“On Virtual Grounds: Reclaiming Realism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century”

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How do you define "real"?
“On Virtual Grounds”: outline

Fredric Hassam  *Rainy Day* 1885

Richard Estes  *Waverly Place* 1980

1. The golden age of realism
2. Realism into the twentieth century
3. Realism at the turn of the twenty-first century
4. The (post)modernist critique of reflectionist mimesis
5. Heuristics, reflexivity, contract, praxis: the tactics of contemporary realism
6. But what makes it true? Validity claims and the lifeworld
1. The golden age of realism
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- The imitation of life
  - Frank Norris: “get to the place where things are real”
  - “the complications of real life”

- Urban poverty:
  - Emile Zola *L’assommoir* (1877)
  - Stephen Crane *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893)
  - Upton Sinclair *The Jungle* (1906)
1. The golden age of realism

- Upper-middle-class domesticity and gender:
  - Gustave Flaubert  *Madame Bovary* (1856)
  - Henrik Ibsen  *A Doll House* (1879)
  - George Bernard Shaw  *Mrs Warren’s Profession* (1894)
  - Kate Chopin  *The Awakening* (1899)
  - Edith Wharton  *The House of Mirth* (1905)

John Sargent  *Edward Darley’s Daughters* 1882

Illustration from the 1905 edition of *The House of Mirth*
1. The golden age of realism

- Financial and real-estate speculation:
  - Emile Zola *La curée* (1871)  *L’argent* (1891)
  - George Bernard Shaw *Widowers’ Houses* (1892)
  - Theodore Dreiser *The Financier* (1912)

Illustration from Lincoln Steffens’s *The Shame of Cities* 1904
1. The golden age of realism

- Political corruption:
  - Hamlin Garland *A Spoil of Office* (1897)
  - Upton Sinclair *The Metropolis* (1907)

Illustration from Lincoln Steffens’s *The Shame of Cities* 1904
1. The golden age of realism

- Militarism
  - Stephen Crane *The Purple Badge of Courage* (1895)

Alexander Gardner *A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July 1863*
1. The golden age of realism

- The literary market:
  - Gustave Flaubert *L’éducation sentimentale* [*Sentimental Education*] (1869)
  - Emile Zola *L’oeuvre* [*The Masterpiece*] (1886)
  - George Gissing *New Grub Street* (1891)
  - Theodore Dreiser *The “Genius”* (1917)

Henri Fantin-Latour *Un atelier aux Batignolles* (hommage à Manet) 1870 Salon
1. The golden age of realism

- Realism as social science
  - Emile Zola. “The Experimental Novel” (1880)
  - Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *Women and Economics* (1898)

Thomas Eakins *The Gross Clinic* 1875

From Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* 1890
1. The golden age of realism

- Investigative journalism ("muckraking")
  - Jack London *The People of the Abyss*. (1903)
  - George Orwell *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933); *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937)
  - David Graham Phillips *The Treason of the Senate*. (1906)
  - Lincoln Steffens *The Shame of the Cities*. (1904)
  - Ida Tarbell *The History of the Standard Oil*. (1904)
  - Upton Sinclair *The Jungle* (1906)
1. The golden age of realism

- After the golden age: twentieth-century antirealism
- Zola turns against Paul Cézanne
- Russian Formalism, the New Criticism, poststructuralism, postmodernism
- A revival of realism in the 21st century?
  - William Gibson: “Cognitive Dissidents” (Virtual Light 1993)
  - David Cronenberg: the “realist underground.” (eXistenZ 1999)
- Alfred Kazin On Native Grounds (1942)

The realist underground in David Cronenberg’s eXistenZ (1999): “The uprising has begun! The world is in flames! Let’s go!”
2. Realism into the twentieth century
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- A severe loss of cultural capital
  - Thomas Pynchon  Toni Morrison >> John Updike  Alan Sillitoe.
  - Pablo Picasso  Piet Mondriaan >> Norman Rockwell
  - Ingmar Bergman  David Lynch >> Made-for-TV-movies
  - Franz Kafka’s modernist enigmas >> realist detective fiction
  - William Burroughs’s postmodernist SF >> classical SF

