Introduction: realism then and now

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Like 'classicism' and 'romanticism', 'realism' is one of those words that denotes both a specific phase in the history of style and aesthetics, and certain recurrent tendencies or qualities in the arts. In our dominant historical narrative, realism is essentially a nineteenth-century phenomenon: a tendency that prepared the ground for modernism in its refusal of traditional aesthetic hierarchies and urgent modernity, but which was superseded by a more formally innovative art that corresponded better to the aesthetic needs of societies after the Second Industrial Revolution. Realism enjoyed a protracted afterlife as an aesthetic of the left – at worst as a kind of ghastly inversion of the critical vision it had once stood for in the shape of Socialist Realism – but in its twentieth-century forms it was increasingly a residual aesthetic. Or so the story goes.

Auerbach's challenge

Within art-historical scholarship there is an abundance of studies of individual realists and realist works, but no grand attempt at synthesis – nothing comparable in ambition and scope to Erich Auerbach's 1946 classic *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, which starts with Homer and the Old Testament and ends with Virginia Woolf. But as Auerbach acknowledged, his book was anything but 'a systematic and complete history'.[1] This was not due solely to the difficult circumstances of the book's writing: it was also because if he had attempted anything like a comprehensive history of European literature, he would have been 'completely buried under a mass of factual information which has long been known'. Instead, he adopted a method that consisted in 'letting myself be guided by a few motifs which have been worked out gradually and without a specific purpose'.[2] Criticized since the book first appeared,[3] this method combined a philological close reading of selected texts with the 'historism' of Ernst Troeltsch and Friedrich Meinecke, that is, with a conviction that historical phenomena could not be explained through general laws on the natural science model, but demanded 'individualizing observation' of the various forms of social collectivity considered as living wholes. Historism's insistent relativism invalidated any call for some overarching theory of realism.[4]

Auerbach's concern was with the devices literature adopted to figure 'the everyday and the real' and for 'representations of everyday life in which that life is treated seriously, in terms of its human and social problems or even of its tragic complications'.[5] In the modern period this increasingly entails 'a concrete portrayal of contemporary political and economic conditions', so that the bases of 'modern

realism' are twofold: 'the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation', and 'the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history'.[6] Literature itself becomes informed by the historist principle.

It is symptomatic of the politics of historism and historicism after 1945 that the defining art-historical study of representation from the period,[7] Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* (1960), was a collection of essays on the naturalistic depiction of visual experience, not a history of realism. While Gombrich's conception of natural-ism assumes a historical dynamic and a normative vision of scientific progress, it was pitted precisely against the anti-naturalism and holism that Auerbach vaunted and which Gombrich associated with totalitarian belief systems. By making the solution to what he called the 'riddle of style' a principle of rational development in modes of representing the natural world akin to what was perceived as the objective path of evolution in the natural sciences, Gombrich largely insulated styles from socio-historical determinants and made them primarily an effect of the working through of universal psychological predispositions. This was like the antithesis to both Auerbach's holism and his assumption that literature was a form of *social* knowledge. Ironically, both saw themselves as defenders of the highest values of European civilization at a time when those values were under threat.[8]

Robert Doran has written that for Auerbach 'the story of realism is the story of the triumph of the notion of equality and the concomitant notion of human dignity'. Central to this is the breakdown of the hierarchy of literary styles.[9] The de-hierarchization of art and the de-hierarchization of life are parts of the same process, which reaches its apogee in the French nineteenth-century novel, and especially the works of Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert and Zola. Auerbach discusses the temporal disunity, the subjectivism and fragmentation of experience in modernist novels – especially in Joyce and Woolf – in admiring terms, but he was clearly troubled by 'a certain atmosphere of universal doom', a 'blatant and painful cynicism', 'a hatred of culture and civilization' that he detects in *Ulysses* and other exemplars.[10]

Auerbach's *Mimesis* remains inspirational in its ambition to define realism as the fruit of a long-term historical dynamic, but it also illustrates the way any definition is framed and determined by its own moment. In the limited space available to me I want to sketch the historicity of realism as a category as a preliminary to the individual essays that follow.

Representing the everyday

The highest achievements of literary realism are by common consent the product of a critical bourgeois culture.[11] But when does an authentically bourgeois culture first emerge and how do we recognize its fruits? The first generation of social historians of art believed that they could detect the beginnings of an urban secular outlook characteristic of that class in the earliest stages of its rise to hegemony, within the framework of art objects produced under the feudal order. Thus, Meyer Schapiro, in essays from 1939, discerned signs of incipient social conflict in 'marginal

secular details' and style forms of eleventh- and twelfth-century Romanesque relief sculptures at the monasteries of Silos and Souillac.[12] We see similar assumptions at work in Frederick Antal's *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background* (1948), which tells us that in the fourteenth century 'a new decisive factor' affecting all forms of culture in Italy and elsewhere 'was the increasing independence of outlook' among the 'upper bourgeoisie', whose capitalist lifestyle and outlook demanded a 'kind of rationalism, a desire and a capacity for giving full weight to material relations', to which corresponded a novel art that, more than any earlier, was 'secular and life-affirming … sober logical and calculated'. The fact that these characteristics were especially active in religious art – reaching their apogee in Masaccio's 1425 fresco *The Tribute Money* – did not mean there was any 'irreligious spirit' at work, but it did represent 'a relatively secular interpretation of the religious content'.[13]

Both Schapiro and Antal thought within the so-called secularization thesis, that is, the hypothesis that a long-term decline in religious faith is an ineluctable accompaniment of the development of modern urban industrial societies, or indeed is a mark of 'progress'. As one of the 'master narratives' of modernity, secularization has been the subject of intense debate among historians and sociologists of religion for fifty years or more.[14] Proponents of neo-secularization theory, such as C. John Sommerville, argue that while the model should not be abandoned outright, its claims must be more narrowly defined and stripped of teleological residues so as to acknowledge the variety of trajectories to modernity in different cultures. Rather than a decline in belief as such, secularization means above all differentiation, 'the separation of religious activities, groups or ideas from others characteristic of the society'; more specifically, it refers to the 'transformation of an institution once considered religious into something not thought of as religious'.[15] This has an obvious applicability to histories of the arts.

