

## Realisms

In Chapter Six *The Story of Art* was considered as a realist history and to have suffered in its account of later twentieth century art, largely as a consequence of its method. This now provides a convenient comparison. Earlier, the exchange between Gombrich and Goodman was noted, concerning the issue of nature versus convention in which Goodman urged further relativism to Gombrich's views.<sup>126</sup> In fact Goodman's approval of Gombrich's work registers in a number of his books.<sup>127</sup> The suggestion here is really to implement the kind of relativism Goodman advocated and Gombrich tentatively supported, and from which an account of later twentieth century art in particular may benefit.

The preceding chapter has shown how pluralism of interpretation is distinct from metaphysical pluralism of worlds. Similarly, realism may be limited to matters of style, taken as plural or realisms, without implying metaphysical pluralism.<sup>128</sup> For Goodman, stylistic realisms arise in three ways, in ease of use, through habit or preference, in novelty or revelation, and in the factual contrasted with the fictional.<sup>129</sup> Realism is thus relative to scheme or style of depiction, to object and system, rather than optics or illusion. Objections may run that the comfortable or preferred are not always realistic. Standard line illustrations for scientific or educational use tend to typify and simplify object, exclude the particular, incidental and so some realism. Then again, photographs used for personal identification, on files and passports for example, are almost never preferred by or comfortable for at least the bearer, and remote and strange objects such as the surface of the moon or Mars often prompt surprising scale and depth ambiguities, even in the most detailed

<sup>126</sup> Gombrich, 1982, p.284.

<sup>127</sup> Goodman 1976, Goodman, 1978, Goodman, 1984 and Goodman and Elgin, *Reconceptions In Philosophy*, London, 1988.

<sup>128</sup> The distinction between metaphysical and stylistic realism adopted here is made in Elgin, 'What Goodman Leaves Out' *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 25, No 1, Spring, 1991, pp. 89-95.

<sup>129</sup> Goodman, 1984, pp. 126-130.

and 'realistic' of photographs. But in any case, to claim novelty as immediately or ultimately a matter of realism is also to succumb to the aesthetic of the realist.

The so-called realism of a Caravaggio or a Courbet for example, was greeted as a revolt in standards of person and theme or iconography. It was not a revelation how much more realistically persons were depicted, but that such flawed or humble people were depicted in or with such controversial roles or attitudes. Such people were hardly a revelation and realism is not to be confused with mere poverty or modesty. The chiaroscuro of Caravaggio or the coarse facture of Courbet may gain in expressive range for the exercise but neither contributes to nor originates from mere realism or lowliness. Much the same holds for the reception of Impressionism, which was no more understood immediately than as only a more realistic approach to light values or Parisian pastimes, which were then hardly taken as more realistic than other kinds. Equally, the contemporaneous adoption of 'oriental' spatial schemes (oblique or parallel oblique projections) and striking asymmetrical framing or composition, while refreshing, hardly replaced just perspectives, or just replaced anything for very long. Even the work of Michelangelo remained deeply controversial in his day, not because of newly acquired accuracy in musculature, but because of his fixation on a supposed ideal nude at the expense of sacred themes and sentiment. Realism and revelation had very little to do with it. Then again, the striking realism of a Vermeer, in integration of tonal values for surface or texture in perspective, and something akin to a photographic depth of focus, went unnoticed in his lifetime and for some considerable time thereafter. Moreover, the proposed theory of art as dense or circumspective meaning argues against just this easy recognition or decisive revelation and is at least as much supported by history on this score as realist accounts. So novelty has no more to do with realism than idealism, as much to do with confusion and challenge as revelation.

Yet Goodman is surely right that either the old or new may be accorded more realistic, the factual or fictional realistic or not and that the routes of realism are many and varied. But in as much as realism is recognised as a relation of scheme to object and system, some further explanation is perhaps owed. Derivation is suggested. In Chapter Five the difference between art and science was touched upon. Art organises works by styles and while older works cannot be conversely

derived from later ones in the way that improvement in scientific theories accommodates – in so far as theories are true – nevertheless, some derivations for schemes or styles, objects and themes are traced, often to distinguish new ones, and amount in fact to the measures of realism. To the extent that a scheme or style contains another, may conversely derive a lesser one from its elements, a scheme is more realistic. Or, where a scheme contains others but is not contained by them, it is realistic. The commonsense appeal to realism in depiction comes to just this.

A simple line illustration may be taken as less realistic than one equal in all other respects but including tonal values (that is, values of light); greater range of tonal values allows more realism, while colour in greater range improves on tone and line. In as much as object permits this expansion of scheme or scheme admits this expansion of object, the fuller colour scheme is the more realistic, allows converse derivation of tone and line; cannot be derived from them. A similar argument may be made for the converse derivation of projections from perspective, along the lines indicated in chapter three, and thus for the greater realism of perspective. Where successive schemes add to information of the same object, realism amounts to a measure of greater information or accuracy for object. Gombrich argues against truth assigned to depiction generally, only to concede that portraiture of person or place is correct (or true) where scheme correctly understood provides ‘no false information’.<sup>130</sup> Realism as a measure of accuracy is confidently rejected by Goodman with the example of two pictures of supposed equal information, one of reversed perspective and colour, the other normal and so more realistic by familiarity or ease of information rather than accuracy.<sup>131</sup> But again, the hypothetical comparison bears closer scrutiny.