Norman Rockwell  *Leaving Home* 1936
2. Realism into the twentieth century

- The hybridization of 20\textsuperscript{th}-century realism
- Naturalism as a hybridized genre

Chaim Soutine  \textit{Le groom [The Bell Hop]} 1915
Ivan Allbright  \textit{And Man Created God in His Own Image} 1931
2. Realism into the twentieth century

- The hybridization of 20th-century realism
- John Dos Passos and modernist fiction
- The modernist features of detective fiction
- Realist painting and abstraction:
  - The Precisionists: Charles Sheeler, Georgia O’Keefe
  - Edward Hopper < Giorgio de Chirico, René Magritte

Edward Hopper *Hotel Window* 1956

Charles Sheeler *Windows* 1952
2. Realism into the twentieth century

- The hybridization of 20th-century realism
- Pop Art: Andy Warhol; Roy Lichtenstein
- Photorealism: David Estes, Charles Bell
- Magic Realism: Gabriel García Márquez
- Historiographic metafiction: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

Andy Warhol  *Electric Chair* 1967

Charles Bell  *Sixteen Candles* 1992
3. Realism at the turn of the twenty-first century
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- Class inequalities:
  - Michael Moore *Roger and Me* (1989); *TV Nation* (mid-1990s)

From Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me*
3. Realism at the turn of the twenty-first century

“[T]he largest beach invasion since Normandy”  Michael Moore’s *TV Nation*
3. Realism at the turn of the twenty-first century

- Political and financial corruption:
3. Realism at the turn of the twenty-first century

- Gender:
  - Maxine Hong Kingston *The Woman Warrior*. (1977)
  - [Emile Zola *The Human Beast* (1890)]
3. Realism at the turn of the twenty-first century

- Theory (metarealism) and pragmatic commitment
  - Peter Weir *The Truman Show*. (1998)
  - David Cronenberg *eXistenZ* (1999)
  - Catherine Belsey *Culture and the Real* (2005)

Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show*

“Yeah, their corporate slogan should be ‘Enemies of Reality’” (*eXistenZ*)
3. Realism at the turn of the twenty-first century

- Pragmatic commitment
  - Michael Moore  *TV Nation* “Militia.” Fox Show 4
  - Sigalit Landau  *Barbed Hula* (2001)
  - [Norman Mailer  *The Naked and the Dead* (1948)]
4. The (post)modernist critique of reflectionist mimesis
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- Reflectionism: the snapshot view of realism
  - William Shakespeare (Hamlet 3.2.22): holding “the mirror up to nature”
  - Meaning expresses itself in phenomena
  - Signifiers are inessential
  - Jean-Paul Sartre. *What is Literature?* (1948)
  - The object of the realist gaze is stable
4. The (post)modernist critique of reflectionist mimesis

- Against “referential illusion”
- Jean Ricardou *Le Nouveau Roman* (1978)
- Realism ignores modernist alienation / transcendence
- Virginia Woolf *The Common Reader* (1925)
- Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*] (1927) objectified “entities” [*Seiend*] vs. elusive “being” [*Sein*].
- Jacques Lacan *Ecrits I* (1966): the “real” vs. the “symbolic order”

Edvard Munch *The Scream* 1895

Yves Tanguy *The Five Strangers* 1941
4. The (post)modernist critique of reflectionist mimesis

- Jean Baudrillard *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981): the “desert of the real”

Laurence Fishburne in Andy and Larry Wachovsky’s *The Matrix* 1998
4. The (post)modernist critique of reflectionist mimesis

- Reflectionism misunderstands the mechanics of language

René Magritte *Le masque vide* [*The Empty Mask*] 1928
4. The (post)modernist critique of reflectionist mimesis

- Realism is politically disingenuous or conservative
- Realism is “monologic”:
  - Mikhail Bakhtin *he Dialogic Imagination* (1981 English translation):
  - Realism disguises history as “unchangeable nature.”
    - Roland Barthes *Mythologies* (1957):
  - “Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power.”
  - Michel Foucault “Truth and Power” *Power/Knowledge* (1972-77)

“De overwinning van het Realisme.”

