

PREFACE TO 1998 EDITION

This book deals with the cultural event in Europe known as "modernity," and in particular with implications for human consciousness and enterprise of the various cultural activities that produced the characteristic, fundamental media of modernity, neutral time and neutral space. These constructs, and the complex cultural agendas associated with them, develop inseparably from certain powers of abstraction and projection that belong to the history of consciousness, and that have flourished in Northern Europe from the late fifteenth to the late nineteenth centuries.

A summary of my discussion and method can be found in the original Preface; a further word here will focus some issues raised by subsequent discussion of the book concerning key terms like "consensus" and "perspective," and particularly concerning the primary value of neutrality that realism establishes.

My interest in writing a book on realism first arose from my fickle admiration for work on both sides of an opposition. On the one hand, I admired realist art in general, particularly the painting of the Renaissance and seventeenth century and the narrative of the nineteenth century, both of which I had long studied and enjoyed and had in fact been taught to consider the apogee of art in general. On the other hand, however, I admired the non-realist art of the twentieth century which I found equally interesting and enjoyable, again, particularly in visual arts and narrative. Although I first intended to write about the anti-realist and implicitly anti-humanist agendas of contemporary writing and art, I realized early on that most discussions of "realism" were entirely inadequate. Either "realism" was treated as a norm of art to be accepted without discussion, or it was treated as a straw man set up for rejection; in short, this cultural argument between realists and anti-realists used the term "realism" variously as term of

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opprobrium or of praise, but rarely as something to be defined. One commentator might attack the "naïveté" of realism and another might defend its "truth," but neither did much to stabilize the term "realism" for the sake of conducting substantial exchange: a desideratum if something important was at stake.

As someone who believes that art is the most highly achieved expression of cultural values, I knew something important was at stake. The whole foundation of pictorial art as it had been established in the Renaissance had been largely abandoned around the turn of the twentieth century by the best and most creative artists, such as, for example, Gauguin, van Gogh, Picasso, Braque, Miró, Gris, Matisse, Mondrian and Klee. In what seemed to be similar ways, the whole foundation of narrative as history, something that the nineteenth century had broadly disseminated and that twentieth-century readers still valued almost universally, had also been largely abandoned by the best, most creative writers of the twentieth century, such as Joyce, Beckett, Borges, Cortázar, García Marquez, Robbe-Grillet, Duras, Hawkes, Nabokov. There was, furthermore, the politically stunning fact that much if not most of this creative work did not arise primarily from English-speaking cultures and languages or, if it did, was created by expatriates like Joyce or Nabokov.

This move beyond realist agendas has figured as well in film, where visual and narrative arts come together and where the most experimental and creative work has moved beyond John Ford or John Lucas to the kind of experimental editorial art that was part of the cubist and surrealist agendas of the early twentieth century, beginning with Dali and Buñuel and continuing to Rivette, Godard, Truffaut and the French New Wave and latterly to Kiesłowski, Jost, Tarantino and the Coen brothers. In a word, the whole basis of art shifted around the turn of the twentieth century from representational values to something new and apparently at odds with those long-established values.

So I set out first to discover and to formulate what actually was at stake in the culture of representation and postponed the book on anti-realist narrative long enough to write a preliminary contextualizing study of realism. The project involved increasingly

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interdisciplinary work; it became a discussion of modernity, and of a particular grammar of perspective that informs the practices of modernity across a range of cultural dissemination, from painting to mathematics and from politics to narrative. A large historical horizon for discussing realism is essential for anyone interested in the complex codes of cultural life.

Realism and Consensus traces the development of a certain power of abstraction that was unavailable to feudal culture and that was delivered unevenly during several centuries across what was to become modern Europe. It thus involves a discussion of “modernity” that provides a basis for discussing “postmodernity” in ways that get beyond the usual flinging of epithets. My contribution to the discussion of postmodernity, that initiating study of anti-realism, eventually appeared as *Sequel to History* (1992) and is based on the arguments about modernity and history established in *Realism and Consensus*.

As I hope my original Preface makes clear, my purpose in *Realism and Consensus* is not to provide an apologia for realism any more than it is to provide an attack—both of which would leave most of the interesting things unsaid. Instead, my purpose is to consider realist art as a convention with certain powers and certain limitations, and one that belongs to a larger and historically intelligible cultural formation. The early and continuing welcome of this book by reviewers and by readers has meant a lot to me not least because it confirms my strong sense that interdisciplinary work keeps open doors that we, as teachers, authors, and citizens alike, allow to close at our peril.

