innovative decades. However, realism as artistic practice has much wider historical scope than the nineteenth century: aspects that we want to call realist can be found in Chaucer's writing and in even earlier classical literature while today artistically innovative realist novels are still being produced. Even in writing that seems to adopt a mode of expression very far from realist representation, there are frequently passages that move into realist style. For this reason, although a water-tight definition of realism is impossible we continue to need the term within the discourse of literary criticism. As a starting point I shall define literary realism as any writing that is based upon an implicit or explicit assumption that it is possible to communicate about a reality beyond the writing. I shall attempt to define and support that claim most fully in the final chapter. In Part I, I outline the historical development of the radical twentieth-century critique of the grounds of knowledge, or **epistemology**, for realism and explore the political and social controversies that are involved in such scepticism.

I

REALISM VERSUS EXPERIMENTALISM?