Given the importance of the Netherlands in the development of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century capitalism, it is only consistent that a painting of the everyday world of lay persons should first be developed there. The predominance of panel painting over wall painting in the region facilitated this since such works could be more readily commodified. It is striking that already in the fifteenth century many panel paintings were not commissioned but sold from artisans' shops or at fairs, and that there was even then a nascent profession of art dealing. By the sixteenth century the export trade in Flemish paintings to Italy was very large. Although the patronage of the Burgundian court was central, prosperous burghers bought panel paintings, which did not yet stand high in the aristocracy's hierarchy of desirable luxury items.[16]

Often seen as the apogee of early Netherlandish realism, Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (Figure 1) is the only surviving fifteenth-century panel painting in which the artist's contemporaries are depicted engaged in some meaningful act in an everyday setting, as in later genre paintings.[17] The assumption that prevailed after Erwin Panofsky's famous 1934 article – that the painting depicts a wedding or betrothal – now seems doubtful.[18] However, that the gestures and setting imply some narrative and represent a ritual between a man and his wife are beyond question.

Figure 1. Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Giovanni [?] Arnolfini and His Wife*, 1434, oil on oak, 82.2 cm × 60 cm

Margaret D. Carroll's suggestion that what is shown is a mandate, or act of procuration, that empowered a merchant's spouse to handle his affairs in his absence accords with the palpably haute-bourgeois character of the couple so assertively proclaimed through their dress and the furnishings of the room.[19]

Panofsky concluded his interpretation by asserting that in the *Arnolfini Portrait* and other works of van Eyck, 'medieval symbolism and modern realism are so perfectly reconciled that the former has become inherent in the latter'.[20] From the 1970s on, his model of iconographic interpretation was the subject of sustained critique by scholars of northern painting from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. This debate – since iconography has also had its defenders – was partly over the extent to which secularization determined an artist's choice of motifs and the likelihood that they were interpreted by contemporaries as having a Christian moral significance. Craig Harbison, for instance, questions whether the thought processes of Arnolfini and van Eyck's other courtly patrons should be treated as mere 'extensions of Scholastic theology' and has argued that the couple wanted to present themselves as 'prosperous and adroit individuals', conventionally pious, but also as capable of participating in the highly developed etiquette of the Burgundian court – thus shifting the painting's main significance from religious belief to lay activities.[21]

But it was in Antwerp, not Bruges – the main scene of van Eyck's career – where a new secular painting of the everyday was ultimately forged.[22] This is hardly surprising, given that Antwerp was both the commercial and financial hub of the European world economy in the first half of the sixteenth century and the site of what has been called 'arguably the first authentic art salesroom', in the form of Our Lady's *Pand*, the market hall put up by the Church of Our Lady (later Antwerp Cathedral) to fund its building programme, which operated 1460–1560.[23] In the long term, Our Lady's *Pand* could not compete with the *schilderspand* established when the upper galleries of the new Bourse became available for year-round stalls in the early 1540s.[24] The Antwerp Painters' *Pand* was the first permanent art market in Europe, with a truly massive export trade.[25] It is in this context that market competition stimulated that specialization of art production by particular individuals which contributed to the emergence of the separate genres of painting and, in the long term, played a crucial role in the formation of realism. The fact that Antwerp was also the centre of the print trade contributed to this process.[26]

The porous boundary between the secular and Christian moralizing seems particularly evident in the paintings of Pieter Aertsen (1508/9–1575) and his pupil Joachim Beuckelaer (c. 1535–1574), which have the first large-scale figures from low down the social scale, in the form of peasants, market vendors and cooks or other servants.[27] Paintings such as Aertsen's *Butcher's Stall with the Flight into Egypt* (1551; Figure 2) and *Market Scene with Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (1559; Städelisches Institut, Frankfurt) juxtapose everyday figures and still lives of various types of foodstuff – rendered extraordinarily palpable by strong modelling and an upturned viewpoint – with distanced views of biblical episodes.[28] In works from the decade before the great Netherlandish *Beeldenstorm* (iconoclasm) of 1566, it is as though disputes over the value and functions of imagery pushed these artists to
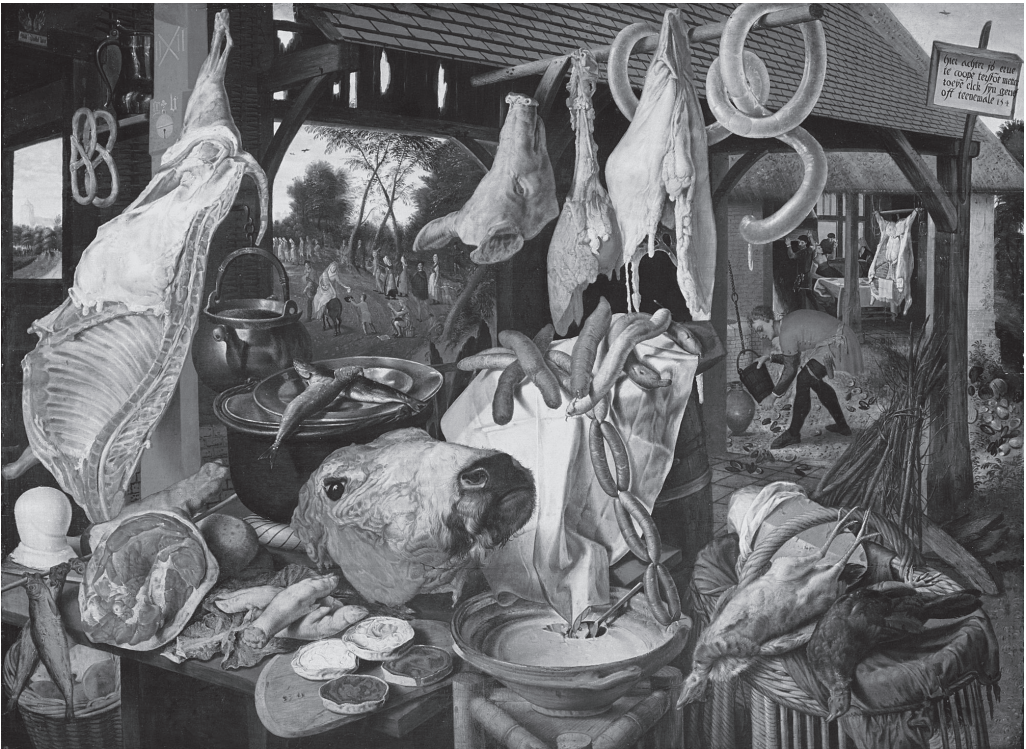
Figure 2. Pieter Aertsen, *Butcher's Stall with the Flight into Egypt*, 1551, oil on wood, 123.3 cm × 150 cm

