

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 4 *Volume 4 (2006)*

Article 21

2006

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Recommended Citation

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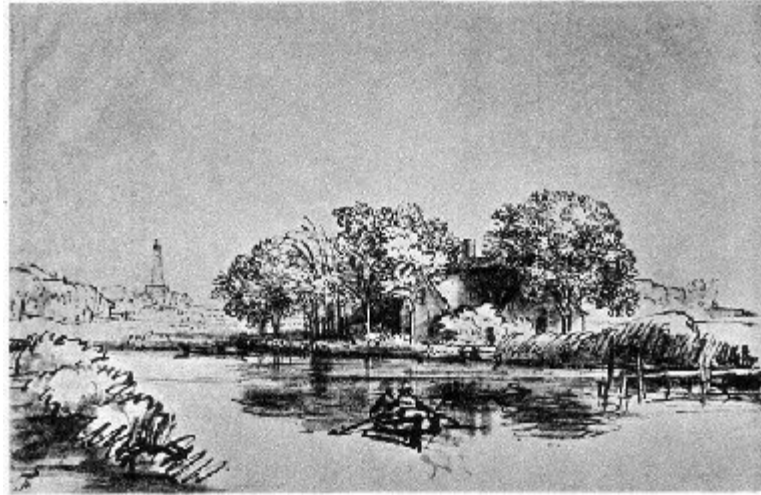
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Depiction and the Sense of Reality

John Armstrong



Rembrandt, *A Canal with a Rowing Boat*, pen and ink drawing.

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1. The Ordinary Force of 'Realistic'

Suppose we say that this image is 'realistic', what are we getting at here with the world 'realistic'? 'Realistic' is a term of everyday use and a word that non-academics use frequently and unguardedly in talking about pictures. Roughly, it can be taken to mean that the depiction is like the real thing of which it is a depiction; more specifically that the depiction is like the real thing with respect to its visual character.

This way of speaking is obviously problematic. People inclined to say that the Rembrandt drawing is realistic have presumably never seen that canal as it was when Rembrandt made this drawing. And when we imagine what the depicted scene must have looked like, in reality, we can easily grasp that there would have been many visual differences of colour and detail between it and the drawing. And yet, the desire to say that this drawing is realistic persists. Conversational logic does not recognise a contradiction here. One might cheerfully accept both of these apparent grounds for denying that the drawing is realistic and still say: 'yes, but it looks realistic all the same'. In other words, the force of 'realistic' (in at least the paradigm case of this drawing) doesn't seem to depend upon acquaintance with the actual appearance of the depicted subject matter, nor does it appear to depend upon the comprehensiveness of visual detail realized in the depiction.

In saying that the depiction is realistic we are not appealing to a close resemblance between the depiction and the subject matter (we're not claiming that the canal looked just like that). So, what are we saying?

2. 'Realistic' Appeals to Our Sense of Material Reality

We might start to make sense of the force of 'realistic' by considering the idea of reality that the word 'realistic' appeals to. In the context of a drawing, or of any work of visual art, 'realistic' means like, but not the same as, reality. So, how should we construe the notion of reality?

When Samuel Johnson attempted to refute Berkeley's idealism by kicking a stone, he was revealing himself a poor metaphysician. However, he was also revealing something quite simple about our ordinary sense of reality. The characteristics of 'reality' that Johnson emphasised were these: a 'real' object is something I can touch, it resists my motion, it has weight and solidity. The idea is of an external object that exists independently and apart from me and with which I can interact. Of course this is wholly inadequate as a philosophical account of reality. But that is not the aim, here. What we are searching for is an elucidation of what might be at stake in calling a depiction 'realistic'. And that term is one employed by people without reference to any grand or complex conception of reality.

The relevant notion of 'real' alludes to at least the following four features of experience; features, that is, of our ordinary interaction with the kinds of things that we encounter depictions of. Consider the example of looking at a human being.

3. The Ordered Disclosure of Detail

There are no gaps or breaks in the visual detail of the object. Whichever part of the body we look at will have some visual character, and that visual character will be disclosed to us in greater detail as we concentrate upon it or move closer or see it in more powerful illumination. The closer the scrutiny, the more will be revealed to sight.

Thus, a depiction will be 'realistic' to the extent that it replicates this experience of being open to further visual scrutiny. If you ask of any particular depicted features what its detail appearance is, the depiction gives you an answer. And, centrally, this answer is yielded in the same way it would be if one were encountering a 'real' object: you move closer, you look with greater concentration.

