

Realism in Art: A Study Day

Some Considerations

Steve Petford – 5 September 2018



Caravaggio, *Basket of Fruit*, c. 1599
46 x 64.5 Biblioteca Ambrosiana Milan



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www.wahg.org.uk

Realism in Art

The main purpose of this study day is to prepare the way for appreciation and understanding of Realism and related movements in British, European, and American art from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, the subjects of the subsequent talks in this series.

In order to highlight the kind of issues involved aesthetically when we use terms like 'realism', 'resemblance', 'verisimilitude', 'illusionism' and 'real' about paintings we start with an examination of a topic not covered in the lectures, Socialist Realism.



Stozharov, *The Village of Andreikovo*, 1958
80 x 200 State Tretyakov Gallery Moscow

By looking at pictures produced under the official aegis of this ideology and its attempted imposition of a dominant regime of viewing, we can pinpoint not only the reasons why such works were deemed to be 'Realism' of a certain type but also, more importantly, get a sense of how the use of such terms assumes and presumes all sorts of differences from preceding Western paintings that we term 'realistic'. The primary difference is that realism is the enemy of the

‘mind-forged manacles’ of ideology and conceptual language generally. It is most definitely not a genre and has no single style or mode. And therein is the crux since habits of what is apparently straightforward perception turn out to be cognitively framed, and the cognitive frames, or Beholder’s Share as Gombrich says, or ‘schemas’ as psychologists say, change over time.

But why and how they change, how we chart the changes in relation to the people who were able to see the paintings, and the art historians or commentators who suggested or set up ways of seeing (Pliny the Younger, for example, or Vasari), for painters and viewers alike, and how we assess those comments and pictures in our contemporary situation - today they are more than ever the subject of many interconnected narratives and competing theories.

Our study is therefore going to raise many more aspects of ‘realism’ than we can possibly examine in detail in a few hours; what we can do is get a sense of the qualities of particular paintings in the Western tradition, their cultural context and how knowledge of context may affect our understanding and appreciation of the painting, as well as the way in which our understanding of paintings is shaped and informed by often competing accounts of how they relate to each other.

One of the master narratives of the development of figurative art - at least in terms of its influence on art historians’ concern with the cultural meaning given to realism - is Ernst Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion* (1960). Its basic thesis is that ‘the discovery of appearances was due not so much to a careful observation of nature as to the invention of pictorial effects’. By means of looking at paintings by Duccio, Cimabue, Giotto, and Masaccio we will explore the implications of this thesis in the development of early Renaissance painting and to what extent it applies as an explanation of palpable changes in the representation of the human figure when we take into account the cultural context in which these works were produced.

An awareness of context shifts the emphasis we give a naturalistic representation of the human figure by enabling an understanding that realism is not an end in itself but part of many other elements that constitute the work. Gombrich's chronological move from one painter to another to show that the central telos of Western painting was illusionistic representation is a highly reductive or, at least, one-sided account and hence limits what such representation is doing. However, he does show that conventions and traditions of representation mediate the subject-matter; in other words, a sense of the real is culturally bound and not universal. If we apply Gombrich's telos to Western painting, then it is not surprising that painters' work might be valued the more highly the more they approximate to what Norman Bryson refers to as the Essential Copy.

The (legendary but instructive) story of Zeuxis' depiction of grapes so realistic that birds are deceived into trying to eat them illustrates this notion. Gombrich judges correctly that total mimesis or the perfection of the Essential Copy is unachievable but his 'eye-witness principle' - that is, the painter must not include in his picture anything that an eye-witness 'could not have seen from a particular point at a particular moment' - assumes that an artist who succeeds in constructing a painting that gives the illusion of a world that we could perceive in actuality (if only we were present) is superior to one whose work, by comparison, is not so convincing.

Reflection on this principle makes us realise that the context in which the artist lived and worked is more germane to an understanding of the work than a chronological juxtaposition of works whose depiction of subject-matter generates what Barthes called 'the effect of the real'. Bryson argues: "'realism" lies...in the effect of a recognition of a representation as corresponding to what a particular society proposes and assumes as "Reality" ...the real is a production brought about human activity within particular cultural constraints' (*Word and Image*). The fact that the context is itself in need of interpretation means that relating it to a

painting is a complex business because it is all too easy to assume that the evidence from which we construct context is simpler and more legible than the art work.