demonstrate that even the painting of everyday things could carry a moral charge. In fact, although they condemned the idolatry of devotional images, both Luther and Calvin maintained that images had their uses and Calvin specifically allowed a value to types of non-didactic motif that gave harmless pleasure, including scenes from everyday life.[29]

Aertsen's pictures of peasants such as the *Peasant Feast* (1550; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and the *Egg Dance* (1557; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) are very different from Bruegel's – which they slightly precede – in that they have no extensive landscapes and present scenes that seem set on the borders of settlements or some indeterminate crossover between town and country. His figures are much closer to the picture plane and are correspondingly large and particularized, very different from the caricatural type of the peasant as a squat coarse figure with bestial or vacant face.[30]

Debate over the meaning of Bruegel's peasant imagery – and particularly of peasant weddings and festivals – parallels that over the *Arnolfini Portrait* in that what is at stake is the extent to which the motifs are saturated with moral symbolism or whether they are better understood as 'a realistic secular art'; whether Bruegel's

approach was that of a Christian moralist or more akin to that of a folklorist or anthropologist.[31] This is also a debate over whether peasants stood as examples of the lowest form of human existence – embodiments of vice, violence and grossness – the opposite in morals and manners to the self-image of the purchasers of such images among the urban bourgeoisie and middle class; or, whether they represented a simple virtuous humanity, part of a common ethnic stock who shared with their social superiors an antipathy to the oppressive manoeuvres of the Holy Roman Emperor and, later, their Hapsburg overlords.[32] It is also about whether finding humour in the behaviour of those deemed socially inferior is inherently demeaning, or whether it can also express forms of cultural and political solidarity.

Given the plethora of peasant imagery in sixteenth-century paintings and prints, it is not surprising that there is no single answer to these questions, only answers that depend on specific works and their contexts. Margaret D. Carroll has argued that in pictures such as *Peasant Dance* (c. 1567; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) Bruegel 'imposes greater decorum and restraint … than in any earlier works in the genre' and that he meant 'to dignify and monumentalize peasant festivity in a spirit with his sweeping paean to peasant labour in the Seasons of the year',[33] while Walter Gibson has shown how closely Breugel's presentation of peasant life accords with a widespread current in sixteenth-century discourse that saw the peasantry as a virtuous humble estate, uncorrupted by city vices or the artificialities of courts.[34] This is not to suggest Bruegel's images are at odds with the ideological array characteristic of his patrons' class. Images such as *Charity* and the *Battle Between Carnival and Lent* correspond with harsher attitudes towards able-bodied poor as medieval notions of charity gave way to the disciplinary regime of sixteenth-century capitalism.[35] But it is to assert that that array encompassed sufficiently positive attitudes to the peasantry as to permit accurate observations of their customs and respect for their labours.

It seems to me confirmation of my larger thesis here, that the next stage in the formation of pictorial realism should occur in the Republic established in 1581 when the seven Provinces of the northern Netherlands rejected the overlordship of Philip II. After the fall of Antwerp to Spanish troops in 1585 and the blockade of the Scheldt closed that city to marine trade, Amsterdam became the staple market of Europe and the central entrepôt of world trade. By 1600 the tiny Dutch Republic was a major world power and in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was one of the most densely populated and urbanized regions in the world. Although the Dutch cities continued to be dominated by a merchant class, it was a society in which capitalist production was a major part of the economy and where feudal relations were increasingly marginal.[36]

With the Reformed Church's aversion to church art and the declining power of the court as an art patron, the dominant forms of painting were essentially secular in function and not geared to noble tastes. They were also seldom produced on commission – portraits excepted – but painted for an open market whose sites included the shops of painters and art dealers (not always distinguishable), annual fairs, lotteries and estate sales.[37] Motifs that had emerged in sixteenth-century paintings

such as landscapes, ships, and peasant, market and kitchen scenes, continued to be produced and became recognizable as the specialist types of pictorial product that would be codified in the hierarchy of genres of seventeenth-century French academic theory. It is a commonplace that a massive expansion in the ownership of paintings – and correspondingly of picture production – occurred in the early seventeenth century, an expansion that made it accessible to the artisanal class as well as to the wealthy burgher.

As with Early Netherlandish painting, interpretation of seventeenth-century Dutch realism has divided over the value of iconology. The foremost critic of the Panofskyan model was Svetlana Alpers, who pitched her 1983 book *The Art of Describing* against a method – epitomized by the scholarship of Eddy de Jongh – that sought to interpret what she saw as a Dutch art primarily oriented to the analysis of visual experience and its simulation through a model of pictorial conception and purpose that was essentially Italian, and oriented to the structures of literary narrative.[38] As several of the book's reviewers pointed out,[39] Alpers's north–south polarity did not hold up and her attempt to associate Dutch painting with contemporary developments in the natural sciences foundered on her failure to establish plausible mediations between the artistic and scientific fields, so that the connection was reduced to one of contemporaneity and suggestive homologies.