The two epigraphs to the book from Pascal and Fontenelle mark the margins of response to the developing culture of representation that began to flourish during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially in parliamentary democracy and in empirical science. Pascal (1623–62) grasps that “the plurality of worlds,” as it was called by seventeenth-century cosmologists (astronomers and theologians), introduces a massive restructuring of value. In northern European countries especially, the Renaissance coincided with a religious Reformation (Luther in 1517, Henry VIII in 1535) that implicitly extended the Copernican revolution to culture by

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pluralizing what had been single. Where there had been one cosmic order of things, one center, one circumference, now there were two or more and thus the potential of a series running to infinity. What had been defined had to be redefined; what had been locked in was now open; what had been confirmed was now unsecured. Pascal remains unsure whether or not all this constitutes progress. It could be said that European culture is still responding to the impact of that era.

Fontenelle (1657–1757), on the other hand, writing a generation later than Pascal, became a major expositor of the Copernican revolution and is thrilled by the very problems that Pascal laments. What is at stake for both are precisely those “Infinities” that the humanist redefinition of space and time have made available for exploration and adventure. Realist painting and narrative, over a period of several centuries, inscribes those infinities, and their founding value of neutrality, at the basis of European consciousness, including representatives of that consciousness in the New World.

The first third of the book discusses the political practices and cultural values analogous to those being traced in detail through art and narrative. Several key terms in this discussion deserve mention here for a variety of historical reasons. The first set of reasons concerns the first edition of this book, which endured what must be a record number of typographical outrages. Two especially should be mentioned. First was the total blank of about twenty pages that appeared in at least some copies in the middle of Chapter Three—in other words, at the heart of the book’s argument. This apparently happened when the presses temporarily ran out of ink, and I only learned of it from annoyed recipients, in one case a distinguished scholar to whom a complimentary book had been sent and who wondered whether the blank was an error or a tactic. This mistake, like the other, was corrected in the second printing from which the present edition is taken, though I have never known how many library copies still contain this pointless vacuum, or how fully Princeton University Press made good on its promise to rectify and resubmit. The second outrage was the disfigurement of the key diagram in Chapter One. For

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reasons that remain entirely mysterious, a helpful publisher's assistant at Princeton felt authorized to redraw the camera-ready diagram, but in doing so omitted the crucial part of it, rendering it nonsensical.

The blank pages now belong to the history of carelessness. But a word is in order about the diagram whose point—lost through the omission of the several receding horizontal lines—is this: that a second contributing viewpoint potentially provides for pictorial space, not another competing vanishing point but, on the contrary, the essential means to establish a universally applicable grid, one that by implication extends to infinity. With only a single, frontal perspective in the frame, there is no guide to the mutual relations in the field, and thus no realism; with the second perspective, and by implication an infinity of perspectives, intersections materialize that sustain a single, common system of measurement for all spatial relations. Under this scheme, even things apparently widely separated in time or space become mutually informative: no longer part of separate and competing systems, but part of a common world measurable by universally applicable common denominators. Since its codification in the early fifteenth century and across the range of cultural practice from painting, science, and mathematics, to politics, economics, and music, this apparently simple device has stood behind many kinds of exploration beyond known worlds and many inspirations to map new territories. This grammar of perspective establishes realism in art and across a range of cultural practice, and it informs key terms in *Realism and Consensus* such as “consensus,” “perspective,” and “nobody.”

My use of the term “consensus,” it should be noted, indicates a formal agreement about the conditions of perception, not an agreement about this or that thing perceived. To agree about any particular (which party to support or whether something is wrong) remains secondary to the formal possibility of agreement itself. Whereas from Homer to Milton the universe presented various fixed and eternal definitions that were beyond control by mortals and that limited and shaped all mortal projects, the neutral media of modernity claim to present no such a priori obstacles to

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choice and development and precisely put all projects into human hands; in fact, they make possible the concept “human” as a species definition. That neutrality became visible first in spatial arts, especially architecture and painting, and later in more temporal arts of narrative.

