

Introduction

Autor(en): **Maeder, Beverly**

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Introduction

The essays in this volume originated in an international conference held by SANAS, the Swiss Association for North-American Studies, in Lausanne in November 2003. Our title, "Representing Realities: Essays on American Literature, Art and Culture," is an emblem for the intellectual ferment that has characterized the humanities over the last half century. Literature finds its place here, while the inclusion of other media attests to the recent broadening of what is understood as "culture" and makes this volume an interdisciplinary one.

To some readers our title may bring up reminiscences of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, first published in Bern in 1946.¹ One of the remarkable things about the book is the way Auerbach allows disparate styles and genres to speak through *explication de texte* as he brings together works as diverse as Homer and Rabelais, the 12th-century *Mistère d'Adam* and *To the Lighthouse* in one historical embrace. Its original German subtitle speaks of "presented reality" (*dargestellte Wirklichkeit*), a formulation which translates Auerbach's idea that a given society in a given time has its own conception of "reality" and that works of artistic expression both belong to and reflect the author's experience of it. This is not so remarkable a historicist notion, but what seems more remarkable is the way in which Auerbach refuses to develop a simple line of historical causality from the texts he reads. Instead, he sees succeeding literary forms and styles, linked with their various understandings of the real, as parts of a dynamic process that is also simultaneously prospective and retrospective.

What Auerbach says in his last chapter about *To the Lighthouse* may be of particular interest here. He notes how Virginia Woolf withholds Lily Briscoe's epiphanic vision at the lighthouse from the reader, preferring to fashion the novel's representable and represented reality from random moments of perception. The seemingly insignificant, the hardly articulable

¹ Princeton University Press is republishing *Mimesis* in 2003, with Edward W. Said as editor, although I have not yet seen it at this writing.

make up the novel's external action. Furthermore, the internal action of the ebb and flow of the novel's several centers of consciousness is also fragmented, puzzlingly selected and combined, by what we would now call the narrating voice or, more simply, the narrator. The "real" in Woolf, as in Joyce and Proust, dissolves in the play of multiple and multivalent subjectivities. Auerbach is led to speculate on the diffused and equalizing "reality" of his own moment and what it may portend; and he foresees a smoothing over of the cultural differences that feed our sense of the "exotic," accompanied by a greater savoring of the elementary things that people have in common, like the emphasis on moments of perception in *To the Lighthouse*.

Now, European and American thinking and cultural discourse in the second half of the 20th century seem to have had it both ways. We end up with a heavy insistence on the realities of cultural specificity on the one hand, along with a pervasive recognition of the common and elemental forces of subjectivity latent in all sorts of activity, including artistic activity, on the other hand. Subtending this artificial dichotomy, however, is a more important shift in our conception of what I would like to call the wholeness of any reality. For several decades scholars in the humanities have fragmented knowledge in the attempt to find new approaches to literature and other cultural artifacts. During this process they have formalized ideas about the interplay of the given and the made, history and narrative, fact and fiction, authorial personality and narrator, text and reader. It has become commonplace to note that our very definitions of history and fiction or objective and subjective, for instance, have become blurred, so that *reality* is commonly understood to signify "realities."

Realities entail an always partial and heterogeneous thingness. For the Latin *res*, "things, matters," we may also read here "events, other people" and everything else that belongs to our milieu, to which we might add the internal "things" of dream, vision and phantasm. Most of the articles in this volume make the distinction, also transmitted by Auerbach, between external things – such as the palpable marks of cultural difference – and the internal ones which include our subjectivities and the motives which move us. Centering on specific works, for the most part, the essays here focus on the way writers, artists and other producers of culture come to or face the realities of their milieu. All of us encounter external reality ready to select and combine, usually in a way that makes the heterogeneous experience more homogenous and thus gives it a sense. Selection and combination pervade not only the kind of linguistic activity Jakobson was referring to when he coined these terms, but everything we do or make with our experience of realities –

like the literary texts, maps, photographs, films or TV news programs discussed in this volume. It is through this individual experience of the world, or subjectivity in the broad sense, that we leap from reality to representation and first construct, then reconstruct, our realities in certain ways. Many now assume, as Wallace Stevens knew, that no matter where we find ourselves in the flux of perceiving and creating, we can never ever “step barefoot into reality.”