In one respect, however, Alpers was certainly correct, namely the error of assuming that the *ut pictura poesis* principle was the key to much seventeenth-century Dutch art and the inappropriateness of searching for hidden moral symbolism beneath its illusionistic surfaces.[40] It is not that de Jongh's claim that the culture of seventeenth-century Holland was pervasively moralizing is implausible, it is rather that this means the functions of genre paintings, landscapes and still lives were conceived primarily in moral and didactic terms. The absence of an elaborate art theory by contemporaries that addressed the meanings of these types of subject is a major obstacle to interpretation, but what comments there are support the view that it was painting's capacity to depict nature and seduce the eye that was valorized, rather than elaborate moral messages.[41]

The contest was presented as one between a realism of depiction ('description') and a surface realism that was in actuality the vehicle of abstract ideas. Realism in the nineteenth-century sense of an art that pictured the everyday so as to disclose social truths was not up for consideration. Even so, seventeenth-century Dutch art did provide representations of some aspects of daily life in the United Provinces. That these representations ordered and arranged social experience from the viewpoints of the dominant elites in a society where there were huge differentials of wealth and power is obvious.[42] It is striking that those lowest in the social hierarchy of purchasers generally preferred pictures of biblical scenes, whereas landscape paintings were purchased only by the wealthiest individuals. It is also significant that scenes of common life were almost always bought by wealthier collectors.[43]

As a recent exhibition at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts demonstrated, the markers of class differentiation are to be found everywhere in this art. Images of male labour – whether that of the farmer or the urban worker – are rare, but painters

produced a plethora of images of the trades and professions and numerous scenes of domestic labour that centre on maids and cooks.[44] Bawdy compositions by Jan Steen and others update sixteenth-century kermis iconography to encompass the urban middle class as well as peasants and seem to have been conceived with a didactic end in mind.[45] What often appears to be an imagery ridiculing common vices of his own class in Steen's work contrasts with the sometimes darker and more bestialized imagery of Adriaen van Ostade, which is surely an index of class loathing.[46] The latter works register the increasing intolerance of 'idleness' and indigence and the perceived need for labour to be disciplined as Dutch society developed an increasingly capitalist ethos.[47] When labour is depicted, faces are usually hidden or averted from our look (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Gabriel Metsu, *The Interior of a Smithy*, c. 1657, oil on canvas, 65.4 cm × 73.3 cm

Figure 4. David Wilkie, *Distraining for Rent*, 1815, oil on panel, 81.3 cm × 123 cm

Seventeenth-century Dutch artists codified the image types for representing the everyday world of commoners and their doings for the next two centuries across Europe and the United States. Despite the achievements of artists such as Boilly, Kobell and Købke, it is only appropriate that the perceived summit of early nineteenth-century genre painting should be Britain, which saw a massive proliferation of such art. The judgement of G. F. Waagen, director of the Berlin Museum, on David Wilkie is symptomatic. In 'his department' of 'subject-painting', Wilkie was 'the first painter of our time' and, together with Hogarth, 'the most spirited and original master' of the English School. But Waagen found Hogarth's work too focused on the dark side of human nature, too satirical. Wilkie was preferable for his 'soothing view of the quiet, genial happiness which is sometimes found in the narrow circle of domestic life', which he depicted with 'delicate traits of good-natured humour'. Even when painting an eviction scene – *Distraining for Rent* (1815; Figure 4) – he never fell into caricature, 'never revolts our feelings'.[48] Decorum and humour were both necessary for genre painting to serve its ideological functions of affirming social hierarchy, as those whose works were judged indecorous discovered. Before the limitations of the genre idiom for representing the everyday could be transcended, the imagery of the everyday would have to eschew the comic and the strivings of commoners would have to assume the potential for tragedy. Inn scenes would have to acquire an aura of gravitas; men breaking stones by the roadside would have to be the victims of an implacable social destiny.

Realism's shifting social base

As Auerbach put it, nineteenth-century realism's social foundation was 'the enlightened, active bourgeoisie, with its assumption of economic and intellectual leadership'.[49] Its capacity to find tragedy in everyday lives was a fruit of the new model of individual citizenship and formal equality before the law – concomitant with the destruction or disempowerment of hereditary orders and ranks – that came out of the American and French Revolutions. The major realist writers were all bourgeois or middle class in origin, even if they felt at odds with capitalist society in important respects and were variously ambivalent or hostile to democracy and republicanism. Not until Zola's Rougon-Macquart series of novels (1871–1893) did one of them attempt to comprehend the perspective of the working class in a sympathetic way. In both literature and art, the measure of realism's social distance is given not just by the selectivity of vision or blatant distaste for plebeian characters, but by the self-proclaimed aestheticism of the writers and artists concerned – both an expression of disaffection from bourgeois culture ('the tremendous and ever increasing expansion of the reading public … and the concomitant coarsening of taste')[50] and a determined attempt to detach art from any notion of social responsibility or use.[51] Things were different in painting, in that although Courbet was the son of a rich peasant, his provincial origins and his family's staunch republicanism motivated him to embrace the popular and demotic in a way no major writer did. For him 'l'art pour l'art' was a 'trivial' (*oiseux*) ambition.[52]

As every sophomore art historian knows, crucial to Courbet's realism was his flouting of the academic hierarchy of genres and styles, his elevation of everyday themes to the scale of history painting, and his adoption of a technique drawn from Rembrandt and Zurbarán that violated the priority of drawing over chiaroscuro and academic norms of finish. What is less remarked is that there are no signs in Courbet's greatest works of either the comic or the pathetic, which were the standard modes of picturing the everyday in genre painting. Indeed, it is the stasis and gravitas of the figures in pictures such as *Après diner à Ornans* (1849; Palais des beaux-arts, Lille) and *Enterrement à Ornans* (1849–1850; Musée d'Orsay, Paris), their absence of sentimental expression, that partly produces the absorptive effect of which Michael Fried has written so much.[53] Courbet illustrates that the refusal of the hierarchical division of styles and subject matters central to Auerbach's conception of literary realism was just as important for the visual arts in the production of a realist effect.[54]