The grammar of single-point perspective in realism erases contradiction by establishing neutrality in space and time. It establishes formal agreement which erases contradiction as a possibility; in other terms, realism maintains in a new form the classical principle of non-contradiction by providing common denominators (neutral time and space) that are so abstract and universal that they become constants by which everything can be measured. The grammar that produces these neutral media literally *objectifies* the world, rendering it One and The Same. The “objects” lovingly represented by realism are not the primary focus of the convention, but only carriers of the larger generalization by which it makes the world One, objectified, common to all alike. No difference is too great, no crime too egregious, to qualify the commonality of the world. What realism primarily “represents” is not the “objects” supposedly contained “in” time and space, but precisely the common denominators themselves, neutral time and neutral space: and particularly the power they confer to deliver mutual relevance even between the most disparate events or persons. How this neutrality is constructed is the burden of the first third of the book, while the rest explores how variously this convention of neutrality is maintained, including those fascinating marginal examples in eighteenth-century English narrative where realism appears incipient but insecure.

The term “nobody” arises directly from the discussion of single-point perspective as formal consensus. The neutral media of modernity are delivered by a certain grammar of perspective this book describes and locates historically.

In order to inhabit my usage of the term “nobody” in the chapter on “The Narrator as Nobody,” a reader must be willing to engage the hypothesis that realism and everything it stands for culturally—particularly the unifying and rationalizing power of its grammar of perspective—is only one among a variety of possible

ways of knowing and of formulating so-called "reality." It is in fact, and as the book argues, a cultural formation relatively unique in world history, belonging to a particular phase of European culture.

The power to agree about the foundations of perception is "nobody's" power in the sense that it belongs to no individual or set of individuals but instead to absolutely everybody. The formal agreement that objectifies the world does so by virtue of universal inclusion. Any and all perspectives would see the same world. The common-denominator world materializes only through that implicit and universal collaboration. It is a world not found in narratives by Milton or Homer, who each show cosmos riven by divine influence or partitioned by the Fates. The world of realism, on the contrary, is a world objectified by the very formal agreements that appear innocently to be standing witness; to "witness" is to participate in a construction of the world. This construction and the power of formal agreement essential to it did not exist before the Renaissance, and there are signs that it has reached some kind of cultural limit in the twentieth century. When I speak of perspective, then, what I want to keep in focus is not "individual" perspective, but a *perspective system*: it is the system that makes supposedly "individual" perspective meaningful, or even intelligible as such at all.

Neutrality is the key value inscribed by realism through its perspective system. "Linearity" and "sequence" are of secondary importance because they are features of all kinds of narrative, including entirely non-realist, unhistorical ones. Even a Borges story involves sequence and, therefore, linearity; a circular narrative, like Homer's *Odyssey*, is still linear in the sense that one thing follows another. It is, as Foucault has noted, the *nature of the sequence* with which we should be concerned. The important questions are, *how* do things follow one another and *why* are narratives constructed in that particular way? The nature of the sequence determines the act of attention. Although I do not successfully avoid the term "linearity" in the course of *Realism and Consensus*, I would be sorry to have contributed to the impression that once we have located "linearity," we have discovered something definite, least of all something "realistic." The

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litmus test of realism—it cannot be said too often—is whether or not a text, a painting, an architectural order, or a political structure encodes the value of neutrality through the use of a perspective system that creates universal common denominators, especially the media of modernity, neutral time and neutral space.

Taken as a contribution to the history of consciousness, this discussion of realism takes place in the overlapping margins of the great contemporary debate between modernity and whatever it is that comes after modernity, called post-modernity. I use both those contested terms as chronological indicators. “Modernity” is a short-hand term that historians have used to indicate the post-medieval European cultural world. “Post-modernity” acts in a similar way, to indicate whatever it is that succeeds modernity. In this margin between the modern and post-modern, it is possible to be aware of traditional commitments and still to recognize their limitations, established irrefutably by now in science and arts and in so many other ways.

