

Postmodern Studies 5

# Neo-Realism in Contemporary American Fiction

Edited by  
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## Surface Knowledge and "Deep" Knowledge: The New Realism in American Fiction

Tom Wolfe, it seems, has managed to bring the question of realism back on the agenda of literary and cultural criticism. One reason for his success may be that, because of his somewhat complacent immunity to the temptations of looking good by being avant-garde—as everyone knows, Wolfe has other means of looking good, among them his dashing white suits—Wolfe dared to express ideas that had been effectively suppressed by the emphatic claims of postmodern writers. Thus, even before *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and Wolfe's subsequent manifesto for the new social novel, the issue of realism was smoldering.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, experimental postmodernism had radicalized its linguistic playfulness and especially its experiments in dereferentialization to such a degree that it had become monotonous, and, what is worse and eventually the kiss of death for any avantgarde movement, predictable. In the ensuing loss of authority, finalized by the fact that Ihab Hassan who has made a career out of being avant-garde left the sinking ship, people remembered, or rather finally dared to admit that they had continued to be interested in stories based on the illusion of a referent all along and that, for many, this had resulted in a kind of intellectual double existence: readers may have privileged Pynchon and Barthelme professionally, but after work they indulged in books by David Lodge or Malcolm Bradbury about academics who use concepts like postmodernism or *jouissance* to stage grandiose fantasies of life on

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast. A literary manifesto for the new social novel," *Harper's Magazine* (Nov. 1989), 45-56.

the cutting edge that jar rather grotesquely with their actual social behavior and their ill disguised professional ambitions.

Alas, such a scenario in which realism triumphantly re-emerges from a shady underground existence in response to the gradual exhaustion of the postmodern experiment tells only part of the story and does, in fact, trivialize the issue. The striking loss of cultural authority which literary realism underwent in the 70s and 80s was not primarily caused, it seems to me, by the fact that critics and readers did not dare to admit their ongoing interest in realistic representation. Instead, it must be attributed to a lack of arguments and concepts which would allow them to make a case for realism in an intellectually respectable fashion. This fate they share with a liberal tradition, long dominant in the United States, that has been challenged and almost completely replaced in cultural authority by an onslaught of radical theory to which it seems to have little or no answers. The impact of this new cultural radicalism in its various anti-foundationalist varieties, has, in turn, further diminished the status of realistic modes of representation, because realism is now seen as a discourse of surveillance and the suppression of desire.<sup>2</sup> The loss of authority of realism in literature thus reflects a corresponding loss of authority of that intellectual system in whose service realism stood in the United States for most of the 20th century, the liberal tradition. For a number of reasons this liberal version of reality and, above all, its belief in the function of experience as a moral agent became less and less plausible roughly after 1970, hence the dramatic loss of status that the work of such writers as Salinger, Bellow, Malamud, or Updike encountered in the 70s. It is not that these authors became bad or less interesting writers from one day to the next. What caused their decline in cultural prestige was that their kind of liberalism, in literary matters as well as in social ones, had little to offer to the challenges of the new radicalism.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Roland Barthes, *S/Z. An Essay* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974); Leo Bersani, *A Future for Atyanax* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), and Mark Seltzer, "The Princess Casamassima. Realism and the Fantasy of Surveillance," *American Realism. New Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 95-118. For a critical discussion of the poststructuralist view of realism see Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986).

For the purposes of our argument, however, we do not have to enter a lengthy discussion of the merits and weaknesses of liberalism, because, fortunately, cultural development is not determined by social or political theory. Thus, the main reauthorization of realism in literature has not come from the realm of theory but from a new body of writing and a new kind of realism. In the following essay I want to deal with some aspects of this development which strike me as especially notable. In doing so, I shall link the new realism to two different literary traditions, each of which, in their own way, have had a major influence on its formation. One of these points of reference is realism's apparent adversary, experimental postmodern literature, the other, the tradition that may be considered its intertextual constituent, the realistic novel of the 19th century. The purpose of this linkage is to get away from a polemical mode of argumentation and from various unproductive dichotomies in order to demonstrate that the new realism is not just a naive conservative backlash to postmodern daring and innovation, but a new type of writing with its own potential for contributing to our contemporary cultural situation. In this discussion, I want to use the term realism to refer to a symbolic construct of reality designed to produce a certain effect—called the 'reality effect' by Roland Barthes—in order to influence a culture's view of, and consensus on, what is valid knowledge about the real.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, realism is no more (and no less) than a system of rhetorical strategies in order to claim special authority for one's own interpretation of reality. It does not simply reflect or mirror reality, but offers a version of it, based on certain assumptions about the nature of the real and the best way of gaining knowledge about it. However, since these assumptions change, realism is at the same time also a form of writing that is in constant exploration of the real—which explains why we have a history of different realisms in literature with their own changing forms and functions.<sup>4</sup>

Such an approach is intended to reintroduce a category that usually does not play a significant role in discussions of realist writing:

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, "L'Effet de Réel," *Communications*, No. 11 (1968), 84-89.