Skirting around the numerous and contradictory traditions and usages of the word *representation*, suffice it to say here that in whatever sense, representation implies a troping – a turn, a displacement – of the thing or *res* itself, of the realities as we first experience them. Examples from the first four articles in this volume can take the place of a definition.² The opening article on Freud and Davidson lifts us first to the metalevel: it investigates our activity of re-representing “made” realities, that is, what happens when we read literary representations. It becomes apparent that our habitual way of treating these already represented realities is to take them tropingly. Indeed, we most often engage in a form of interpretation that transfers what we take to be the word-sense onto another level of “meaning” – a metaphorical move *par excellence*. As for the primary level of representing the “given” world, the troping involved is demonstrated in the next three essays, all of which in one way or another focus on writers’ direct encounters with and reshaping of the world of objects. Here we meet Cooper reanimating correspondences between landscape and political realities, political program in mind; Thoreau, on the contrary, trying to write his way beyond the hold of correspondences and interpretation to celebrate the things of nature for themselves; and Williams, too, trying to meet the object in and by his poetry, while Moore might be said to work with the constant revision of imagination by the thing. Not only do perception, values and other components of subjectivity transmute the things of the external world, but any sign system or medium of expression and communication may further distance us from the raw material we have in front of us, and Davidson, Thoreau, Williams and Moore express high degrees of interest in this movement.

The movement of troping is further illustrated in two essays on photography, a medium that also does something both more and less – something other – than make the represented object present. Presence is always figurative, and a photograph, moreover, signifies the pastness of the object. But

² On the whole, the authors in this volume take a rather intuitive or philosophically “realist” approach toward the act of representation. They work flexibly, however, and rather than “harden” the “realities” that form the impulse of representation, they focus on the act itself.

there is more. Stieglitz's photographic portraits of women, for instance, include particulars and framing devices that underscore the otherness of the object, the non-objectivity of the image and the hiddenness of other forces around it; while Native American photographs may transpose and (re)compose in ways that revise history, create new cultural selves and affirm cultural specificity within a culturally diverse society. In all the photographs reproduced here, despite the undisputed effect of the sitter's presence, the "wholeness" of the reality represented in any given view is only apparent, though sometimes seductively so, as the photographs also mediate multiple invisible realities.

When the dust of half a century's academic skirmishes among isms has been left to settle, we are left with a clearer view of the status of what we can still call, in shorthand, representations. We have a heightened awareness that texts do not represent "realities" directly but are interesting for the mediation they perform as they reconfigure and (re)create what is given in the world around us. In this context, we might say that a "fiction" may mediate more accurately the lived experience of individuals than political analyses and newscasts do. This is the case of Gish Jen's novel about a Chinese immigrant family, discussed in this volume. It might be read as a counter-story to the rhetoric of (current) political orthodoxy. At the same time, we have become sensitive to how biographers select, combine and sometimes invent the stories they tell in accordance with their own desires or the hot issues of the times. The example here is a series of writers who have swirled around their "factoids" and mythified Marilyn's defeated body.

When the objects of representation touch the political sphere – at the very least, when we are dealing with perceived injustices and violence or with the denial of cultural diversity – we are self-conscious about possible abuses of all mediated versions of reality. Perhaps we are spurred on by the development of technologies that are backed by far greater financial means and have far greater manipulative power than a Jamesian narrator of a now hundred-year-old novel could ever have imagined. The problem is not so recent of course, since the potential of radio propaganda was already an object of academic scrutiny in the early 1930s. In the following pages, both obvious and less obvious forms of domination through representation are brought to the fore. We will see that it is clear retrospectively how seemingly "rational" frontier maps consolidated the colonizers' power over Canadian American Indians, and how Hollywood and US government film versions of national myths – both entertainment and documentary – may be said to have underpinned and validated the US military engagement in Vietnam. Closer to

us, yet not too close to meet head-on, the blatant case of TV manipulation of the events of 9/11 can be understood as a sign of the quagmire in which the news and entertainment industry is caught on the one hand, and as a trope for a more pervasive and deeper refusal of death by American culture on the other.

