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Devin Fore

Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature

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[Alex Potts](#)

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Devin Fore's *Art after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* is an important book that addresses with real erudition and insight some very important issues regarding realism and modernism in European art, writing, and theater in the period between the two world wars. It offers a particularly compelling rethinking of the supposed return to realism in the later 1920s and the 1930s, focusing on Germany, where debate on the subject was played out with unusual intensity and sophistication. Fore argues persuasively against the standard view that there was a rehumanization of art and a return to order as avant-garde artists and writers who had engaged in the modernist dismantling of conventional representational forms began working in more traditional modes—exploiting realist figurative devices and reworking traditional genres such as the novel, autobiography, caricature, and naturalist drama. Singled out for attention are artists and writers for whom the apparent turn to realism was noticeably embedded in an ongoing commitment to modernist distancing and abstracting. The book is structured as a series of case studies that analyze in depth symptomatic works by each of the following figures—Bertolt Brecht, John Heartfield, Carl Einstein, László Moholy-Nagy, and Franz Jung and Erik Reger, two writers of the German industrial novel. The chapters on Heartfield and on Brecht include a very illuminating discussion of the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, an important figure for any understanding of modernist montage in the period.

Fore shows how these figures, far from retreating to the reassurances of a groundedness in reality and a sense of subjective wholeness associated with earlier, established forms of realism, were, rather, making work that was as much in tune with the cultural and political realities of their times as their prior rejection of traditional forms had been. Particularly valuable is his systematic analysis of the formal strategies involved—the destabilizing or canceling of naturalistic illusion through either a flattening or overcoding of representational forms, the deployment of abstract structures in place of conventionally integrated narrative and composition forms, and the resulting effect of a hollowing out of subjectivity appropriate to the dehumanizing logic of modern industrial capitalism. The consistent working through of this formal analysis is one of the great strengths of the book. At the same time, its poststructuralist framing means that little consideration is given to the persistence of earlier attitudes to realist representation, almost as if the cultural baggage of nineteenth-century realism and naturalism had been made obsolete by a modernist reconfiguring of artistic form.

Two figures play a crucial role: Brecht and Eisenstein. They both responded to the changing cultural and political conditions of the late 1920s and 1930s—the growing disillusionment with the political efficacy of radical abstraction as well as the move toward a

social or socialist realism—in an unusually self-conscious way. While drawing much more than they had in the past on the representational possibilities of realist motifs and devices, they did not disavow a commitment to modernist forms and techniques—epic theater in Brecht's case and montage in Eisenstein's. What is striking about these two artists, in addition to the political density of their work, is the breadth of their engagement with different media. With Brecht there is not only writing, but also theatrical staging with its tableaux, environments, gestures, and role-playing; with Eisenstein, not just filmic technique and editing, but also larger issues of narrative, montage, and caricatural imaging—the last, as Fore shows, being relevant to understanding Heartfield's powerful political photomontages of the 1930s.

In Brecht and Eisenstein there was a complex intertwining of realist representation with a modernist reconfiguring of temporality, space, and figure—a reconfiguring very much in tune with the realities of the developed capitalist and increasingly bureaucratized Soviet systems, but also, in its more radical iterations, a reconfiguring that projected alternatives to dominant understandings of modern reality purveyed by these systems. A fascinating treatment of such issues is also found in the chapter on the modern German industrial novel, and they play a leading role in the chapter on Carl Einstein's never-completed remaking of an early, radically vanguardist novella as autobiography. Also notable is the very fine chapter on Eisenstein's and Heartfield's reworking of montage as realist figuration. This chapter makes an important point that the abstracting of realism in the interwar period took the form not just of a hollowing out or demotivation of realist representation, but also of an oversaturating or overcoding. On the one hand, there is Brecht's antiempathetic recycling of the debased everyday discourse issuing from Nazi Germany and his episodic dispersal of dramatic effect in the play *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (1938); on the other, Heartfield's overcharged, vividly condensed refashionings of widely circulated media images of Nazi leaders as hallucinatory monsters.

These intriguing forms of modern realism were activated by a politically charged dialectic operating in the larger culture between insistent flattening and equally relentless overcoding. It is precisely such charged complexity, though, that is lacking in the interwar work of another of Fore's featured artists, Moholy-Nagy. Fore's account of Moholy-Nagy's experimental reworking of the spatial configurations of traditional perspective and his play with multiple viewpoints failed to convince me that he was much more than a talented, well-intentioned modernist. His montages seem emptily formalist by comparison with the vivid, powerful engagements with, and subversion of, realist effect in Heartfield's political caricatures, or in comparison with Vertov's energetically wayward experiments in reenvisioning a distinctively modern temporal and spatial reality by way of the camera eye, as discussed in the chapter on Moholy-Nagy.