<sup>4</sup> For a more extended discussion of these issues see my essay "Fiction and Fictionality in American Realism," *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 31 (1986), 101-112.

that of aesthetic experience. Even in the heyday of postmodern experimentation we had remarkable examples of an ongoing realistic tradition. But these texts were justified and praised on primarily social and political grounds, preferably as the voice of a long suppressed social group. Thus, the battle for cultural authority between postmodern and realist writing has its pivotal point in the respective claim of both camps that the other type of literature fails to provide meaningful or relevant versions of aesthetic experience. In this exchange, experimental postmodernism had the upper hand because of its successful claims for radical formal innovation. But what exactly is the aesthetics of postmodernism? One of the surprises in looking for an answer is that most descriptions, and especially those that are most enthusiastic about the postmodern project, are not exactly helpful in this respect. As a rule, these accounts are satisfied to vaguely equate aesthetic experience with formal innovation, as if any kind of semantic disruption or linguistic play would already constitute an aesthetic experience. Or they discuss the postmodern text as a successful illustration of a postmodern philosophy authorized by names such as Heisenberg, the "late Wittgenstein," or, more recently, by the ultimate signifier, the apocalypse.

I do not have the space here to discuss the question of aesthetic experience in postmodernism at length. Let me therefore try to make my point in the shortest possible way. In the writing of such major postmodern writers as Donald Barthelme or Thomas Pynchon, aesthetic experience is neither provided by a mere play of words aimed at radical defamiliarization in the construction of meaning, nor by a deliberate textual disorder providing a quasi-mimetic representation of the chaos of our present-day world. Instead it is generated by a calculated and carefully constructed interplay between radical dehierarchization in the formation of meaning and brief moments of reauthorization, between desemanticization and the brief, but continuous semantic recharging of the sign, between a loss of emotional depth and the evocation of an emotional state that results from exactly this loss.<sup>5</sup> The experimental postmodern text, in fact, seems to be characterized on all of its levels by

such movements between what appears to be mutually exclusive. It freely moves between fiction and reality (that is, between ontological levels), between romance and realism (that is, generic levels), as well as between mythic and 'ordinary' dimensions of meaning (that is, between semantic and cultural levels). Far from being a literature of exhaustion, entropy, or chaos, it is a highly creative literature which, by its constant mixture of modes, explores the possibilities as well as the problems of cultural dehierarchization.<sup>6</sup>

If this is valid, however, then a new possibility of describing the difference between postmodern literature and realism on aesthetic grounds would seem to emerge. While postmodern experimentalism wants to create a literature designed to liberate and intensify aesthetic experience by a constant mixture of semantic levels and generic modes, sometimes to the point of oscillation and a mere flickering of meaning, realism could be considered as a literature intent on arresting semantic play by insisting on the need of life-likeness and verisimilitude in representation—both of which are concepts, after all, which imply that there can be, in principle, only one correct version of reality.

The stories of Raymond Carver seem to provide a case in point for linking realism with such an aesthetic theory of recognition. One way of describing the new realism in painting was to coin the term "sharp-focus realism" and it makes sense to apply the label to Carver's writing as well. Quite often, his stories provide brief, occasionally enigmatic and somewhat surreal descriptions of an isolated, decontextualized moment that nevertheless result in an effective illusion of reality. The realistic quality of these texts has been praised repeatedly. They depict a lower class America of truck drivers and drunken drifters, secretaries and mechanics, waitresses and salesmen, servants and teachers that has led to the very fitting characterization of a "K-mart realism"—a designation that, even in condescension, testifies to what many praise as the sociological accuracy and truthfulness of Carver's writing. In this context, Irving Howe who, quite aptly, I think, calls Carver a writer of

<sup>5</sup> I have tried to describe this in more detail in an essay on Donald Barthelme: "No Figure in the Carpet: Die amerikanische Postmoderne und der Schritt vom Individuum zum starken Signifikanten bei Donald Barthelme," *Individualität*, eds. Manfred Frank and Anselm Haverkamp. *Poetik und Hermeneutik*, vol. XIII (München: Fink, 1988), pp. 541-568.

<sup>6</sup> For a description of this paradoxical mode cf. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987) and Ulrich Broich, "Die Annäherung von *Mainstream Literature* und *Science Fiction* im Zeitalter der Postmoderne," *Unterhaltungsliteratur*, eds. Dieter Petzold and Eberhard Späth (Erlangen, 1990), pp. 76-79.

strong but limited effects, has pointed out: "I think Mr. Carver is showing us at least part of the truth about a segment of American experience few of our writers trouble to notice."<sup>7</sup>

