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Café Américain

IAN PACE

The Problem with Cultural Realism, Part 1 *On Cultural Realism in Music and Film*

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Realism is frequently identified with the literary work of writers such as Dickens, George Eliot, Balzac, Flaubert, the Goncourt brothers, Theodor Fontane, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Mark Twain and many others; and also in the theatre with Ibsen and Chekhov; in the visual arts with Courbet, Daumier, Adolph Menzel, Ilya Repin, Whistler, and others. In music, realism was theorized much later than in other arts, above all by the German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus in the 1980s, after a few rather half-baked earlier attempts by other scholars. Dahlhaus recognized realism as a much less prominent movement in music than in other arts, and framed it in terms of music's ability not only to imitate non-musical sounds and indulge in instrumental "word-painting" of texted music, but also to represent spatial movement and speech intonations. Dahlhaus also pointed to the wider notion that music presented an image of nature as a whole. Operatic composers in particular grappled with the issues of representing of reality in such a non-realistic medium, leading to bizarre experiments such as Aleksandr Dargomyzhskii's *Rusalka* (1848-55), essentially written throughout in a type of recitative (a slightly stylized form of declamation with instrumental accompaniment, traditionally used to communicate plot detail, and in contrast to song). Or, take for example Modest Mussorgsky's unfinished opera *Marriage* (1868, after Gogol's play), in which the composer attempted to render the inflections and rhythms of speech through musical notation, as exactly as possible.

Both works eliminated some of the elements most valued in opera, in particular melody, whereas later attempts at "realist" opera, such as Bizet's *Carmen* (1875) or the *verismo* tradition ushered in by Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890) are distinguished more by the prominent presence of lower-class characters and milieux, (portrayed in a larger-than-life fashion with exaggerated emotions) than through musical verisimilitude—although attempts to create musical languages which mirror aspects of vernacular speech continued in various 20th century operas, such as those of Léos Janáček or Benjamin Britten.

Realism is not easily contained within a narrow historical period. The greatest theorist of literary realism, Erich Auerbach, in his magnum opus *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), located realist elements in literature as far back as Homer (through the attention to multiple levels of detail in the portrayal of the scar on Odysseus's thigh, as seen by Eurykleia in book 19 of the *Odyssey*), through Dante, Shakespeare and Cervantes, right up to idiosyncratic readings of Proust and Virginia Woolf, all of which could be considered at least part of a continuum with the more familiar "realist" writers Auerbach surveyed—Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and the Goncourts. Similarly, art critics have located precursors of 19th century realism in

the circles around Caravaggio or the painters of the Dutch Golden Age, while in music precedents can be found in the *stile rappresentativo* of the late 16th century.

Gradually a range of modernist or proto-modernist artistic movements which emerged towards the end of the 19th century—symbolism, aestheticism, decadence, futurism, cubism, and others, as well as the advent of photography—are thought to have displaced realism in the visual arts, while new approaches to narrative, psychology, the relationship to myth, and more, did the same with literature, at least for a period. Heated debates ensued amongst leftist intellectuals in the West in the early 20th century as to the value of these developments. Hungarian Marxist György Lukács (1885-1971) emerged as the most eloquent defender of a type of realism, including that of Balzac, Walter Scott, and Thomas Mann. Like Engels before him on conservative royalist Balzac, Lukács framed his analysis somewhat independently of the conscious politics of the authors. He argued that their potential to open a window onto social forces and processes rendered their work of much greater progressive value than what Lukács saw as the petty individualism and narcissism of many modern movements, not least Expressionism.

Film, which can be said to be both the most and least realistic of the arts, was of course born in roughly the same period. Whilst much early work took a hugely creative approach to the medium, whether Eisenstein's revolutionary montages or the surrealist creations of René Clair and Jean Epstein, that tradition came to inhabit a position ever more on the fringes of mainstream cinematic production, as both technology and a film industry developed. Non-realist genres such as fantasy, science fiction, horror or animation have continued to flourish to the present day, but they differ from other mainstream work in terms of content rather than cinematic style. In contrast, some filmmakers of the left, from some of the post-war Italian neo-realists to the likes of Ken Loach (and other British directors who developed their craft initially through television) have doggedly pursued an earnest and often visually, aurally and dramatically narrow approach to film-making, as if to erase their own creative role.

This is a ruse. Anyone who has been involved in the business of filmmaking knows just how many conscious creative decisions are made at every stage of the process, and could well have been made otherwise. Loach's pseudo-documentary style is just as contrived and "cultural" as that found in any work of Maya Deren or Peter Greenaway, and serves to obfuscate the intensely politically manipulative strategies of the director. Parallel arguments, albeit somewhat milder, can be made about a good deal of mainstream cinema and television which, if not exactly hiding its stylization, nonetheless still presents itself as in essence a representation of reality.

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At the heart of the issue, and at the heart of many contemporary "culture wars" launched by some self-styled progressives against a good deal of culture, is the assumption of culture's subsidiary role, primarily as a *representation* of a wider society. I disagree profoundly: while culture can draw upon empirically observable phenomena and social facts, its fields of activity are *themselves* social facts and a fundamental part of society, deserving in themselves of cultural and sociological

study. Instead of simply reflecting experience, culture adds to it, creating something not available elsewhere. The types of hypnotic, deindividualizing experiences created through house, techno and other electronic dance music traditions constitute a *supplement* to other experiences and forms of reality, not simply a mirror (as one might imagine the sometimes-reductionist Theodor Adorno claiming, on the basis of his views on Stravinsky and much popular music, especially its static and repetitive nature).

At the heart of many contemporary “culture wars” launched by some self-styled progressives against a good deal of culture, is the assumption of culture’s subsidiary role, primarily as a *representation* of a wider society. I disagree: culture itself is a part of society.

