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REALISM IN ART: A SHORT NOTE

I. Opening Statements

Let us start with a short historical overview. Plato dealt with falsehoods in his own way but in spite of this he authorised authors to make true statements about gods of how to wage war in a proper way. According to Aristotle, a proper tragedy is not about what has actually happened, but about what may happen “according to the law of probability or necessity”; Herodotus’ stories, put into verse, remain historical, because factual (particular). Generally speaking, while art represents the universal – namely “a person of a certain type on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity”, history represents a particular piece of reality, essentially.¹ Baudelaire’s ambition was to describe the way of things as they are or the way they would be assuming that he did not exist, in other words, he made a case for truth. Engels’ realism – surprisingly aristotelicallian – implies, besides truth of detail, a true reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances. Picasso’s opinion was more sophisticated: he professed that art is not in immediate relation with the truth and that the truth is rather induced by untruth. The task of an artist is therefore to convince others of the truthfulness of its/his falsehoods. It seems that some basic intuitions about realism need clarification. The first one is this:

1. Every artist intends to represent something true in a way, to be realistic in this sense.

According to 1. the basic statement about realism can be sketched thus:

2. Artistic realism is a sort of correspondence between a work of art and reality.

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Newburyport: Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company 2006, section IX.

And probably a controversial one

3. To be true is a necessary condition for something to be considered a valuable work of art.

II. Conceptual Optimism?

According to a common view, artistic realism is characterised unproblematically as a complex, true, and faithful description of reality or similarity to reality.² The goal of realism is not to construct beauty, but to achieve truth. Does this mean that the more true an art representation is, the more is ipso facto realistic, and therefore the more it can become artistic? Is every photograph – captured causally – maximally visually true, therefore realistic, and therefore artistic? Is every article of news in the newspapers, for being true, artistic because of having of that property? It does not seem to be the case.

On the other hand, there are artistic representations which are more realistic – more faithful, more true to the world – than others. And every concept that establishes such a comparative difference (namely more/less realistic) is useful. Therefore, a simple and fundamental statement has to be submitted:

4. The concept of artistic realism is not trivial, but useful and meaningful.

So, if intuition 1. is correct and every artist intends to represent truth by doing this according to intuition 2. (even if, according to Picasso's note, via untruth), under what corresponding condition/s does an author fail in doing his representative business? In other words, what is the criterion that separates a more true artistic representation from a less true one? It seems that the nature of concept of realism as such leads us to the question: what role does truth play within a concept of realism, if any?

III. Possible worlds?

Let us take a glance at literary representation, the most conceptual of all artistic genres. It seems obvious there are proper and improper literary

² Comp. e. g. Konrad Lotter, Realismus, in Wolfhart Henckmann – Konrad Lotter (eds.), *Estetický slovník*, Praha: Svoboda 1995, p. 157. A concept of realism concerns normally literature and visual art, in broader sense also other artistic genres used to be counted being somehow realistic.

representation of the world. To argue to the contrary would presumably mean to argue for the triviality of literary value.³ But it is evident there is at least one belles-lettres piece which is more valuable than others. Therefore, there can exist an unsuccessful literary representation which does not fulfill 3. What are the characteristics of a valuable literary representation? Perhaps the key to the answer lies simply in realism understood as a kind of representation related in a way to truth. A short reflection on a dictionary entry, e. g.

Realism [...] one of the fundamental literary tendencies since its very beginning that contains an author – reality relation as an art object, externalizing this reality in works of art [...]⁴

What does it mean – reality? Probably not just a representation of the actual world, because if so, it would be extremely easy to fulfill the necessary condition of art: to tell the truth. In accordance with the above-mentioned views it seems to be more proper to consider such a relation as a range of possibilities. A well-known tool for viewing possibilities offers itself, namely the possible worlds semantics⁵. Let us see briefly if such a tool would be helpful in answering our question.⁶

According to 2. works of literary realism should/must correspond to reality. If a work corresponds to its inherent fragment of the world, it is declared to be true. And again: it is evident that there is at least one realistic – more faithful to the World – work over others. Now let us state the next intuition:

5. literary representation is the more realistic, the more a given represented is occupied in the set of possible worlds.

³ It is a proper representation considered as a necessary condition for having value which is in accordance with a common understanding of realism. As a sufficient one used to be commonly considered beauty – formal one or another. In this paper we deal alone with realistic representation considered as a necessary condition of having value. The question of sufficient conditions is in this instance outside the area of our interest.

⁴ Jaroslava Heřtová, Realismus, in Štěpán Vlačín (ed.), *Slovník literárních směrů a skupin*, Praha: Panorama 1983, p. 255.