Thus our essays are all tinged with the knowledge, conscious or subliminal, that the human spirit has a penchant for dominating the raw material of experience in order to make sense out of it, sometimes to use that sense to exercise power over others, sometimes to ward off what we are loath to recognize. Our authors exhume this knowledge, when it is not visible on the surface, from the works and products of culture that they discuss. For when we deal with literature, art and culture, the reality in question is the doubly partial, doubly constructed one of works that make claims to wholeness and homogeneity and require a special kind of critical distance.

The writers in this volume are conscious that they are themselves situated in a *mise-en-abyme*. The texts they consider are already mediations of given realities as transmuted by their authors – creative writers, photographers, film-makers, TV journalists or philosophers –, while the scholars here are also mediating the made world of texts for their readers. Our writers are also aware that you, their readers, will be silently creating other realities as you read and interpret. Not only are the made objects redoubled, but the historical, political and intellectual contingencies are multiplied. This is why the emphasis in our title is placed on the act of representing, rather than on representedness as a “fact” or on representation as an abstract concept. The essays themselves, as Auerbach wrote about his selected narratives of daily “realities,” gesture not only toward the past but also toward the future work of cultural creation and mediation. Part of this work is done ongoingly in the universities and our readers will contribute to it.

With the exception of the opening article on Davidson, the order in which the essays are arranged respects a vague chronology of the works discussed. The groupings may also suggest ramifications, a few of which I would like to adumbrate in the following abstracts.

Robert Chodat’s “Real Toads and Imaginary Gardens: Freud and Davidson, Meaning and Metaphor” opens the volume probing the assumptions that tacitly underpin our work of interpretation. Placing Freud at one pole of the spectrum, Chodat shows that most of our interpretive endeavors, and not just those of Freud or Freudian critics per se, are pervaded by the view that the creative writer cannot but reveal some other “reality” hidden behind the constructed surface of metaphors and fictions. Donald Davidson, a central figure

in post-War American philosophy, holds out another promise. For Davidson, metaphors and other literary language are better seen not as asserting truth or falsity, or as being bound to meaning; rather, they can be read as opening up new intimations and effects that we savor through our “wit” and practical intelligence. As Chodat sees it, this attitude is consistent with the secular resistance to a priori principles and specialist knowledge that is ingrained in the American philosophical tradition (some of us might also be reminded of Susan Sontag’s early manifesto, “Against Interpretation”), but he also shows that this strain has effectively been overshadowed in literary interpretation by the line running from biblical hermeneutics to post-Freudian symbolic readings – a line visible in the Wordsworthian and Emersonian strains that affected Thoreau and William Carlos Williams, treated elsewhere in the present volume, and represented at the end of the volume in a discussion of 9/11 and the representation of death in American culture.

Patrick Vincent’s essay examines the complicated representations, or interpretations, of Switzerland that are connected to Cooper’s definition of a political ideal suitable for the young American Republic and to his conscious – even self-conscious – search for an embodiment of this ideal. The title, “‘Natural Arabesques’: James Fenimore Cooper’s Republican Ideal on the Léman,” suggests Cooper’s interpretive scheme: in the works he wrote after his two Swiss tours, he uneasily recycles an older trope of correspondences between institutions and manners, on the one hand, and natural beauty, on the other. Vincent describes how Cooper projects onto his observation of Switzerland his own political propensities. These give priority to a gentlemanly ideal that would preserve America against the potential excesses of populist democracy. Vincent’s attentive reading of Cooper’s initial reactions to Switzerland and the structuring metaphor of the Léman landscape that recurs in Cooper’s works shows that oligarchic privilege, however, had no place in his ideal for America. Yet, since Cooper failed to find an importable model that combined stable institutions and personal freedom while also excluding inherited class distinction, his strategies of representation betray his growing dilemma and lead to a conservative dénouement in the fiction of *The Headsman*.