To introduce a scheme of colour and perspective reversal is also to stress a new alignment of the two. The reversal of one does not follow from the reversal of the other. The scheme therefore draws attention to unusual alignments of shape and distance to colour, is difficult to understand not just because of rarity of scheme, but because other information to the normal scheme is ignored or concealed in the reversal. For example treatment of surfaces, textures or contour (sharp or soft) even

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<sup>130</sup> Gombrich, 1960, p. 78.

<sup>131</sup> Goodman, 1976, pp. 35-36.

tonal contrasts for a given part or object, are confused in colour and perspective reversal and crucial symmetries and other alignments to vanishing points are replaced.<sup>132</sup> So an appeal to the same information between schemes does not quite hold, although information in the reversed scheme is nonetheless accurate, and in as much as object is actual or factual, both schemes are realistic. In as much as aspects revealed in the reversed scheme are at the expense of more or more useful aspects in the normal scheme, the reversed scheme is less realistic. To argue that familiarity with the reversed scheme can accommodate the lost or concealed information can as easily argue that the normal scheme will no longer then offer this information (would strictly, no longer be the normal scheme) but rather, an equally confusing contrast, or for simply a reversal of information from respective schemes or of just names for schemes. Difference between schemes maintains difference in information.

However the illustration also shows that accuracy of object now depends on more than one scheme, accuracy of scheme depend either on versions of object or different objects. Realism of scheme cannot thus be measured along a single derivation. Realism and derivation for scheme and object are multiple, allow conflicting schemes for the same object, (as in the normal and reversed examples) or versions of the same object for the same scheme (say, colour and perspective alignment). In so far as derivation is maintained for scheme and object, realism obtains. But as such, realism now becomes necessary yet antithetical to art; faces science and stricter uses as easily as the more circumspect and looser organisation of art. Realism, in so far as it is consistent in derivation, supplies the bottom line for art.<sup>133</sup> Yet information preserved or extended between schemes or styles cannot be complete anymore than synonymy may be absolute. Moreover, information derived between styles still confronts the difference between fact and fiction, sense and

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<sup>132</sup> Similar if simpler reversals obtained either by mirrors or mere inversions of pictures are a common source of comparison for painters, as a way of detecting subtle imbalances or discrepancies to a painting, either in traditional genres, especially portraiture, as well as in abstract work. The abstract works of De Kooning for example were made by working the painting from all four sides and corners, usually when upright, in order to take into account just these differences to the information or composition. The familiar practice of backing away, squinting with tilted head is another way of making similar comparisons.

<sup>133</sup> Under this formulation the line between science and art obviously blurs somewhat, according to strictness and range of derivation for depiction, but does not disturb the basic distinction between digression and progression, indeed better explains the shifts in status of say, antiquated medical or engineering illustrations, where improvements to accuracy may allow new appreciation of the (now less realistic) scheme.

nonsense and begs questions of the difference between fact and category. Pictures of unicorns and Homer Simpson or any young woman and a typical tiger may be realistic as pictures but not as information, as often are neither, or unrealistic as pictures but realistic as information. Derivation to and from fictive and class terms is thus also required of realism, and the irrealist here appeals to Goodman's nominalism.<sup>134</sup>

Very briefly, class and fictive pictures do not depict universal and fictitious objects. As indicated in Chapter Three, they actually depict only a sort of picture, and serve to collect or sort pictures of actual objects, or individuals, so that any such collection contains a unique ordering of individuals, is an 'individual' collection, identified by just one and the same name. Goodman's nominalist construction thus builds only with individuals, only to individuals. Class and fictive pictures basically point to such sortings. The difference between class and fictive pictures lies in the truth or accuracy of the sorting. The typical tiger preserves just key features to all pictures of (actual) tigers, is at least 'nothing but the truth' in sorting relevant schemes and object. The unicorn on the other hand is literally false as a sorting of schemes for horses and horns, although may highlight the realistic scheme in interesting ways in so doing; offer striking (and true or right) metaphor for mutation, anomaly or the unexpected. Sorts of pictures, factual and fictive, denoted by hyphenation as 'tiger-pictures' or 'unicorn-pictures' for example, thus shape the organisation of pictures, their objects and realism. Realism (and idealism) of scheme is tested or tempered by the fictive, while effective factual sorting extends actual object. Realism thus derives from both under this nominalist ontology, but again by no single or fixed route.