Shklovsky, in 1917, identified *defamiliarization* of reality (*ostranenie*) as a defining quality of art, and this conception was taken in other directions in the critique of realism and naturalism by Bertold Brecht, ostensibly seeking to reveal the contingency of so much which when rendered in realist terms was made to seem inevitable. The explicit use of artifice in the films of Jean-Luc Godard or the television plays of Dennis Potter (one of the few working in the medium who rejected the realism favoured by Loach) have roots in this tradition.

Much else categorized as realism well exceeds the boundaries implied by this term. Dickens’s novels regularly feature elements of caricature, the grotesque and the carnivalesque; Dostoyevsky’s are as much about the exploration of extreme psychological states in highly exceptional circumstances as they are about depicting recognizable “reality”; Courbet’s paintings vividly illuminate faces and allow other parts of the body to fuse with the background, and constructs startling, almost abstract figures within his landscapes, while his nudes continue to evoke classical and mythical figurines; Puccini’s *verismo* operas score extremely contrived melodramatic scenarios and draw out even passing emotions with overwhelming intensity.

The types of realism embedded in early social sciences have also faced challenges. The early idea of a “positivist” sociology, by which sociologists acts as a purely dispassionate observer of “positive” facts, from which they construct their social models, took little account of the fact that human beings, unlike the objects of study in the natural sciences, are capable of choices, and those who study them both can affect these, and are rarely neutral parties. Max Weber introduced the concept of *Verstehen*, emphasizing the interpreter’s need to understand the perspectives of those he is studying toward the social world they inhabit.. C. Wright Mills introduced the concept of the “sociological imagination”, emphasizing the role of the sociologist in *synthetically* creating a model to make sense of the data they encounter. Much later, Roy Bhaskar attempted to move beyond both positivist and “interpretivist” models with the concept of “critical realism”, which posited the existence of objective reality, the ability to perceive which may be limited, but different models have greater or lesser degrees of cogency.

Critiques also emerged in the 1980s of “ethnographic realism” in anthropology, such as appeared to erase the presence of the ethnographer, also the voices of individual subjects, and required a certain narrow style of writing. Certainly, there were and are many dull and laborious ethnographies which resembled reportage or “data dump” as

much as anything else, and demonstrated little sociological imagination. However, some of the alternatives were little better: highly self-indulgent writings, which utterly foregrounded the scholar and played fast and loose with data (creating fictional or composite characters, for example, as part of a supposed rendering of a social world), leading to some calls for a return to greater humility and fastidiousness on the part of academics undertaking this type of work. Nonetheless, the palpable role of *writing* in not simply rendering but *constructing* a type of world has not been forgotten, either in anthropology, or in historical writing, following the challenge laid down by historiographer Hayden White in the 1970s to consider the role of *emplotment* strategies in the writing of history, and how historians (White's examples were taken from the 19th-century) employed similar narrative archetypes to those used by writers of fiction.

The academic humanities and social sciences resemble the arts in the sense that they *construct* social worlds, which are ultimately cultural phenomena, though the requirement that these be founded upon verifiable social facts is quite reasonably much stronger than for an artist. Accordingly, it is more than justifiable that such work, including that dealing with supposedly "progressive" issues, such as addressing poverty, unemployment, racism, identity-based violence, etc, should come under proper scrutiny, not only in terms of its use of data, but also in terms of its framing of theories, narratives, social portrayals.

But a form of sociological or historical writing which fetishizes poverty and misery is not more necessarily "real" (or "social"), nor necessarily does more social good, than one which mostly brackets that out. Weber's sociological studies of world religions, Norbert Elias's study of court society, Robert W. Witkin's study of Manet's *Olympia*, Jean-Pierre Poulain's work on food in society are all of a very different nature. Academics are sometimes held up for negative comparison with the so-called "real world", but their work, and the institutions in which they pursue it (sometimes major employers), are wholly "real". The quasi-realist concept of "everyday life", as developed in the work of Henri Lefebvre, Raoul Vaneigem or Michel de Certeau constructs this phenomenon as an imaginary homogenized "other" which serves to bolster certain theories of resistance and subversion.

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Trotsky was shrewd enough to recognize that art amounts to something more than just a historical or sociological window, and has a power and vividness which takes it beyond its original time and place. This was only possible through an imagination untethered by realist assumptions. Similarly, for all the ideologization of Soviet society, even those who believe the 1917 Revolution and its aftermath to have been mostly a negative and destructive phenomenon (in which category I count myself) may recognize that such a society nonetheless provided a high level of education to all, in which there were also many notable achievements in science and scholarship. None of this would have been possible had such a society not allowed some degree of relatively autonomous development of these fields, rather than always forcing them to conform to the demands of a reductionist/realist perspective (this certainly did happen

at some points, but they were amongst the least productive times during the history of that society).

By contrast, many contemporary “progressives” are unable to move beyond reductionism and realism, and are quick to denounce culture for its forms of representation, following the tedious and predictable process of “decoding”, with little concern for culture’s aesthetic dimension, as if culture amounted to little more than a window onto the “real”.

I am finishing this article after attending a revelatory performance of Pierre Boulez’s *Pli selon pli* in London, a work whose musical *material* is obstinately resistant to any type of interpretation reducing it to the familiar and externally observable (including pre-existing musics), a creation as magnificently uncompromising as the brutalist Barbican Centre in which it took place, and demonstrating with great immediacy how little “decoding” can tell us about remarkable art.

An equally destructive attitude—through “decolonization” initiatives, demands for “epistemic” justice, and the like —is also found towards various forms of scholarship, as if such work’s only value is in terms of who it supposedly represents. This is symptomatic of a society and culture in decline. Culture and scholarship will indeed be rendered superfluous by a realist sensibility which assumes their marginality from the outset.