François Specq’s essay, “Thoreau’s Flowering of Facts and the Truth of Experience,” analyzes Thoreau’s gradual rejection of idealism and Emerson’s theory of correspondences as illustrated in and performed by his very rich *Journal*. For the younger Thoreau, as for Emerson, natural “facts” were made to serve a “higher” reality. In the context of this volume, we might see Emerson’s transcendent ideal as designed to select the particulars of external

reality and combine them into a meaningful whole. Specq intimately connects Thoreau's distancing from idealism with the literary project incarnated in his *Journal* as Thoreau begins, during the period 1849-1851, to record and study nature as an end in itself and cease cannibalizing the *Journal* for other works. He shows that Thoreau goes against the main currents of his time, for instance in privileging the sensuousness of experience. His stance requires striking a balance between the perception of the material object and acquired knowledge about it, through which both the given natural *res* and the experience of perceiving ultimately acquire new value. Thoreau is thus freed for experiencing particular instances as part of the fluid and timeless immensity of the universe. Specq's discussion demonstrates that Thoreau's sense of the limitations of language is a corollary to his recognition that nature itself cannot be reduced to essences but must always resist our complete understanding.

Robert Rehder's discussion of the poet's relation with the object in "Williams and Moore: Wasps, a Gentian and Real Toads" springs from the poems synecdochally present in the title and then looks back to the paths opened by the work of their predecessors. His explication of two of William Carlos Williams' poems on poetry and two versions of Marianne Moore's "Poetry" reveals opposing attitudes. Williams excludes emotion to concentrate on given things themselves – natural, domestic, human in the instance of "The Poem" – to also make of the poem itself a single object "made of / particulars." Moore's first version of "Poetry" includes the particulars that she would later excise, but still includes aggression and other feelings. Williams' poems can be read as objects that keep pulling towards the realities they represent, whereas the inclusion in Moore's list of "imaginary gardens with real toads in them" suggests her awareness of a process in which imagination always precedes our perception of reality and is then constantly revised by it. Rehder relates these problematics to Wordsworth's grappling with the interaction between the inner and outer world and with the ensuing development of a poetry of heightened consciousness and self-analysis. The larger context includes innovations by others from Scott to Freud that help us understand how forms of representation in 20th-century poetry relate to changes in our ideas of the object and of emotion.

Peter Halter reflects on the tension between what viewers see and do not see, or what they think they may see and what they do not know, when they view a photographic portrait. "Portraits of Women in Early 20th-Century American Photography" places portraits taken by Stieglitz in the 1920s and 1930s at the center of the discussion, while situating them in a broader

framework of photographic genres. Thus Halter explores features of public versus social portraits and formal versus informal portraits that can sharpen our understanding of how the visible and invisible come together in a portrait. Thus, for instance, the “thereness” represented by objects in a particular milieu in the informal portrait can become part of the meaning of the photograph and point to other experiential realities. Halter also notes that particulars can establish the common connectedness of photographer and sitter to a world they share and signify the photographer’s attitude towards the relationship. For at the heart of any portrait is the problem of the photographer moving in on the subject and potentially threatening his or her intimacy. Not only Stieglitz, but also in a very different way Lange, both point to the ultimate hiddenness of the “other” in the person of the sitter, an “other” who escapes varying degrees of control the photographer may exercise over him or her. Halter shows us how central this condition of representation can be to the viewer’s response.