In the Wallace Collection in London there is a portrait by Van Dyke of a seated woman, which is highly realistic in this sense. Seeing it from the far side of the room, we can make out certain details; but, if we want to see just what colour her eyes are, the shape of the corners of her mouth, the colour of her fingernails, we have to do exactly what we would do if we were looking at a real woman from a similar distance. We have to walk towards the image and as we do so, the visual detail is disclosed to us at the same pace and in the same order as it would be if we were walking towards an actual person.

This is why we can say that the image is highly realistic even though we have no idea whatever whether it resembles the woman who actually sat for Van Dyke. Instead what is at stake is that our visual encounter with the depiction is like our visual encounter with a real object of the appropriate type. This is not to suggest that, in such a case, we take the depiction (in error) to be a real woman, only that our engagement with the

depiction is like our engagement with a real woman, with respect to the disclosure of visual information.

An issue which we hope the discussion of realism will clarify is this: how is it that there are so many different ways in which a depiction can be realistic. While some realistic depictions include a great deal of visual detail, many (such as the Rembrandt sketch) do not. One option is to regard the term 'realistic' as infelicitous, as masking an important difference. But another option is available: the accumulation of visual detail (when it is disclosed to sight as in the van Dyke portrait) achieves an end that can also be achieved in other ways. The relevant end is the portrayal of the depicted object as if it were a real object.

To put the point more simply, the accumulation of detail that I have mentioned in connection with the Van Dyke portrait is not a necessary condition for realism. However, it is necessarily productive of realism. For there are, as I suggest below, other ways in which our sense of reality can be engaged by a depiction.

4. The Object Located in Space

Our perceptual experience of a real person has a particular structure to it: the body is a three dimensional object located in space, and therefore when we see it from a particular point of view only certain parts of it are visible while others are occluded.

Thus, the more a depiction conveys to us a three-dimensional character, and the more firmly that object is located in a coherent spatial order with other objects, the more it looks 'real', the more we see it as being like a real thing. Consider the difference between a two-dimensional architectural elevation, which may convey a great deal of accurate visual information about the façade of a building, and a rapid sketch by a fine draughtsman which, although short on detail, gives a strong impression of the three-dimensional character of the building. The latter may well look much more realistic than the former. The reason is that three-dimensionality is a central feature of our sense of the reality of objects, of their material existence apart from us. This explains why the practice of shading, when carried out with even a modest degree of competence, rapidly enhance the realism of a drawing. For by conveying the three-dimensional character of the depicted object, its depiction as a material object in space (hence as a 'real' object) is enhanced.

When an unaccomplished amateur draws a picture of a standing person the figure has a tendency to 'float' in the vague space of the surface on which it is drawn. The realism of the depiction can be augmented by the simple device of adding a line beneath the figure that suggests that the figure is standing on something: that is, the figure is located in relation to something else. And being precisely located in space, in relation to other objects, is a core feature of real material objects. In the Rembrandt sketch above, there is a very clear sense that the boat is on the water; this effect is surprisingly difficult to achieve.

One of the most striking examples of realism, along these lines,

is to be found in Corot's painting *View of St.-Lo* (Louvre). It depicts the towers of a church seen across a valley, from a distance of perhaps half a mile. The extraordinary thing is the degree to which a sense of specific distance has been created. Although much of the intermediate detail is obscured in the picture the location of the towers in space is astonishingly precise. Even if we cannot say exactly how far the towers are from us, they look as if they are some precise distance. That is, they have the character of real objects in space. On looking at a real tower approximately half a mile away, I may not be able to judge with any great accuracy what the distance is, but my sense is that there is some exact measure of the distance to be had.

For the person learning to paint or draw the achievement of realism of this kind is exceedingly difficult. The reason, in the instance of the Corot picture, is that it depends upon several independent techniques: illumination, focus and the record of detail. To comment only on the last of these at this stage: what Corot has managed to do is record exactly the degree of detail which one would normally be able to see of a building of that scale (in such a degree of illumination and when focusing on it to the degree the picture suggests).

5. The Depiction of Weight and Movement

A perceived body actually has many physical qualities that are disclosed to sight in a complex way. For example, the human body will have a particular weight, which is supported on its legs and by its internal structure; the weight is distributed differently depending upon how the person is standing, and of course very differently when in motion. The limbs have a degree of strength; there are distributions of muscular tension and relaxation that depend upon movement and posture. Although we do not straightforwardly see the weight of a body, we certainly have visual experience marked by a sense of weight, tension and solidity.