Auerbach's *Mimesis* shares with Georg Lukács's late aesthetic – with which it demands comparison – a sense of realism's problematic futurity.[55] Both see the nineteenth-century novel as the high point of realist accomplishment; both see contemporary novels in naturalist idioms as lacking because they offer no perspective of a unifying social whole. (What Auerbach terms a lack of 'objective assurance' in Woolf's presentation of characters extends to modernist writing generally.[56]) Thus Auerbach and Lukács offer narratives in which the emergence of a self-conscious realist aesthetic in the nineteenth century does not lead to an enduring collective project of greater refinement but to a weakening or turn away from realism, under pressure from historical forces.[57]

For Lukács, famously, this falling-off of realism begins with the shift to the quasi-scientific conception of the work of art as a document of social life advanced by Zola and his followers under the name of 'naturalism'.[58] While Lukács was right to see dangers in a conception of the individual subject as merely an effect of heredity and environmental and social determinants, he also underestimated the importance of the extension of literature's social range to encompass not just proletarians, but also marginal types and social outcasts.[59]

Richard Thomson has argued that a predominantly conservative version of the naturalist aesthetic was intrinsic to republican cultural hegemony in France over the decades of the 1880s and 1890s and should be seen as the foil against which modernist tendencies set themselves. It was a hegemony manifest as much in private patronage as in state patronage. It was also eclectic: the range of ideological stances encompassed by republicanism was matched by a wide variety of styles.[60] As Marnin Young has demonstrated, those who continued to pursue what we might understand as a realist project produced work that was distinguished in its implicit temporality (among other things) from both naturalism and impressionism.[61]

If realism, in its better moments, remained a formally innovative mode, it was at odds with the aestheticism and symbolism that were rising trends in European bourgeois culture from the late 1880s onwards. Impressionism's subjective naturalism corresponded better with forms of philosophical idealism than did realism's dogged commitment to picturing the social.[62] In early twentieth-century Europe it seemed as though the idealist tendency was hegemonic in bourgeois culture, a fate partly sealed by the fact that realism was increasingly claimed as the aesthetic of the international working-class movement. Authoritative voices of social democracy such as Franz Mehring (despite his sophisticated understanding of philosophical aesthetics) saw in modernist art only a symptom of the bourgeoisie's cultural decline and called for painting and sculpture that depicted the modern proletariat as it actually was. (Constantin Meunier was one of the few artists who answered this requirement.)[63] Before it calcified into the orthodoxy of Soviet state ideology, this vision of realism had its achievements in the novels of such writers as Martin Andersen Nexø and Maxim Gorky and the 1920s paintings of Aleksandr Deineka and Yuri Pimenov.

At the same time as realism was being called on to perform new didactic functions, it was challenged formally by modernism's demolition of pictorial naturalism and concomitantly by its rejection of the humanist theory of painting and eschewal of narrative. Developments in photography and the emergence of film compounded the idea of naturalism's obsolescence. In the circumstances, it seemed to those with avant-garde convictions that pictorial depiction that did not register these changed conditions would fail to produce the kind of cognitive jolt to the viewer's consciousness that was the distinctive accomplishment of nineteenth-century critical realism.

Nonetheless, the interwar period saw a resurgence of art in realist modes across Europe and the United States – very variable in quality and ambition – that was partly premised on the widespread perception that the modernist art of the pre-1914 years was formally exhausted and its claims to aesthetic autonomy were socially

irresponsible in a phase of economic and political crises.[64] The relationship between the new realisms and conventional naturalist modes of depiction was various. At their best, they had a highly self-conscious interplay with earlier pictorial models, modernist formal devices and new technologies. This is notably the case with some of the art bracketed under the label of Neue Sachlichkeit, which is very different in its spatial structures from nineteenth-century realism and deliberately eschews its sensual appeal. In some cases, the conjunction of techniques from fifteenth-century northern painting with machine age iconography produces an effect of calculated non-synchronicity that is glaringly incongruous. In others – the work of Otto Dix most notably – the strident ugliness and grotesquerie that had all along been a component of realist iconography produces an overwhelmingly bleak sense of human prospects, which made it repugnant to many communist critics.[65] This would be particularly the case after the advent of socialist realism as official Soviet doctrine in 1932. The new 'aesthetic' categorized nineteenth-century 'critical realism' as the 'individual creation of "superfluous people"', the fruit of disaffected bourgeois writers struggling against the 'conservatism of the feudal lords resuscitated by the big bourgeoisie'. By contrast, socialist realism, directed towards the international proletariat, needed an injection of 'revolutionary romanticism', a myth-making impulse that would 'provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way'.[66]

Among contributors to the Marxist aesthetic debates of the 1930s, it was Bertolt Brecht who articulated most clearly the implications for realism of the shift from a bourgeois audience to one comprising 'the broad working masses'. The new situation meant that realism and 'popular art' had become 'natural allies', since intelligibility was a prime desideratum.[67] But this did not mean falling back on the patterns of earlier realist art: 'Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change.' Artists need not be afraid of using unusual devices, for realism demanded 'fantasy', 'imagination', 'humour' and 'invention'.[68] Whereas Lukács's imaginary audience was a multiple of the individual contemplative subject of German classical aesthetics, Brecht's was a collective of class-conscious workers geared to revolutionary action, or at least potentially so. But if Brecht's realism was no less instrumental than socialist realism, it remained a critical realism whose function was analytical, not myth-making, centred on a process of intervention in the lives of its audience that was dialogical, not an authoritarian didacticism. It was realism as a method, not as a style.[69]

Artists on the left who accepted the modernist claim that the different arts each had their own historical logic of formal evolution argued that only art that submitted to this logic could claim realist status. Traditional forms of naturalistic depiction were illusionistic and gave a falsely static and hierarchical view of the world. Although it led them to different solutions, both the Soviet constructivist avant-garde and modernists such as Fernand Léger and Stuart Davis insisted on the ontological priority of the art object's material properties over any picturing of the world. Davis and Léger, like many artists in the bourgeoisie democracies, adopted mural painting as a potentially popular form that could reach a mass audience.