The media of modernity, especially in narrative, give a certain privilege to a particular notion of consciousness as something that transcends particulars and assembles them. This privilege—Derrida in *Margins of Philosophy* calls it “the ether of metaphysics” (trans. Alan Bass, New York and London: Harvester, 1992)—is what post-modernity contests in its many different incarnations including in philosophy, but also in science, arts, and politics. In the multiplied landscapes of post-modernity, consciousness can only be defined in terms of differential systems, and not as something superior to them. And consciousness defined as Derrida does it, as “a determination or an effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but of *différance*,” is a consciousness that is anxious, unsettled, “beside itself” as it is in Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Freud, who “put consciousness into question in its assured certainty of itself” (pp. 16–17). But I fear Derrida mistakes the historical horizon indicated by this event in the history of consciousness: it is a mutation of traditions that are traceable to Renaissance and Reformation Europe and that did not exist for Plato and the Platonic tradition with which Derrida and post-structuralists generally concern themselves. Ancient culture re-

mains remote in its assumptions from that of Christian Europe. The term "post-structuralism" helpfully differentiates between this work that takes the critique of Western metaphysics back to Plato and the work of "post-modernism" which takes the critique of Western culture only back as far as the beginning of modernity.

None of this, it might finally be noted, has to do with that "modernism" which, especially in its European manifestations, was powerfully influential but historically quite a local phenomenon around the turn of the twentieth century, roughly from the 1890s to the 1930s. That "modernism" is Janus-faced, and can be regarded as the phoenix-fire of modernity: a supreme abstraction of its fundamental values, and at the same time something that tips over toward postmodernity in its emphasis on language and on finitude.

Realism and Consensus establishes some characteristics of the culture of modernity, although it necessarily makes comparisons with medieval and even with classical arts and narrative. This culture of representation has its powers, and its limitations, and has produced much that we still take for granted as citizens of European, democratic, and capitalist societies. What we make of it in future depends entirely on what we understand about its past.

The selected bibliography includes cited works mainly. It does list a few texts such as narratives by Fielding, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Nabokov, Borges and others which, though they are not cited in the discussion, helped to formulate the problem. In one case I include a later essay of mine that develops the comparison initiated here between narrative and dramatic realism, that is, between the "nobody" narrator and Shakespeare's audience. Given the interdisciplinary range of the project, my reading ranged widely in classical culture and literature from Hesiod to Euripides, in medieval narrative such as those by Dante and Augustine, in Shakespeare's history plays (especially both parts of *Henry IV*), in the history of politics and science in seventeenth-century England, and in other narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. All of these might be read according to the principles I establish in *Realism and Consensus*.

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The project is irreducibly interdisciplinary. My intention is not at all to achieve coverage according to a particular disciplinary agenda but, instead, to establish principles for reading the narratives produced by the humanist culture of representation. In selecting texts for discussion, my intention has been to open the door, not ransack the room, so the fact that I have not cited, say, *Mansfield Park* or *The Mill on the Floss* means only that I am intent upon constructing an argument with further application, not upon covering a limited field. Scott, Thackeray, the Brontës, Gaskell, Trollope, Oliphant, Meredith, and hosts of others might have been mentioned, some of them marginal and some of them thorough examples of realism. But all of them can be considered according to the terms the book establishes.

Thus, for example, I deal with Walter Scott's contemporary, Jane Austen, because I am concerned to show how very considerably her work is non-realist; but I do not deal with Scott's novels, even though they are perhaps the first realist novels, because the principles established by discussions in later chapters apply as well to his ground-breaking work. Almost single-handed in European literature, Scott invented realist narrative, that is, the form of history which provides the narrative counterpart of that neutral space in realist painting. With his first novel, *Waverley, or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814), Scott invented a new form for a new social order, and the result was immediate and continuing sensation in Europe and in North America, and admiration for his achievement not only in his generation but by successors like George Eliot, Trollope, and Virginia Woolf whom Scott profoundly influenced. The varnish on his immense originality may have darkened for us somewhat, but that stems in part from the fact that we have so completely absorbed the very narrative values that his writing did so much to establish.

My thanks to the many generous readers and critics of *Realism and Consensus*, and to the scholars who still make it a point of honour to read and acknowledge what other people have written; the bibliography records my effort to match theirs. A special thanks to Diane Elam, Jackie Jones, and John Rignall for their creative and

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essential contributions to the publication of this new edition. In a very few odd cases it has been impossible to recover some publication data, page numbers mainly; the relative completeness of the references is owing in part to the efforts of Clare Powne and Ann Sutherland at Edinburgh University Library, who so nobly came to the rescue during the final search; thank you, cavalry.

Edinburgh, 1998