Mick Gidley, in “Photography by Native Americans: Creation and Revision,” draws on the fact that not only have Native American writers appropriated the colonizers’ language, but they have been attracted to photography, a singularly western medium that has intruded into their culture. Some have used it themselves as a form of historical critique and resistance. Several other contemporary American Indian photographers discussed here have performed revisions of history by including historical photographs of Indians taken by Euro-Americans in composite works of their own. Such works not only reveal the primitivist vision that permeated the colonists’ approach to America’s Native peoples; they also attest to the presence (in Barthes’ sense) of the subjects represented and grant symbolic agency to the Native American photographers themselves. Reflexivity has figured prominently in Native American photography as a way of not only contextualizing the use of the camera in their midst, but also of indexing the role the medium has played. For one of the recurring subjects for Native American photographers is Indian identity itself, and this, as Gidley shows, can be affirmed, multiplied, blurred, problematized by photography, a medium which has too often been seen as merely a relatively “true” rendition of the external world.

Clara Juncker’s “Real Marilyn’s” takes us through a whirlwind of myth-making in selected biographies of Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn’s own seminal *My Story* exhibits not only her self-conceived pre-destination as sex star but also a penchant for pattern-making. Biographers continue her work of revision. The star’s self-figured self-destructive destiny provides the background for others subsequently dissecting the facts surrounding her death. The crea-

tion of the murder story and its conspiratorial overtones is only one way in which Marilyn's body and story have been reinvented and interpreted. Her biographers have used and abused her in notoriously self-serving ways, and Juncker exposes the process by which they have rewritten Marilyn to fit her to their own subliminal or consciously advertised desires and projects. Thus we witness the transformation of whatever "real" Marilyn there may be into a fetish of male/masculine desire, a ploy in a feminist project, a postmodern simulacrum, the heroine in a novel that blends fact as fiction and fiction as fact. In addition, Marilyn's biographers have created a field in which by 1995 there were more than seventy authors vying for a place in the Marilyn market. Juncker's chronological treatment of the biographies sheds light on the changing modes of rereading and rewriting Marilyn and the dialectic between writing from the "realities" of one's time and writing to them.

Martin Heusser provides a perspective on representations that make up American national identity from World War II to the Vietnam War, an instance of fashioning representations in relation to the time. "The War Spangled Banner: Vietnam and the Fabrication of American National Identity" focuses on the uses and abuses of the frontier myth during these decades to show how frontier values were primarily perpetuated – and reified – by Hollywood through Westerns and both government-made and commercial War movies. The heroes in these TV and screen films embodied trivialized versions of "American" values that were assimilated by the post-war generation. Such representations of the frontier myth ironically reveal, however, the violence inherent in the power used against the "other." Heusser's thesis, then, is that the Vietnam War did not bring about a questioning of American national identity, but rather the war was used (and abused) as a signifier for national identity at a time when America's sense of it was already changing. The visions transmitted by Caputo's novel *Rumor of War* and Kubrick's film *Full Metal Jacket* provide a striking confirmation of the malfunctioning of traditional definitions of American identity. The sense of absurdity that pervades these works is the result of the encounter of the soldier protagonists, who went to Vietnam identifying themselves with cowboy heroes, with the reality of violence and death. In other words, it is a response to the discrepancy between film-induced self-representations and lived experience.

In her essay, "Constructing New 'Realities': The Performative Function of Maps in Contemporary Fiction," Christina Ljungberg considers the semiosis of maps included in novels. She sees maps as an aid for novelists to body forth the difficulty of leaping from reality to representation, because maps make more visible the cleft between object and sign. Drawing exam-

ples from three recent novels, she reads what the maps make visible through the methods of mediation they experiment with. Thus, Quinn in Auster's *City of Glass* attempts to force the fusion of signifier and signified by mapping Stillman's walks around the city. In contrast, two Canadian writers make this mediation historically significant. The colonizers' maps included in Wiebe's novel graphically reinforce the other, narrated, vision-version of the subjugation and transformation of the natives' land and ironically underscore the violence this entailed. Van Herk's novel, on the other hand, undoes the indexical function of maps. Her map, like her writing, metamorphoses both the female self and the arctic landscape of Ellesmere Island. She does away with our ordinary understanding of representing space, be it geographical or bodily. We find within the very different questions raised by these novels a typically contemporary self-consciousness about the means and effects of the turn from the world to the text and the construction of identity. Ljungberg shows that the participants are many, from historical actors to narrativized characters, to map-makers and novelists, with the reader at the end of the chain.