Carver's stories are, on the whole, impressive, although read in sequence and in greater numbers, they also begin to create an effect of monotony and may cause a feeling of unease by their single-mindedness.<sup>8</sup> There is an almost obsessive concern with experiences of loss and seemingly insurmountable problems in the relation between the sexes, in which the failure to communicate is compensated for by the constant circulation of linguistic banalities and a set of ritualized gestures such as smoking or drinking. This lack of a vocabulary to express one's feelings is, of course, one of the great and recurring topics of American literature and is strongly reminiscent of Hemingway as well as a tradition of tough-guy writing which focuses on the heroic plight of a taciturn, outwardly independent, but inwardly highly sentimental male. Some critics therefore consider Carver as hardly more than a latter-day Hemingway. There are some stories, however, for example, "Why Don't You Dance?," "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," "They're Not Your Husband," "Neighbors," or "Feathers," on which I want to focus in the following discussion, because they illustrate what is new and interesting in Carver's writing.<sup>9</sup>

To start with, Carver's settings are, as a rule, different from Hemingway's bars, boats, and bullrings. And as Carver's world is different, so are the characters, who move about in it rather helplessly and without orientation. In comparison to Hemingway's prize-fighters, hunters, fishermen, and the occasional sensitive female, Carver's characters appear to be not so much emotionally hurt as confused,

unstable, and disoriented. This draws attention to a more fundamental difference between the two fictional worlds: traditionally one of the major sources of authorization for the realist text has been the power of experience to provide knowledge. In claiming to depict reality as it really is, realism not only refers to the criterion of a shared experience, but, by doing so, also promises to provide a more truthful and relevant version of that experience than other forms of literature.<sup>10</sup> The striking paradox that this claim has led to quite a number of different realisms should be attributed not only to the obvious fact that experiences change, but also to the ensuing consequence that the status of experience as a source and criterion of knowledge changes with them. Hemingway's crises and catastrophes, as well as those of the realism of the liberal tradition, represent crucial moments of initiation for both characters and readers in which a rare moment of authentic experience and existential truth is reached. This search for authentic experience is part of a modernist project to penetrate to a deeper level of human existence that lies beneath the shallow surface of Victorian conventions. Indeed, it is part of literature's promise for modernism and the liberal tradition that it can be regarded a privileged mode and medium for recovering this quality of the "authentic." As Fredric Jameson points out in a well-known and widely circulated essay on postmodern culture, Marxism, psychoanalysis, existentialism and finally structuralism all offered versions of this discourse of "deep knowledge" and consequently share the methodological ideal of a "Tiefenhermeneutik," an interpretive procedure designed to uncover the workings of hidden constituents of human existence in order to provide a deceptive and misleading surface with its "actual" meaning.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to the skillful insinuations of Hemingway, Carver's stories no longer offer such promises of a "deep knowledge." In Carver's work, crises and catastrophes are not heroic moments valued for their potential to reveal an existential truth but accidental occurrences in a

<sup>7</sup> Irving Howe, "Stories of Our Loneliness," *New York Times Book Review* (Sept. 11, 1983), 43.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Howe: "A few of Mr. Carver's stories...can already be counted among the masterpieces of American fiction; a number of others are very strong. But something of the emotional meagerness that he portrays seeps into the narrative." *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>9</sup> These stories can be found in the following collections of Carver's short fiction: "Neighbors" and "They're Not your Husband" in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1978); "Why Don't You Dance," and "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (N.Y.: Vintage books, 1982); "Feathers" in *Cathedral* (N.Y.: Vintage, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> By calling experimental literature "academic," as Tom Wolfe does, for example, realists on the other hand want to draw attention to a specialization in aesthetic production that destroys this element of a shared experience.

<sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, No. 146 (1984), 53-92.

dehierarchized sequence of daily events. Consequently, the characters that experience them are not transformed or deeply affected by them, but continue to live on as before. It would appear beside the point to use words like authentic in this context, because experience has no redeeming force of initiation or transformative potential for the weak identities of Carver's characters. It is one of the main problems of these characters that experience remains embedded in, and defined by, a stream of contiguous circumstances in which the banal and the unusual are indiscriminately juxtaposed. Thus, the unusual must be expressed through linguistic banalities, just as, on the other hand, in recurring moments that actually constitute the highpoints of Carver's work, the banal always threatens to become the unusual.

One of Carver's most striking stories, "Why Don't You Dance?" is a case in point. The story takes its departure from the separation of a couple, a fact that is registered only in the briefest of sentences (four words to be exact). Instead, the loss of social and emotional relations manifests itself in the scattered belongings that are spread out on the lawn for a bargain sale. People, then, move out of the story at its beginning; things are left behind. Other people come and use them temporarily. New, transient bonds are formed around them, in this case by a young couple which is looking for cheap furniture and almost takes over the front yard in its eager enthusiasm to rehearse family life. When the owner returns from the supermarket, a new, although brief communality emerges, in which difficulties of communication are overcome by the quick return to well-established routines of everyday life such as drinking, watching television, and playing records together.