This was not an option for the constructivists, who had already foresworn painting as an obsolete individualistic medium. Accepting the imperative to speak to the masses, avant-gardists such as El Lissitzky and Aleksandr Rodchenko turned to photomontage and single-image photography in an ambition to radicalize popular forms such as posters, books and exhibitions. But as it became an instrument of state propaganda, photomontage increasingly lost its original destabilizing effect and similarly single-image photography was turned from the dynamics of what Germans called *das neue Sehen* to monumentalizing and glamourizing labour, thereby injecting the medium with 'revolutionary romanticism'. Worse yet, suitably modified, the formal techniques of the Soviet avant-garde were taken over by propagandists of the fascist regimes.[70]

Despite the destruction of the European *ancien régimes* by the revolutions of 1917 and 1918 and the appearance of new models of art education such as those of the Moscow Vkhutemas and the Bauhaus, state academies of the visual arts continued to provide traditional training in the visual arts in the interwar years, though their authority was further eroding. The rise of modernism to the status of the official culture of the bourgeois democracies in the early Cold War years came about through the wholesale destruction of traditional elite cultures by fascism and the war, and the institution of stable democratic regimes across western Europe. At the same time as modernism was codified as an ideology in the West, socialist realism became the official art of communist regimes throughout the world; this meant that postwar realisms operated in a cultural field where the cognitive and critical claims once made in realism's name had lost credibility for most critics and historians. Part of the importance of Alex Potts's *Experiments in Modern Realism* (2013) is that he addresses art produced in that singularly inhospitable phase of abstract hegemony when critical discourse was dominated by aestheticism and existential humanism.

As we have seen, there was no inherent contradiction in claiming realist status for art that incorporated modernist devices; indeed, these had become almost essential to any art that wanted to achieve what Fredric Jameson has called that 'violent renewal of perception' in a world of reified consciousness which was realism's essential charge.[71] So it was not just that novel forms of figurative art emerged in the late 1950s which adopted 'realism' as a label or had it applied to them,[72] it was that even before then there were forms of painting – works by Willem de Kooning and Jean Dubuffet serve as examples – that manifest a realist impulse in their engagement with the everyday world, if one which has not, for the most part, previously been recognized as such. Painting's depictive role as a recorder of the plebeian everyday had been ceded to documentary photography and film, which, while they had, for the most part, lost the radical political ambitions of 1930s documentary at its most engaged, in the right circumstances could yet interpellate models of citizenship that were global and collective, not yet subsumed by nationalism, anti-communism and consumerism.[73]

While some artists appropriated forms and techniques from the consumer culture of the everyday – such as magazine photographs (Robert Rauschenberg), billboards (James Rosenquist), advertising graphics (Hervé Télémaque) and comic

strips (Öyvind Fahlström) – their work was nonetheless confined to gallery spaces and museums. By contrast with the mass audience that the engaged realisms of the 1930s aspired to address, their viewing subject was the conventional bourgeois aesthetic subject.[74] Up to the reactionary turn of the 1970s, it was just about plausible to claim that there was still a progressive bourgeois high culture, locked in an unbreakable embrace with an endlessly expanding consumer culture that was pervading more and more of the everyday world with the commodity form. Such a culture was ideologically necessary to project an image of individual rights and freedom of expression (however idealized) against the hollowed out forms of the Soviet Union's claims to represent an authentic humanist culture good for all humanity. After the debacle of the Soviet Union and its satellite regimes in 1989–1991, such cultural pretences were no longer functionally necessary. At the same time as free market capitalism was trumpeted as both the ideal and actual destiny of all humanity, neo-liberalism was undercutting all claims to an autonomous culture by opening up the one-time public spaces of museums and other cultural institutions to the penetration of capital.[75] While postmodern culture has created venues for kinds of critical art hitherto marginalized, it is hard to discern much evidence in the twenty-first-century cultural landscape for the presence of that Enlightened progressive culture that underpinned realist art. One of the signal strengths of Potts's book is that it shows us that realist art still appears in inhospitable circumstances, if we can only recognize its forms. In this regard, as in many others, it is an exemplary work.

The essays

This collection was conceived to explore the implications of Alex Potts's expanded conception of realism for understanding both art that preceded realism's emergence as an aesthetic category and art of recent times, with which it is not usually yoked. Since painting has lost its pre-eminence as the realist medium par excellence among the visual arts, it was inevitable that we would include essays that focus on photography and film as the media that often seem its natural successor in terms of veridical depiction – however little the indexical character of either provides a tidy resolution to the complexity of realist truth claims.[76] Adopting a perspective that encompasses happenings and performance as realist media, it seemed appropriate to expand realism's antecedents to the critical discourse around garden design. Given the mediatic openness of Potts's conception and his groundbreaking contribution to study of the medium, we also felt it essential to give substantial coverage to sculpture.

It will be evident that a variety of conceptions of realism are on display in this volume. While we have not included any essays on nineteenth-century naturalism as a subgenre of realism, several of the essays make reference to naturalism in Gombrich's sense of the principle of veristic depiction – in all its complex forms – within the broad parameters of the Renaissance system of representation.

We are well aware that the political and cultural history of the last five decades has not led all art historians to a conviction of realism's continuing pertinence as a hermeneutic or a banner. We finish with a tribute to Alex Potts from Adrian Rifkin,

which is also a sketch of the intellectual trajectories that have moved them apart on this issue. As they have others of our generation.

Notes

1   Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard R. Trask (1953; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 556. Originally published in German in 1946 under the title *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*.