⁵ Here the Wittgensteinian (from his *Tractatus*) possible world semantics is considered: properties and relations ranges over fixed set of individuals. Set of all possible worlds is a set of all possible distributions of properties and relations over individuals. Such a set is infinite, of course. Every empirical assertive sentence cut this set into two parts: that one in which is true and that one in which is false. The actual world is an infinite subset of a set of all possible worlds, namely all statements which are true in our world at one point of time. Which world is an actual one we cannot know for it consists of infinite propositions.

⁶ Possible worlds semantics used to be a frequent tool of literary analysis, e.g. Doležal's. Comp. e. g. Lubomír Doležal, *Heterocosmica. Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore – London: John Hopkins University Press 1997.

However acceptable 5. may sound, it has to be rejected. The reason is quite simple: the most realistic works would be those which are true in all possible worlds. So the most realistic literary work would be a kind of tautology: it wouldn't say anything. Or, let us take the news which is true (let's hope) in the actual world – as such it would fulfil the condition according to 3. But is an actually true representation – a news item – a piece of valuable literature because of being actually true? Why should it not be? Is it not possible to find out – in the future – that the story of Hamlet is completely true, actual? Let us take a paradigmatic example of literary realism, *War and Peace*. Something in the plot is real (e.g. Napoleon, Austerlitz), the rest is fictive. From a semantic point of view, reading Tolstoy's chef d'oeuvre we need not know if its sentences are true, if the Andrey Bolkonsky was a real man or not. What is important is this: Semantics cannot give an empirical answer as to the existence of particular people or events. Individual existence is the business of empirical disciplines, history, for example. Instead, we read novels as possibilities, in accordance with Aristotle (and Engels and others).⁷

Let us return to the initial intuition 1, the role of truth in “reading” art. What about artistic falsehood, the reason why many philosophers, affected by the Platonic heritage have refused art as such? Falsehood can be – for the modest goal of this paper – viewed as a case of fiction, to use the jargon of literature theory. But what exactly is fiction?

There are some novels which are true: as a pars pro toto let us take Alexander Kluge's *Extinction of the Sixth Army*. This novel consists of real letters, news, orders, medical records etc of Wehrmacht soldiers. In a common sense Kluge's text is true, there is no fiction there. Autobiographic texts are of that sort – we suppose at least: Augustinus' *Confessiones*, Sartre's *Les Mots*, Scheinpflugová's *Byla jsem na světě*. But there is a problem: do we feel a need to negate these texts, to argue against them? It seems to be absurd. For texts of belles-lettres are not read as true, even if they can appear to be true (consider for example Schliemann's reading of the Iliad). Truth is non-essential for understanding literary texts for it has nothing in common with meaning as an entity which makes understanding possible.⁸

The above can be summed up as:

6. literary texts can be “read” regardless of truth.

⁷ It would seem that a kind of *as-if* fiction reading is proposed here. Not at all. We presuppose there is just one natural language semantics for various purposes, e. g. for telling stories.

⁸ See e. g. Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetic Understanding. Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture*, South Bend: St. Augustine's Press 1997, esp. the first Chapter.

Possible worlds semantics does not seem to be a proper technical tool for a description of artistic realism.⁹

IV. Artistic Verisimilitude

Well, possible worlds are probably out. Maybe a concept „artistic verisimilitude“ can be fruitful. Such a view was introduced by J. P. Day and in fact it aims to explain realism in accordance with our goal here. Day tries to find out if fictions and verisimilitude are compatible in and if so, under what conditions.¹⁰ Does realism have its roots in physical laws or laws of human psyche? The decisive in processes of evaluation of something as realistic are the perceiver’s preconditions and familiar acquaintance with human behaviour and the world in general, the perceiver’s expectations as to the probability of subsequent events. If a character travels from Paris to London in three minutes it is necessary to explain such a circumstance *authentically*. If an explanation of any situation is given authentically, the receiver tends to grasp it as *possibly* real. This is because we are more reluctant to give up our psychic expectations and desires than any particular physical laws of the world. If e. g. the fictitious characters Pytlík the Beetle or Ferda the Ant are competent speakers of Czech we expect them to behave the same way as human speakers of Czech. In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* there are different laws of nature and even logic, yet nevertheless, the characters of that fiction can be grasped as distinctive types representing particular people of this world. Not all characters behave in accordance with our expectations. Many characters of so-called socialist realism fiction do not behave in such a way and our criticism has its source just there – in conflict with our knowledge of the world. If you mentally enter a gigantic rotating cylinder while reading Clarke’s *Rendezvous with Rama* and subsequent events follow from this hardly probable fact, everything seems to be real in that story. Thus thinking, Day submits his explication of realism, where „realism“ denotes such a correspondence between the work of art and the world in which represented events or characters correspond to our knowledge of laws of nature, logic, the laws of human behavior, in short to