In the best tradition of realism, Carver's world is always a familiar, but never a habitualized one. This is an important point to make because it puts into doubt the modernist equation—by now also quite familiar and almost habitualized in itself—between defamiliarization and an anti-mimetic mode of writing. As Carver's stories demonstrate time and again, an effect of defamiliarization can emerge precisely (and perhaps even more effectively) from what appears strikingly and almost overwhelmingly familiar. Since his characters possess only weak identities and are therefore easily unsettled, any incident can initiate an unexpected turn of events. In this case it is the

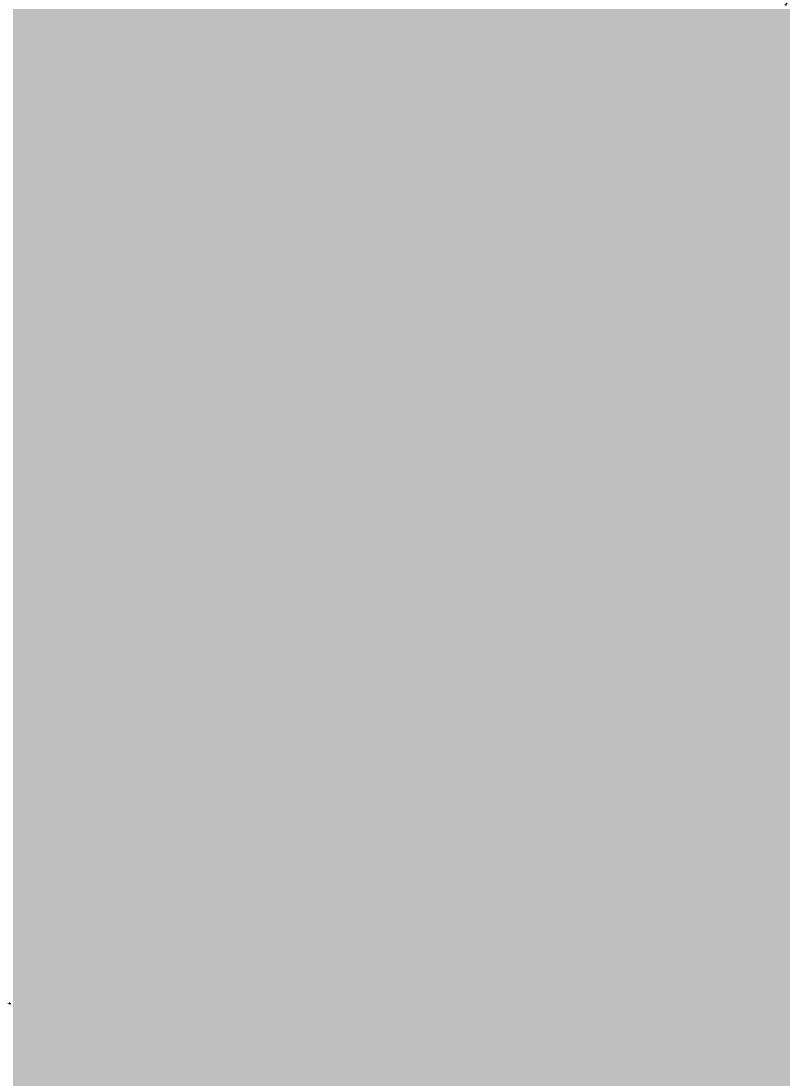
question "Why don't you dance?" which leads to a bizarre scene in which the young woman and the home owner end up dancing together in the simulated living room on the front lawn. This fleeting encounter, enigmatic and yet full of connotations, is clearly the climax of the story, but it is not a climax or epiphany that could provide the rest of the events with 'actual' meaning. There is no teleology, sustained argument, or moral structure in Carver's story, just a chain of events in which one scene acquires an inexplicable, almost surreal transcendence for the briefest of moments—a moment that seems to carry, in contrast, for example, to Hemingway, no representative power beyond itself. Although there clearly are suggestions of loss and loneliness, as well as of repression and furtive longing, there simply is not enough information to establish a consistent interpretation in which the encounter would emerge as an event of symbolic significance, because "reality" is in this case reduced to what may be called a moment of decontextualized experience. What is lost in context, however, is gained in intensity and aesthetic effect. It is an effect generated by a realistic surface that promises to represent and thus to become meaningful, yet fails to do so, but which is, at the same time, nevertheless constantly recharged with the suggestion of meaning by Carver's mode of representation.

In its effective collage of various states of spatial as well as emotional displacement and its hyperreal depiction of conventionalized cultural gesture, "Why Don't You Dance" can be regarded as almost a piece of Americana, while in their faint suggestion of emotional loss and a vague sense of longing to escape, Carver's stories provide material for a study of the psychological makeup of a certain segment of American society. The sentimental core in all of this is unmistakable, although there are some stories, such as "What's Your Husband," that go beyond the Hemingway connection in their chilling and entirely unconventional portrayal of social relations between people with weak or empty identities. Still, it makes sense to argue that the dance, as is the endless talking in another of Carver's stories, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," is a response to an experience of separation and loss. Let us therefore assume that Carver's characteristic style emerged in yet another attempt to avoid Hemingway's latent sentimentality by decontextualizing his painful core experiences even more radically than Hemingway does and by hiding them underneath