Weight and solidity cannot be straightforwardly depicted. Our ability to recognise, on a visual basis, such things as the effort that a person is making (say in lifting a weight) or the kind of movement they are making, seems to require only rather specific sorts of evidence. The position of the joints counts for much more, in such matters, than many other details. If I glance at a person, and notice very little about him or her (in terms of the details of appearance) I may still be able to see whether the person is balanced or about to topple over; I can see that the person is carrying a heavy load or perhaps a large object that is actually quite light.

This suggests that the visual evidence upon which we attribute such things is rather specialised. It is, therefore, quite possible in a depiction to present the relevant visual evidence (for a person standing in a balanced posture, or making an effort to lift a heavy weight) while omitting many other visual details. The point that is important to the current discussion is that the depiction of such features is very important in the creation of a sense of the 'reality' of the thing depicted. For it presents, visually, the causal interaction of the depicted thing with other material objects (a weight, the ground). And such interaction is a crucial element in our ordinary conception of what it is for an object to be real.

Thus when we say that the depiction of the boat in Rembrandt's drawing is realistic, we might be getting at the way in which the boat looks as if it is actually in the water; it has weight and solidity. This effect has been achieved not so much through careful delineation of the shape or material structure of the boat, but by the particular placing of the boat in the water and the contrastive depiction of the surface of the water as a continuous sheet which is broken and displaced by the boat.

6. Vitality

A living person looks alive; our perception of vitality is bound up with an awareness of possible motion. We see someone who is actually stationary, but the person may look as if about to move. Our recognition of such characteristics in the case of actual people occurs visually, although it attributes more than can literally be seen at any precise moment. There are visual indicators of 'being about to move' or 'being slumped in exhaustion'. We are not good, perhaps, at isolating these indicators in a self-conscious fashion, although we are responsive to them. An artist who can isolate such visual indicators can, by deploying them in a depiction, endow the depicted object with such characteristics. And the way in which the depiction gains this content parallels our visual recognition of such characteristics in actual people.

To endow a depicted person with a quality such as 'being slumped in exhaustion' or 'being about to move' is to endow them with characteristics that are central to our sense of the reality of other people as independent of us and alive: as 'real'. And because the visual indicators of these kinds of characteristics are, in principle, separable from many other visual details, there is no mystery in the fact that they can be depicted in isolation from the depiction of other visual characteristics.

Thus it is possible for a depiction to be 'realistic' in a high degree with respect to certain characteristics but not with respect to others. This is an extension of an obvious point about depiction. When an object is depicted we can always say more precisely which visual aspects of the object have been depicted. Thus Rembrandt has depicted a boat, but not the colour of the boat. Or, in a [famous example](#), Monet depicted very carefully, the tonal variations on the façade of a cathedral, but not the structural details of the façade.

7. The Temporal Aspects of Visual Experience

Our experience of looking at a person, or at an object, is often marked by a temporal character where the temporality is a feature of the manner of visual engagement. We might glance at them, we might stare at them; we might have the sense that we are seeing this person at a specific moment in time.

A special way in which temporality enters a depiction is in the evocation of our sense of a particular moment, a particularity not connected to duration (as in the example just discussed) but to something else which it is harder to define. In a famous painting by the nineteenth century German artist Menzel, (in the National Gallery in Berlin) entitled [The Balcony Room](#), there is an extraordinary portrayal of light. The picture is sketchy on

many details of the room depicted, but the sense we have of the reality of daylight is uncanny. And this is closely connected to the experience the beholder has of seeing the room at a particular moment. This is not a matter of knowing which moment has been depicted (what year or day or time of day).

This phenomenon, the sense of the particular moment in time, is related to realism. It serves to anchor the depiction in the ordinary aspect of our sense of reality, namely that we encounter the external world in the present, that is, within a temporal dimension.

8. Kant's Question

This approach to realism is broadly Kantian in inspiration. A central question, for Kant, can be put in the following way: What is it that enables the input of intuition to be experienced as perception of an independent, objective world? Kant's suggestion is that the material of intuition is organized in various ways: partly by the structure of continuous space and time, partly by deployment of the categories of the understanding: most notably substance and causal interaction. Phenomenologically, at least, this is astute. Our sense of the external reality of objects precisely does seem to rest upon our experiencing them as substantial (continuing to exist when we don't see them), and colloquially, as solid and with weight, as causally interacting with each other and as located in space and time. On this view, to make a 'realistic' depiction is to endow the depicted object with just such a range of features; and, further, to disclose those characteristics to sight in a way that runs parallel to our visual recognition of the same qualities in real objects.

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Published January 18, 2006