Deborah Madsen also analyzes the construction of identity in her "American Exceptionalism and Multiculturalism: Myths and Realities." American national identity has been interpreted as being vexed by a conflict between multiculturalism on the one hand and national exceptionalism on the other. In the aftermath of 9/11, exceptionalism reigned supreme and was cloaked in the rhetoric of the myth of national unity, informed by the value of freedom. Such a transcendent and transhistorical value, however, ignores the kind of freedom that allows for ethnic diversity, a diversity, moreover, that has historically been infringed by the US government's exclusionary policies. The possibility exists nonetheless for marginalized groups to affirm their difference and reconfigure the diversity of ethnic cultures in the language of exceptionalism, and Madsen provides an example of it in Gish Jen's 1996 novel, *Mona in the Promised Land*. What percolates through the novel's comedy is a sampling of attitudes ranging from one that essentializes ethnicity to one that brings Americanness down to the right to choose whatever one wants to be. This right may be trivialized by ethnically marked commodification and consumption. Madsen reads Jen's fiction, nonetheless, as illustrating how the conflict between multiculturalism and exceptionalism may be assuaged in lived experience – by an exceptionalist commitment to the foundational values of freedom and democracy. And she encourages her readers to ponder the vested interests that perpetuate the myth of a conflict between the two.

Marguerite Moritz views America's representation of itself through the lens of TV news. "United We Stand: The Constructed Realities of 9/11" explains how the events of 9/11 were presented to the American public, how their technically sophisticated "packaging" worked and how network journalists were themselves conditioned. Network images and narratives of 9/11 tended to reinforce certain central myths of American identity, promoting the idea of a powerful and righteous country but also the land of the free, exemplified by a free and objective press. Criticism of TV's political and patriotic bias, its dependence on facile human interest stories and the possible traumatizing effect of violent imagery, did not take many weeks to appear. Yet at the same time, the repetitive and predictable form of TV news reassured the public about their tomorrows. Moritz discusses more generally the inherently contradictory demands of objectivity and completeness, on the one hand, and story selection and story writing, on the other. She evokes the internal pressures that create a shared set of beliefs and a common definition of news within the world of professional newscasting. The kind of sympathy and patriotism newsmen had to demonstrate after 9/11 were also the result of inevitable external pressures. These Moritz links with the narrow domestic focus of news broadcast in the US. Her analysis reveals that not only are news events constructed by network professionals, but that, inevitably, network professionals are themselves produced and constructed by contrived self-representation.

Observing the "communal spectacle of death" generated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Boris Vejdovsky examines the representation of death in American culture more generally. "Nine-Eleven-Two-Thousand-And-One: The Morning After and the Melancholy Streets of Manhattan" helpfully reworks the dichotomies of representation versus reality and fiction versus reality to show how the narratives produced by the representation of events – here the representation of the destruction of the World Trade Center and its aftermath – blur the borderlines between fiction and historical fact. Vejdovsky reads the void produced by the destruction of the WTC as a sign of a chasm in US culture, which is one that here as elsewhere operates a melancholy elision of death. For death is, as Emerson noted, that reality that "will not dodge us." It is bodily, individual, singular. Yet, as Goodwin and Bronfen have argued and as Kubrick's *The Shining* shows, death in the US is hypertrophied to the point of becoming a screen. Representations of death screen out its reality and replace it with aestheticized versions of the heroism of the men of the New York Fire Department, for example, thus making it into America's own purloined letter. Death is thus unreadable within the

traditional dichotomy of the real and the fictional. And Vejdovsky, too, invites his readers to ponder their own role in the perpetuation of such dichotomies.

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Beverly Maeder