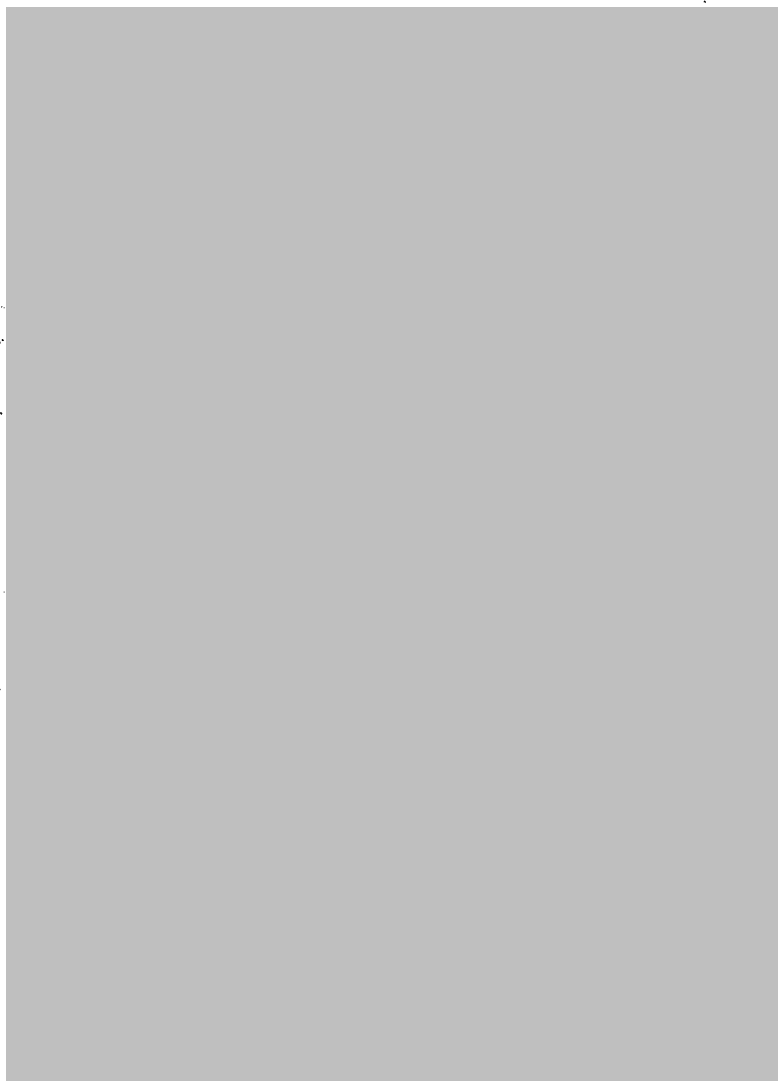
a series of seemingly aimless acts of simulation almost to the point of invisibility.

There is a point of no return, however, where such a strategy of decontextualization must result in a new kind and quality of aesthetic effect, namely, when the many aimless acts and empty gestures designed to stand for something absent and unnameable start to dominate the text to such a degree that they begin to develop their own aesthetic presence and force. The gradual transformation can be illustrated by briefly comparing two paintings that have become recurring points of reference for a discussion of neorealist trends in American culture, Edward Hopper's *Night Hawks* from 1942 and an example taken from the photorealism of the 70s and 80s for which Hopper paved the way, Richard Estes's painting *Central Savings* (1975).

Hopper's by now famous painting is of interest for our discussion because it is situated exactly in the middle between two traditions and styles. On the one hand, its theme, urban loneliness, and the effective division of the pictorial space into a dark, almost empty outside and "a clean, well-lighted place" providing a temporary haven for a few displaced persons evokes Hemingway; on the other hand, the strong aesthetic impact of Hopper's empty spaces and barren walls, as well as his cool light and his strong colors have led to a rediscovery and reception that is entirely free of the "L'Etranger"-type of existential despair characteristic of much modernist writing. Rather, it reflects an aestheticization of the theme in which urban experience is redefined as an aesthetic challenge to the self for which Hopper's visual language provides a welcome repertoire of signs and gestures. In this sense, Hopper's unique type of neon-realism anticipated and ushered in neorealism. In this shift, Hopper teaches a similar lesson as Carver: the less sentimental and emotional, or, to put it differently, the "cooler" and disengaged the text wants to present itself, the more it must also liberate and decontextualize its material; the more independent the linguistic or visual material becomes, however, the greater the likelihood that it will acquire its own surreal presence and thus transform the nature of the aesthetic experience.



Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942

Richard Estes, *Central Savings*, 1975

This point is clearly reached in the paintings by Estes and other photorealists. In their empty, often clinically clean and radically dehierarchized paintings of the city (in which human beings no longer play any significant role, as they still do in Hopper and Carver) reality is simulated to the point of deception. Yet the aesthetic point of these pictures is not recognition, but, quite on the contrary, a formalist challenge to the viewer who is to gauge the familiar in order to assess the formal structure of the representation and the often subtle effects of difference. Why is this formalism interested in a realistic mode of representation, then? One reason Estes has given is the influence of a specifically American concern with the material and physical world that has made realism a much more forceful and enduring tradition in American culture than anywhere else. But there is also a good reason for such a choice from an aesthetic point of view: What a realist surface manages to quite effectively do is to constantly refuel the viewer's interest and curiosity because of a promise of representation that is, on the other hand, never fulfilled.

In the classical American realism of the 19th century, experience is crucial because it validates observations and corrects fantasies. Experience connects the individual with a world whose underlying laws are thus revealed. It is experience that eventually tells characters such as Silas Lapham, Huck Finn, or Isabel Archer, often in programmatic contrast to their cultural training, what is right or wrong, true or false. Experience can therefore also become the main source for determining what is important and representative. For Howells, ordinary experience can therefore also become representative experience. In contrast, ordinary life in Carver "is the enemy of ordinary people."<sup>12</sup> In a reality defined as a sequence of decontextualized moments, the ordinary and commonplace can no longer retain any symbolizing power. And yet, Carver's events, by force of their realistic mode, clearly 'represent' reality in the double sense of the word. It is here that an interplay, a movement back and forth between different levels of the text sets in. On the one hand, Carver's illusionist realism promises an authenticity and representativeness of experience that is, on the other hand, continuously undermined by the absence of semantic depth. We are not inclined to

<sup>12</sup> Howe, "Stories of Our Loneliness," 42.

accept this, however, because the realistic mode of representation promises exactly such a depth, so that we return to the realistic surface in order to search for yet another clue for a successful recontextualization and generalization. We are thus constantly moving between a promise of representative experience, its subversion and its subsequent restitution—a movement that is revived time and again by Carver's strategy of recharging the realistic surface of the text with a meaning that cannot be firmly grasped. As is the case in photo realism, ordinary events thus assume the character of fascinating, semantically highly charged images, without suggesting, on the other hand, any representative value beyond themselves. Indeed, it may be argued that it is exactly because they both promise and subvert a claim for representative meaning that they remain effective as an aesthetic experience. Carver needs realism to establish a promise that provides his stories with potential meaning and, thus, with interest. But his narrative technique of metonymic minimalism remains without a representative center or depth because the relation between sign and referent has become so unstable and transient that his signs are constantly placed in states of isolation and decontextualization.

There is no "tyranny of the referent," here, as Roland Barthes has accusingly characterized realism, because, although Carver's mode of representation is "transparent" and the referent therefore easily identifiable, it still remains semantically "empty." Thus, the new realism offers one of the strongest counter-arguments against a simplistic equation of illusionist realism as a mode of writing and a quasi-totalitarian control of meaning that postmodernism and poststructuralism have set up for their own polemical purposes. It is, on the contrary, quite interesting to note a number of striking similarities between postmodern literary experiments and the new realism of a Carver. A retreat from the search for an experiential ground that would provide symbolic representativeness to the single sign or event is only one of them. It is equally notable to realize that similar narrative strategies are employed in order to deal with the challenges in representation that arise from a loss of semantic depth. In both modes of writing, strategies of decontextualization play a crucial role, although such decontextualization is in each case achieved by different means: in Pynchon, for example, by elliptic sentence and plot structures, in

Barthelme by constant ruptures of semantic consistency, in Carver by an unexpected, potentially surreal turn of familiar events. And in each case, these strategies lead to moments of aesthetic immediacy in which the decontextualized sign is recharged with meaning for the briefest of moments. In postmodernism, this leads to the temporary semantic liberation of a strong signifier, in the new realism to what one may call an image of sharp focus which, although transparently referential, can still be seen as another version of the strong signifier in postmodernism.

The new realism, then, is by no means—at least, by no means necessarily—another version of "The Empire Strikes Back" in which the complacent petty bourgeois finally gets his or her revenge for years of suffering in the hands of wild-eyed experimentalists. Far from merely falling back on traditional patterns (which could then be neatly interpreted as a literary equivalent of the Reagan era), new realists respond to recent cultural and aesthetic developments in their own skillful way. What we get in consequence, is, as always in literary history, a hybrid—a mixture of modes in which the relations between various narrative strategies are newly negotiated. Let me, therefore, briefly touch on two especially interesting examples for the wide range of possibilities such negotiations can take, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Walter Abish's *How German Is It*.