Velasquez, *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*, 1618
63 x 104 National Gallery London

The different purposes to which realism and the ambivalence of interpretation they generate is unfolded spectacularly by looking at Van Eyck's *The Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (c.1437), Holbein's *The French Ambassadors* (1533), Caravaggio's *The Supper at Emmaus* (1601), Velasquez's *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (1618), and Vermeer's *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* (c.1670-1672). In all of these paintings what we identify as their realistic aspects takes us into a ferment of aesthetic and intellectual interrogation (much of which may not match the complexities as the actual painters understood them).

Even compelling but unchallenging works - that is, works which we might take for granted habitually - are made new by applying the making and matching concept or the eye-witness principle. We could say that Constable made more realistic paintings than Cimabue because he had the benefit of a long line of predecessors' experimentation in achieving that goal. But once again we can regard this approach as reductive - depending on the kind of factors we bring in concerning what is absent - that is, objects that the artist could have, and probably did, 'eye-witness' but did not include.



Constable, *Wivenhoe Park* 1816

56.1 x 101.2 National Gallery of Art Washington DC

John Barrell in *The Darkside of the Landscape* (1980) argues that Constable is 'not simply a landscape painter but one clearly concerned to express in his landscapes a social vision - the image of a productive and well-organised landscape, as it relates to the idea of a well-organised society' and yet at one and the same time there are very few people depicted in

landscapes: people are largely absent. Constable's landscapes are highly realistic in one respect of the 'eye-witness principle' but unrealistic if we take into account what he would probably have seen and selectively omitted. Whether we concur or not with Barrell's explanatory analysis this consideration leads us to realise the profound importance of the notion that what the artist portrays and the attitude or mode with which he or she portray it is not a world independent from themselves, including their cognitive frames that at once inform their consciousness and which they shape.

We can explore the implications of this way of interpreting by looking at Breughel the Elder's *Hunters in the Snow* (1565) and Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem from the Dunes at Overveen* (late 1660s). Mutatis mutandis, we can examine the use of natural motifs in which a naturalistic building-block of a picture - in these instances, the moon - is charged with other registers of meaning by a comparison of Joseph Wright of Derby's *View of Cromford: Arkwright's Cotton Mill at Night* and (c.1782-Caspar David Friedrich's *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819).



Degas, *Place de la Concorde*, 1876
78.4 x 117.5 Hermitage Museum St. Petersburg

From the late 19th century another major example of how different kinds of information are required in order to see in a picture something other than what immediately presents itself as realism and something that deepens the meaning of the work, is Degas' *Place de la Concorde (Vicomte Lepic and His Daughters)*, (1875). Art historians often use this work as an exemplar of the influence of photography on depicting experience in the modern urban world. That is a familiar explanation - a changing world brings about an altered world view with new forms to embody it. But early photographers tried to make pictures that resembled what people thought pictures should look like, a paradigm based on perspective, which Degas' painting subverts. Hence, we could argue that a cause-effect relationship between photography and Degas' work is actually the other way round: snapshot photography appeared later than the painting. The understanding of this new perceptual field exemplifies the way in which we can get used to dramatic displacements in representations of the real because they draw our attention to lived experience, the antithesis of Socialist Realism.

Suggestions for reading:

Berger, J: *Art and Revolution Writers and Readers* 1969

Baxandall, M: *Patterns of Intention* Yale 1985

Bryson, N: *Tradition and Desire* CUP 1984 (the opening chapter)

Bryson, N: *Word and Image* CUP 1981

Fischer, E: *The Necessity of Art* Penguin 1960

Gombrich, E: *Art and Illusion* Phaidon Press 1960

Mieke, B and Bryson, N: *Semiotics and Art History* The Art Bulletin Vol.73 No. 2 (Jun., 1991), 174-208

Rosen, C and Zerner, H: *Romanticism and Realism* ff 1984

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