2   Ibid., p. 548. For a useful sketch of Auerbach's career and bibliography, see Jan T. Bremmer, 'Erich Auerbach and His Mimesis', *Poetics Today*, 20, no. 1 (spring 1999), pp. 3–10.

3   For example, René Wellek, 'Auerbach's Special Realism', *Kenyon Review*, 16, no. 2 (spring 1954), pp. 209–307; David Carroll, 'Mimesis Reconsidered: Literature, History, Ideology', *Diacritics*, 5, no. 2 (summer 1975), pp. 5–12.

4   Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, tr. J. E. Anderson (1936; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. liv–lxi. For Auerbach on historism, see Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 443–445, 572.

5   Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 158, 342.

6   Ibid., p. 491.

7   English usage does not usually distinguish between the German 'der Historizmus' and 'der Historizismus' and Auerbach's method is often described incorrectly as 'historicist'. Historism does not entail the teleological or predictive claims associated with historicism. Popper acknowledged the distinction but found both epistemologically objectionable. See Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 16.

8   For Auerbach's sense of the ending of European culture, see Geoffrey Green, *Literary Criticism and the Structures of History: Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 12.

9   Robert Doran, 'Literary History and the Sublime in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*', *New Literary History*, 38, no. 2 (spring 2007), pp. 353–369.

10   Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 551. On the conditions that produce this consciousness, see pp. 549–551.

11   See for example Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 500–502.

12   Meyer Schapiro, 'From Mozarabic to Romanesque in Silos', in Meyer Schapiro, *Romanesque Art: Selected Papers* (1977; London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), pp. 45–48, 51, 122–124. For all their brilliance, Schapiro's interpretations of sculptures at Silos and Souillac were compromised by his determination to 'align progress with the secular'. See John Williams, 'Meyer Schapiro in Silos: Pursuing an Iconography of Style', *Art Bulletin*, 85, no. 3 (September 2003), p. 461.

13   Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background* (1948; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 117, 289, 308. I have not been able to follow up Antal's important insight concerning the secular within religious motifs in this essay.

14   Jeffrey Cox, 'Secularization and Other Master Narratives of Religion in Modern Europe', *Kirkliche Zeitgeschichte*, 14, no. 1 (2001), p. 28.

15   C. John Sommerville, 'Secular Society/Religious Population: Our Tacit Rules for Using the Term "Secularization"', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 73, no. 2 (June 1998), pp. 249–253.

16   Lorne Campbell, 'The Art Market in the Southern Netherlands in the Fifteenth Century', *Burlington Magazine*, 118, no. 877 (April 1976), pp. 188–198. The extent to which works were produced 'on spec' has been questioned – see Filip Vermeylen, *Painting for the Market: Commercialization of Art in Antwerp's Golden Age* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), p. 163.

17   For recent thinking on the identity of the couple and much else, see Lorne Campbell *The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Schools*, National Gallery Catalogues (London: National Gallery Publications, 1998), pp. 192–196.

18 Erwin Panofsky, 'Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait', *Burlington Magazine*, 64, no. 372 (March 1934), pp. 117–119, 122–127; Campbell, *The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Schools*, pp. 198–201.

19 Margaret D. Carroll, *Painting and Politics in Northern Europe: van Eyck, Bruegel, Rubens, and their Contemporaries* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), ch. 1.

20 Panofsky, 'Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait', p. 127.

21 Craig Harbison, *Jan van Eyck: The Play of Realism* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), pp. 11, 42, 37.

22 For comparison of the Antwerp and Bruges markets, see Vermeylen, *Painting for the Market*, pp. 15, 137, 163–165.

23 Dan Ewing, 'Marketing Art in Antwerp 1460–1560: Our Lady's *Pand*', *Art Bulletin*, 72, no. 4 (December 1990), p. 558.

24 Vermeylen, *Painting for the Market*, pp. 50–61.

25 Ibid., pp. 28–33; Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerp* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), ch. 1.

26 Larry Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes: The Rise of Pictorial Genres in Antwerp* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

27 I have drawn on: Keith P. F. Moxey, *Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beuckelaer, and the Rise of Secular Painting in the Context of the Reformation* (New York: Garland, 1977), and Honig, *Painting and the Market*, ch. 2.

28 For a compelling interpretation of these works, see Margaret A. Sullivan, 'Aertsen's Kitchen and Market Scenes: Audience and Innovation in Northern Art', *Art Bulletin*, 81, no. 2 (June 1999), pp. 236–266.

29 Moxey, *Pieter Aertsen*, p. 165.

30 Honig, *Painting and the Market*, p. 41.

31 The debate is usefully recounted in Walter S. Gibson, 'Bruegel and the Peasants: A Problem of Interpretation', in *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Two Studies* (Lawrence: Spencer Art Museum, University of Kansas, 1991), p. 26.

32 The negative position is laid out in Paul Vandenbroeck, 'Verbeeck's Peasant Weddings: A Study of Iconography and Social Function', *Simiolus*, 14, no. 2 (1984), pp. 79–124. An important corrective is Margaret D. Carroll, 'Peasant Festivity and Political Identity in the Sixteenth Century', *Art History*, 10, no. 3 (September 1987), pp. 289–314. See also Carroll, *Painting and Politics*, ch. 2.

33 Carroll, 'Peasant Festivity', p. 301.

34 Gibson, 'Bruegel and the Peasants', pp. 17–23.

35 Ilja Veldman, 'Images of Labor and Diligence in Sixteenth-Century Netherlandish Prints', *Simiolus*, 21 (1992), pp. 227–264; Silver, *Peasant Scenes*, pp. 138–143.

36 Pepijn Brandon, 'Marxism and the "Dutch Miracle": The Dutch Republic and the Transition-Debate', *Historical Materialism*, 19, no. 3 (2011), pp. 106–146.

37 Eric Jan Sluijter, 'Ownership of Paintings in the Dutch Golden Age', in Roni Baer (ed.), *Class Distinctions: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer* (Boston, MA: Museum of Fine Arts, 2016), pp. 110–111.