⁹ It surely could be mentioned that semantics used here is considered as hyperintensional one in the sense of Pavel Tichý, *The Foundations of Frege’s Logic*, Berlin – New York: De Gruyter 1988), Pavel Materna (Concepts and Objects, *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 63, Helsinki 1998) or Marie Duží (in *Procedural Semantics for Hyperintensional Logic. Foundations and Applications of Transparent Intensional Logic*, Berlin: Springer 2010, co-authors B. Jespersen and P. Materna).

¹⁰ See J. P. Day, Artistic Verisimilitude, *Dialogue* 1, 1962, No. 2, p. 163–187.

credible founding events of our world. The most striking motto of realism seems to be – *C'est la vie!*

V. Realism as a kind of human experience

Does Day's concept of artistic realism satisfy the above-mentioned conjunction of all the above mentioned statements? It seems an answer to the opening question could be yes, it does, except 5 (no possible world semantics!). Our pointing at a rigorous, semantic truth via possible worlds is probably misleading and artistic realism understood in a such a way is a sort of categorical mistake: a more sensible view seems to be to consider realism as an understanding of the world via the recipients' mental states. In such a view, the concept of artistic realism is not to be considered purely ontologically or *semantically* but rather *empirically*. What we mean by „true“ in realism is nothing but a correspondence to our expectations, led by our individual and/or shared life experience. A work's degree of realism is accordingly proportional to the degree of a reader's life experience: the more experienced the perceiver, the more he knows incredible types of everyday characters or life situations and consequently considers them to be realistic – *verisimilar* in Day's jargon – ones. In this sense Goodman¹¹ and Gombrich¹² were correct, at least partly: realistic art is art that *is not semantically true* but *is perceived as possibly true* in the sense of familiar, home-loving, ours, because of its correspondence to human life experience.¹³

ABSTRAKT

REALISMUS V UMĚNÍ: KRÁTKÁ POZNÁMKA

Nahlédnuto filozoficky bylo umění, a zejména literatura, vždy nějak spojováno s pravdou. Cílem každého dobrého umělce bylo a je sdělit cosi podstatného o světě, neboli říci pravdu. Kdo ze spisovatelů chtěl kdy záměrně lhát či mást? Uměleckému dílu, považovanému za pravdivé, je běžně připisován atribut realistické. Znamená řečené, že pojem realismu jako něčeho, co je spojováno s pravdou, náleží všem uměleckým dílům?

¹¹ Comp. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company 1976, Chapter I., section 8 about realism.

¹² Comp. Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London: Phaidon 1960, Chapter III.

¹³ The paper is an output of Specific Research programme at Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University Brno, MUNI/A1150/2014 Aesthetics in Context of Art and Human Sciences.

Je v tomto smyslu realismus triviální pojem? Cílem příspěvku je pokus o vyjasnění pojmu umělecký realismus. Po citátech vybraných autorů či filozofů k věci je učiněn krátký pokus o vyjasnění realismu pomocí sémantiky možných světů. Je zjištěno, že čím širší by reprezentace světů byla, tím méně by byla informativní. Nejrrealističtější dílo by v posledku neříkalo nic. Sémantika možných světů proto není shledána vhodným nástrojem pro explikaci pojmu umělecký realismus. V poslední části je krátce představen smysluplný pojem realismu.

Klíčová slova: umělecký realismus, pravda, možné světy, sémantika, mentální koncept, Day

SUMMARY

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Art has been considered in one way or another to be in close relation to truth. The goal of each and every author is and has been to relay something vital regarding the world, to express a kind of truth. Most likely no artist has ever wanted intentionally to lie. A work of art that speaks truth is normally described as a realistic one. Does this mean that the concept of realism as something expressing truth is related to all works of art? Is *realism* a trivial concept? The goal of this paper is to attempt to clarify the concept of artistic realism in a simple way. To begin, some thoughts about artistic realism are introduced. In the following parts, e. g. a brief attempt to clarify realism based on possible worlds semantics is made. It is stated that the more true a representation is, the less informative it is. The most realistic work wouldn't in conclusion say anything. So, the possible world semantics is found to be not proper tool for our goal. Finally, a proposal for a natural concept of artistic realism as a meaningful component of a critics' vocabulary is proposed.

Key words: artistic realism, truth, possible worlds, semantics, mental concept, Day

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