Clearly, Abish and DeLillo are more experimentally minded than Carver so that it may be regarded as somewhat problematic to discuss them in the context of a new realism. It seems to me, however, that such a context makes sense, because although both of these writers include, as does Carver, grotesque and other elements and mix generic frames, they still retain an illusionist mode of representation as the basis of their aesthetic effects. One of the possible explanations for this surprising reemergence of realistic representation even in experimental writing may be that, in keeping with the realist tradition, this mode makes it possible to reinsert the question of experience into the narrative. In DeLillo's *White Noise* this is done in a most ingenious way. His first-person narrator and main character of the novel, the successful college professor Jack Gladney, is chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. In this way, the symbol of an



experience that makes us reevaluate all experience, is transformed into an academic issue:

I am chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill. I invented Hitler studies in North America in March of 1968. It was a cold bright day with intermittent winds out of the east. When I suggested to the chancellor that we might build a whole department around Hitler's life and work, he was quick to see the possibilities. It was an immediate and electrifying success. The chancellor went on to serve as adviser to Nixon, Ford and Carter before his death on a ski lift in Austria.<sup>13</sup>

In turning the phenomenon of Hitler into a field for professional specialization and distinction, Gladney has not only furthered his own career, he has also provided an example of the effective neutralization of experience in a society guided and governed by a constant circulation of images and cultural material. If such a society empties out experience, it also creates new experiences, however, among them some of an unheard dimension. DeLillo's most striking creation is a chemical cloud emerging out of nowhere and evoking associations of the Tschernobyl disaster. This new reality has an altogether different quality. It challenges the epistemological status of experience as a source of knowledge because its deadly effect can no longer be seen or felt and can only be determined by a computer. Yet, contrary to first impressions, DeLillo is not Baudrillard. Revealing perhaps a major difference between literary theory and creative writing, he is not just interested in out-analyzing everybody else, but in dealing with the problem of how we can acknowledge such new realities and still continue to live with them.

Although simulation plays an important role in the novel—for example, in the simulated evacuation organized by the private consulting firm of Advanced Disaster Management—DeLillo's major interest seems to lie in exactly the opposite direction, namely in the unforeseen possibilities of rechanneling simulation into real experience,

<sup>13</sup> Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin, 1986), p.4.

as his children do in the case of the simulated evacuation. DeLillo's favorite examples for this potential of reappropriating a world "full of abandoned meanings" (p. 184) and transforming it back into new experience are the lively uncontrollable disorder of the family and the semiotic plenitude of the supermarket. But the ultimate moment in the novel arrives when Gladney watches one of his daughters sleeping: "I sat there watching her. Moments later she spoke again. Distinct syllables this time, not some dreamy murmur—but a language not quite of this world. I struggled to understand. I was convinced she was saying something, fitting together units of stable meaning." (p. 154f.) In a nutshell, this passage dramatizes the neorealist redefinition of the relation between surface knowledge and deep knowledge. Gladney's struggle to understand (one should take note of the heroic vocabulary) highlights the prototypical approach of a hermeneutics of depth that goes to work with the assumption that sleep will reveal what has been repressed. The unconscious, however, has become another postmodern chain of empty signifiers; the two words Gladney finally deciphers with much difficulty are "Toyota Celica." It is important to point out that this is not to demonstrate an all-pervasive colonialization of the mind, but the successful resemanticization of a freely circulating signifier by reconnecting it with a human context. In this sense, the emptying out of experience creates the possibility "of a moment of splendid transcendence" (p. 155) that reintensifies experience, if only for a fleeting moment, reminding us of similar instances of sudden, unforeseen transcendence in the work of Donald Barthelme.

Similarly, for Abish in his *How German Is It* photos and other traditional forms of evidence are no longer able to provide reliable knowledge of a Germany oscillating between a bright new surface of economic success and an underworld of concentration camps. But neither does experimentalism, because it would only trivialize this experience. Abish, in drawing on ideas of Russian formalism on the effacement of knowledge by the familiar thus pursues a subtle strategy of disturbing the familiar—a strategy, however, that no longer relies on modernist modes of defamiliarization, but on the sometimes almost unnoticeable integration of difference into the familiar. Abish's manipulation of realistic illusion is comparable to photorealism and has resulted in a fascinating battle between realist and modernist readings

in the reception of the novel, especially in the response which the novel has found in Germany.

Such contradictory reactions confirm that Abish, strongly influenced by Godard on this point, has succeeded in dramatizing his main concern: the political impact of a signifying practice that relies on the familiar and the habitualized for its interpretation of the world. Where the seemingly self-evident relation between sign and referent is dissolved all too radically, however, an important part of the signification process is eliminated as well (its function of political and historical interpretation). Hence, Abish strives to establish an especially ambitious and difficult version of something that characterizes all of the texts discussed in this essay, namely, a new balance between two different modes of signification that constantly challenge and question each other's authority but which also remain dependent on one another because of this interaction. In this linkage, Abish does not only argue against the suppression of past political crimes, but also—and this is the actual achievement of the book, as I see it—against a mere inversion of hierarchies. For Abish, talking about the unnameable horrors of the Nazi past can also become a cliché. In order to prevent this, the sign has to be kept from a stable and habitualized attachment to a referent that would restrain readers from exploring the full range of semantic possibilities. Thus, in keeping with its own program of resistance to the authority of the familiar and habitualized, the novel may be an irritating book, but it is never a moralizing one. I think it is an important part of the novel's remarkable power to provoke that it does not replace one signifying practice with another in an act of programmatic or subversive defiance, but skillfully oscillates between the two, so that the reader can never comfortably settle with a tendency toward realistic naturalization nor with a stance of modernist subversion. In consequence, readers find themselves in a state of prolonged and persistent ambivalence that can be highly energizing and activating.