The book benefits from the clear focus given by its judicious choice of material. At the same time, the exclusive concern with more modernist-seeming figures leaves to one side difficult questions about differences and affinities between work clearly informed by a political and artistic radicalism (an activist realism, as it were) and work that was driven by conservative impulses, such as Novecento painting in Italy. The emptiness identified with the turn to traditional artistic forms in the latter, here deployed quite consciously with a view to regaining the groundedness of classical archetypes and truthfulness to nature, could be ascribed to the unconscious effects on this art of the abstracting imperatives at work in modern culture. In what ways, formally speaking, does this passive abstracting or distancing differ from the activist engagement with these effects in the art that Fore discusses? Or is there no difference at the level of formal or structural logic, as Fore at one point (229) seems to imply?

I also wondered how Fore's formal insights might play out in relation to other, less overtly modernist, but still critically and politically engaged refashionings of realism during the interwar period—such as the *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting of Otto Dix and Georg Scholz, the intriguing socialist realism of Aleksandr Deineka, and the stylized, modern realist murals of Diego Rivera. Extending Fore's analysis to such cases would require consideration of the ongoing pursuit of a vividly evocative realism in ways that would be at odds with much of the formal logic underpinning his study. The overloading and overcoding of representational motifs can make a work seem vividly real, as in Dix's portraits, where reference to a powerful material presence is made more alive, not more abstracted and empty, by caricatural excess. In other words, the unreality strikes one as very real. Equally, the abstract, nonnaturalistic effects in Rivera's work sometimes convey a sense of the larger political reality being pictured. The depictive strategies are not totally unlike those found in certain earlier art, at the same time that the insistent formalizing bears testimony to the abstraction necessary in any compelling (and realistic) artistic visualizing of things in the conditions prevailing in the interwar period. Fore's analysis could be adapted to provide useful insights into the distinctive nature of such modern reworkings of earlier figurative modes, provided that the contradictory exploitation of realist effects and resonances is taken into account.

A seriously ambitious intervention such as Fore's inevitably raises questions for readers who come to his material from a different perspective than his own. My questions are twofold. Firstly, there is his historical framing of interwar "realism after modernism" between the earlier realism and naturalism of the nineteenth century that it was simultaneously reworking and negating, and the subsequent postmodern return of the real in the later twentieth century. He likens the representational mode of interwar realism to the postmodern simulacra's evacuation of substantive reference, while distinguishing it categorically from nineteenth-century realism, in which the image is supposedly stably grounded in a real referent (10, 297). Like many writers on twentieth-century art and culture, Fore remains loyal to the modernist assumption that a structural break with the representational forms of earlier art and writing occurred at the moment of radical avant-garde experimentation in the early twentieth century. However, a number of the devices that Fore singles out as characteristic of interwar realism were deployed in the nineteenth century. Realist writers such as Charles Dickens exploited nonnaturalistic augmentation and overloading representational motifs, while the absence of well-rounded character and the figuring of nonautonomous subjectivities shaped by their social and material environment was a defining characteristic of much naturalist literature.

This is not to say that such devices had the same valence among the more critically self-aware artists of the nineteenth century as they had among those working in the interwar period. Radical changes in the cultural landscape had taken place, of which the more extreme forms of early modernist abstraction were certainly a symptom. Still, there is no reason to assume that interwar realism represented such a departure from earlier naturalism or realism that it is best understood as having closer affinities with later postmodern representational skepticism and irony. The assimilating of interwar art and culture to familiar poststructuralist paradigms glosses over the very real tensions between the survival of earlier representational strategies, including the desire for utterly truthful depiction, and the remaking of such strategies, energized by a compulsion to break radically with the past.

There is a related issue concerning Fore's rather straightforwardly negative take on mimesis, or what he calls "mimetic realism"—equating it, in effect, with naturalistic illusion. Mimesis, even in its more traditional understanding, does not necessarily imply that the meaning of a sign or motif is grounded in a single, clearly defined equivalent in the real world—just as it is not necessarily the case that forms of signification in modern art acquire their meaning entirely by way of abstract interactions with other signs, without regard to immediate referential or denotational effect. There are moments when Fore seems to incline to the latter view, as when he envisages Brecht's *Grundmodelle* to be "non-mimetic diagrams of grammatical relations" (176) that operate independently of the particular characters in a play—like a theory of language that focuses exclusively on the interconnections between linguistic signs, and brackets out the entities these reference. Such strict poststructuralist formalism leaves out a crucial aspect of any realism, however attenuated or disrupted it might be: the referential value of the motifs deployed, which interacts with, complicates, and gives a greater density to the interplay among signs and motifs. To be fair, Fore himself at times argues for a realist semiotic "based on similarities circulating freely between matter and sign" as against a semiotic in which a categorical distinction is made "between the referent and its image" (298). Moreover, the semiotic abstraction and estrangement between the image and anything palpably real that the author foregrounds elsewhere in his study carries its own powerful realist resonance. He makes it clear that its effects are not purely formal, but have to do with very real abstractions operating in the wider world of developed industrial capitalism.

[Alex Potts](#)

Max Loehr Collegiate Professor, Department of History of Art, University of Michigan

adpotts@umich.edu

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50 Broadway, 21st Floor, New York, NY 10004 | T: 212-691-1051 | F: 212-627-2381 caareviews@collegeart.org