“The victory of realism!” (*eXistenZ*)

Isaac Brodsky  *Lenin at the Smolny*  1930
4. The (post)modernist critique of reflectionist mimesis

- Realism freezes the Heraclitean flow of signifying experience
  - Jacques Derrida *On Grammatology* (1967); *Speech and Phenomena* (1967)
  - Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari *L’anti-Oedipe: capitalisme et schizophrénie* (1972); *Mille Plateaux* (1980)

Mark Tansey *Action Painting II* 1984
5. Heuristics, reflexivity, contract, praxis
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- Realism as a complex, multidimensional gesture.
- Neo-historicist re-evaluations of realism in the 1980s and 1990s
  - June Howard. *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985)

Norman Rockwell *Triple Self-Portrait* 1960
Four axes of contemporary realist practice

- Heuristics: fact-finding
- Reflexivity: metadiscursivity
- Contract: the negotiation of reality
- Praxis: realism as social intervention
5. Heuristics, reflexivity, contract, praxis

- Heuristics
5. Heuristics, reflexivity, contract, praxis

- Reflexivity:
  - Maxine Hong Kingston *The Woman Warrior* (1977)
  - Stephen Crane *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* (1893)
  - Mark Twain *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)
5. Heuristics, reflexivity, contract, praxis

- **Contract:**
  - Philippe Lejeune *Le pacte autobiographique* (1976)
  - Daniel Defoe *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)
5. Heuristics, reflexivity, contract, praxis

- **Praxis:**
  - Emile Zola. “The Experimental Novel” (1880)

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Emile Zola’s “J’accuse” 1898

Michael Moore facing GM headquarters in Detroit
6. But what makes it true?
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- Truth: postmodernism’s blind spot
6. But what makes it true?

- Truth and political lies
6. But what makes it true?

- Truth as definitional feature for realism as a genre
  - Vassily Kandinsky; Piet Mondriaan.
  - Ian Watt. “[F]ormal realism”; a mere “convention” (35); its “report on human life” were not “any truer than those presented through the very different conventions of other literary genres” (Watt 35)

John White  *Indians Dancing*  1585
6. But what makes it true?

- Realist practice: the realist appropriation of art and discourse
- A realist appropriation of magic realism
  - Gabriel García Márquez. *A Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967)
6. But what makes it true?

- Realism as commitment
  - Suspending (post)modernist alienation
  - Doing justice to the “heterotopian” texture of postmodernity
  - Brian McHale. *Postmodernist Fiction* < Michel Foucault
6. But what makes it true?

- Realist practice as centripetal dialogism
  - Deferred closure
  - A virtual point of convergence
6. But what makes it true?

- Realist practice and the lifeworld
- The suspension of Heraclitean mutability
  - The “lifeworld” < Edmund Husserl. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936)
- Communicative action as dialogical practice
- A commitment to cohesion and rationality

Entrusting oneself to a cohesive lifeworld:

“It was as if we both decided to play this game without having to discuss the rules […] I was happy to go along with that” [Auggie Wren /Harvey Keitel in Wayne Wang and Paul Auster’s *Smoke* (1995)]
6. But what makes it true?

- The lifeworld as regulatory utopia
- The temptation of romance: depicting an unproblematic lifeworld
  - Fredric Jameson < Northrop Frye: romance and the restoration of “some lost Eden”
- “problematic” < Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel* (1920)
6. But what makes it true?

- American independent films of local life: a half-skeptical, half hopeful representation of the lifeworld


6. But what makes it true?

- Auggie Wren’s Christmas story (Wang and Auster’s *Smoke* [1995])

The lifeworld between romance and demystification
6. But what makes it true?

“We love you, now that you have proven to be true and trustworthy realists.” (Cronenberg’s eXistenZ)