If these two novels tell us something about the current situation of American writing, then it surely must be that experimental and realistic modes of writing mix and merge in new and unforeseen ways, so that the old battle lines between the two, drawn, in essence, by

modernism, have to be reconsidered. Still, the question remains why there should be a need for realistic representation at all, if this realism moves in the direction of postmodern literature and, on occasion, already shows such notable affinities to it that one may be tempted to speak of a postmodern realism? Basically, I can see two reasons. For one, a realistic mode offers especially effective ways for continuously recharging the linguistic surface which is the basis for postmodern aesthetics. Drawing on the reality effect may be especially effective, on the other hand, because it helps to introduce material with strong semantic and emotional resonance into the interplay between the promise of meaning and its constant deferral and therefore reenergizes aesthetic experience. The priority of this aesthetic function may explain why the new realism is not primarily concerned, as 19th century realism was, with an attempt to maximize the illusionism of the realistic mode. Instead, as I have tried to show, new realist writing relies on strategies of decontextualization and dehierarchization that change the aesthetic impact of the literary text as well as the kind of knowledge it provides. What is gained by the return to a promise of shared experience is a kind of blood transfusion for a signifying process that was in danger of being suffocated by overtheoretization. But there is a price to be paid for the neorealist effort to reconnect signification with experience. Instead of anchoring and stabilizing the textual system, as in classical realism, the representation of reality is now infected by the instabilities of the process of signification itself, so that reality, as represented in the new realism, is dominated by the unstable, decentered features that also characterize the textual system. Or, to put it differently: the mimetic relation between the textual system and its referent has now become, if not inverted, at least one of mutual exchange, so that reality emerges as a space of proliferating signs in which all striving for order remains arbitrary. Knowledge, says a character in *White Noise*, changes everyday. This new understanding of reality is very hard to pin down ideologically, but it is certainly not a view of reality that would confirm a liberal version. In this sense, I think, the return of realism is by no means what it appeared and promised to be: it is not a reauthorization of liberalism. Quite to the contrary, it is another blow to liberalism's cultural authority.

Why then the continuing antagonism between postmodernism and realism? After discussing the new realism as aesthetic experience and in terms of its changing view of reality, the question leads to a final major constituent, realism's changing cultural function. Quite obviously, the prevailing antagonism between postmodernism and realism has its primary reason in a strong disagreement about the cultural functions and possibilities of literature. Realism has traditionally claimed that any retreat from a mimetic mode of representation will also sever literature from a meaningful relation to life. However, modernist and postmodern writing became possible only because photography and other new media seemed to fulfill the task of realistic representation much more successfully than literature, which, among other things, set literature and painting free to explore new modes of representation. Liberated from the ambition to construct a consistent illusion, art drew on its possibilities as a heuristic device to explore the perceptual and formal constituents of aesthetic experience. As a consequence, this process of experimentation also led to an almost exclusive appropriation of the concept of the aesthetic by the experimental mode which put up a successful claim to be the artistically most advanced way of writing or painting.

A strange dialectic set in: In order to fulfill its avantgarde promise, art had to become increasingly heuristic, that is, exploratory. But in doing so it also moved further and further away from a reality effect and the authority of shared experience. This has created the impression that, ironically enough, the kind of text that is awarded the highest authority as artistic response to the world seems to have the least to say about it. The novel which appears to have the most to say about it is, on the other hand, the realistic novel, but it can only fulfill this function by ignoring many of the insights and artistic gains that the modernist and postmodernist project has developed as a heuristic device. *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, as sympathetic as it may be in its critique of the shortcomings of a liberal vision of contemporary America, is an obvious case in point. In this situation, the new realism of the 80s offers another alternative. It retains a realistic mode of writing in order to remain connected with the world of a reader who is not a professional academic; at the same time it also uses such realistic forms of representation in ways that undermine their self-evident reliance on the

authority of experience and the claim for representativeness linked with it. One of the results is the almost paradoxical phenomenon of a realism that no longer wants to offer a representative version of reality but is content to explore and represent a decontextualized surface. It is a realism that does not claim to know the real, but wants to come to terms with the fact that it is nevertheless there in an amorphous, ever changing shape. In the final analysis, this realism refers us to a cultural situation whose complexity and variety can no longer be represented by any single text or mode of writing, only by a set of relations within a growing plurality of cultural styles and modes of writing. This new cultural space still has to be mapped out and in this sense a discussion of the new realism is meant to contribute to an understanding of the plurality of choices in which we currently live. The new realism, to be sure, is just one of them. However, as my discussion intended to show, it is one with its own flexibility and aesthetic potential to respond to changing times.

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