38 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), especially appendix 1. De Jongh responded forcefully in a damning review in *Simiolus*, 14, no. 1 (1984), pp. 51–59.

39 Ivan Gaskell's review in *Oxford Art Journal*, 7, no. 1 (1984), pp. 57–60, is especially incisive.

40 Eddy de Jongh, 'Realism and Seeming Realism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting' (1971), in Wayne Franits (ed.), *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 21–56.

41 Eric Jan Sluijter, 'Didactic and Disguised Meanings? Several Seventeenth-Century Texts on Paintings and the Iconological Approach to Dutch Paintings of This Period', in Franits (ed.), *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, pp. 84–87.

42 For Dutch perceptions of social rank in the period, see Henk van Nierop, 'The Anatomy of Society', in Baer (ed.), *Class Distinctions*, pp. 23–53.

43 Roni Baer, 'Introduction', in Baer (ed.), *Class Distinctions*, pp. 20–21; Sluijter, 'Ownership of Paintings', pp. 105–106.

44   See the sections 'Professions and Trades', 'Women at Work' and 'Labor', in Baer (ed.), *Class Distinctions*.

45   Mariët Westermann, *The Amusements of Jan Steen: Comic Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (Zwolle: Waanders Publishing, 1997), pp. 122–125.

46   Ivan Gaskell, 'Tobacco, Social Deviance and Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century', in Henning Bock and Thomas W. Gaehtgens (eds), *Holländische Genremalerei in 17. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1987), pp. 117–137.

47   See Veldman, 'Images of Labor and Diligence'.

48   Gustav Friedrich Waagen, *Works of Art and Artists in England*, 3 vols (London: John Murray, 1838), vol. 1, pp. 239–240.

49   Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 521. Cf. pp. 458–459.

50   Ibid., p. 501.

51   In Auerbach's words, Zola 'stands out boldly from … the aesthetic realists'. *Mimesis*, p. 506.

52   Gustave Courbet, 'The Realist Manifesto', in Linda Nochlin (ed.), *Realism and Tradition in Art, 1848–1900* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 33.

53   Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1990).

54   For a development of Auerbach's argument, see Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2015), part I, ch. 7.

55   Georg Lukács, *Die Eigenart des* Ästhetischen, 2 vols (Darmstadt: Hermann Luchterhand, 1963). Auerbach's relationship with Marxism is a neglected topic. It is at least suggestive that by 1935 he had a warm and intellectually close friendship with Walter Benjamin. See Karlheinz Barck, '5 Briefe Erich Auerbachs an Walter Benjamin in Paris', *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, 9, no. 6 (December 1988), pp. 688–694.

56   Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 535.

57   Lukács's concept of pictorial realism was capacious enough to comprehend Cézanne and van Gogh, but while he acknowledged the talents of Matisse and Picasso he saw them as representative of a decorative tendency that was only superficially non-conformist. Lukács, *Die Eigenart des* Ästhetischen, vol. 2, p. 774. On nineteenth-century painting, see also ibid., pp. 722–723.

58   Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Survey of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoi, Gorki and Others*, tr. Edith Bone (London: Merlin Press, 1978), ch. 4, pp. 122–123.

59   On which see Sally Ledger, 'Naturalism: "Dirt and horror pure and simple"', in Matthew Beaumont (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Realism* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 86–101; Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, pp. 148–150.

60   Richard Thomson, *Art of the Actual: Naturalism and Style in Early Third Republic France, 1880–1900* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

61   Marnin Young, *Realism in the Age of Impressionism: Painting and the Politics of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 9.

62   For a powerful example of the philosophical worldview impressionism could conjure up, see Richard Hamann, *Impressionismus in Leben und Kunst* (Cologne: M. Dumont-Schaubergsen Buchandlung, 1907).

63   See for example Franz Mehring, 'Der Kapitalismus und die Kunst' (August 1891), in Mehring, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Thomas Höhle et al. (Berlin: Dietz Verlag 1963), vol. 12, pp. 172–173.

64   Günter Metken (ed.), *Realismus; 1919–1939; zwischen Revolution und Reaktion* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1981); Paul Wood, 'Realisms and Realities', in Briony Fer, Dave Batchelor and Paul Wood (eds), *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1993).

65   James van Dyke has made a singularly important contribution to understanding of the political complexity of Dix's work. See, for, example, his 'Otto Dix's *Street Battle* and the Limits of Satire in Düsseldorf, 1928', *Oxford Art Journal*, 32, no. 1 (2009), pp. 37–65.

66   Maxim Gorky, 'Soviet Literature', in H. G. Scott (ed.), *Soviet Writers' Congress, 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp. 65, 41–42, 43–44.

67   Ronald Taylor (ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 80.

68   Ibid., p. 82.

69   John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption: Realism, Photography and the Everyday* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 11. More generally, see Wood, 'Realisms and Realities', pp. 324–326.

70   Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'From Faktura to Factography', *October*, no. 30 (autumn 1984), pp. 82–119; Roberts, *The Art of Interruption*, ch. 2.

71   Fredric Jameson, 'Conclusion', in Taylor (ed.), *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 213.

72   Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), chs 4–7.

73   This was the case for the Museum of Modern Art's Family of Man (1955) exhibition made by Blake Stimson in *The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Pres, 2006), pp. 96–97. As Potts remarks in an endnote, the 1980s saw the emergence of new kinds of 'conceptually orientated' realism by artists such as Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler and Hans Haacke, which mobilized photographic and other forms of documentation to produce more self-reflective variants of realist effect. Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism*, p. 408 n.24.

74   Within the left tradition of self-critical documentary photography and film, epitomized by the work of Allan Sekula, the class character of art's audience has remained an abiding concern.

75   On the phases of neo-liberalism, see William Davies, 'The New Neo-Liberalism', *New Left Review*, series 2, no. 101 (September/October 2016), pp. 121–134. Of course, the notion of 'public' associated with such institutions was far from any Habermasian ideal.

76   On indexicality and realism, see John Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), ch. 1, and more generally, Steve Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 80–111.