Realism, in short, might be called a style with too many variations; conversely, a style, variation with not enough realism. How many realisms to rightly allow among styles, like how many styles to allow an art history, or indeed how much history to allow styles or realisms, depends upon a theory of depiction, given styles and how the history is focussed or framed. No history accommodates all styles; some styles exclude others. Period styles do not apply everywhere nor regional or national styles

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<sup>134</sup> A full nominalist treatment for depiction, maintaining individuality to construction, is the work of another study. For details see Goodman, 1976, pp. 21-26, and Goodman, 1984, pp. 48-53.

hold for all periods, and while personal styles are more consistent in this respect, subdivisions similarly compete for works, between an artist's early, middle and late styles, their Paris, Munich and Rome styles, their mad, bad and sad styles, for example. Moreover, any history of a given style rarely includes its entire works, and any given work is usually grasped by a variety of styles. So history must settle for some styles, some works; trace realism between them to more or less, and to more or less realism. Choice of historical frame may be as much determined by prominence of styles or realisms, as determine them.

An irrealist duly allows multiple right art histories; may either improve upon some, in right grasp of stylistics, accuracy of source, reach of styles, or diverge from them, where other works and styles are rightly included, and so amount to a different rather than better history. Either way, art history is served by a version that is right in construction, true to facts for source. This mix and match of realism and style also suggests a model for the procedure of the artist, in contrast with Gombrich's make and match. And in just this, the difference may not seem to amount to very much: between the artist correcting a style and the artist connecting styles. One corrects realism; the other connects versions. The difference however, is more pronounced firstly in the attitude of this undertaking. For Gombrich, the activity is a fairly clear cut case of problem solving, of preferably a commission, or at least an intention, obvious and available schema, and test results gauged by potent illusion. For Goodman, grasp of style is much less clear cut; is more a matter of practice and feedback, as with the acquisition of language, the artist duly plays by feel, draws on any number of schemas or features for the right circumspection.

The difference grows with the priority the problem solver must assign synonymy of object or content. Style then becomes just ways of showing the same thing. The same thing accurately added to or improved becomes the real thing and the problem solver allows perspective, tonal and colour accuracies to make more realism, to match principles of visual perception and cast rivals as mere versions, as ideal or subjective, expressive or decorative. Yet what can be made or matched is actually severely constrained by a single synonymy. Improvements in the ways of showing the same thing have a way of turning into ways of showing different

things, or the expressive as subjective, emotive or decorative is soon overdone or wrong. The problem solver cannot then quite find the problem much less solve it.

The player, by contrast, has more options. Styles need not share the same object or content, depicted objects may be native to a style, so that style then starts from mere 'statement'. Expression is not necessarily sentiment or subjective, real or ideal, while the literal structure of a depiction, the facture, texture and material sample may be meaningful even though obviously not stating an object or expressing anything other than itself. The player is interested in a right version rather than a 'realistic' one – in additional conditions to the realistic or idealistic, the expressive or stated, objective or subjective, and these rest with the routes of reference rather than the laws of optics. The difference is now considerable. Realism for the player is really a function of the organisation of styles within routes of reference, and is duly multiple and mobile. To re-phrase Gombrich - there really is no such thing as realism; there are only realisms.

A useful contrast is suggested by Gombrich's treatment of the work of Pollock. Pollock's distinctive abstractions are taken as 'the sheer handling of paint regardless of any ulterior motive or purpose'.<sup>135</sup> But this is decidedly at odds with the interpretation of Pollock's work at the time and since. In the case of the example provided in the *Story of Art*, titled *Number 31* (1950) such work is generally understood as offering both literal and metaphorical meaning, of expressing violence, freedom and improvisation, as well as being literally a uniform field, sustained on an imposing scale, rigorously achieved through the novel technique of dripping or flicking of industrial enamels.<sup>136</sup> As noted, Gombrich resists meaning to materials and technique as augmentation of depiction, ostensibly as a consequence of his commitment to principles of visual perception, even when here, clearly an accepted interpretation.<sup>137</sup> But such literal sampling also constitutes realism, and properties sampled in abstraction equally allow and rely upon derivation, upon

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<sup>135</sup> Gombrich, 1995, p. 602.

<sup>136</sup> The work is lavishly reproduced in the sixteenth edition of *The Story of Art*, (1995) even by its own impressive standards, in a double gatefold, all the more curious for the stark interpretation that accompanies it. See Gombrich, 1995, p. 603.

<sup>137</sup> For standard interpretation of Pollock, see Claude Cernuschi, *Jackson Pollock: Meaning and Significance*, New York, 1992. William C. Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* Cambridge/Mass./London, 1983, Irving Sandler, *Abstract Expressionism: The Triumph of American Painting*, New York/London/Washington, 1970.

precedents and versions. Whether we accept that dripping sets new standards in application of paint, or exemplifies a profound and 'real' quality of paint and painting, depends how it is seen contributing to matters of field composition, freedom, improvisation, scale and so forth. In other words it is a question of rightness of mix in derived realisms.

Pollock's dense, uniform compositions or 'fields' thus stand in comparison with those of Mirō, Masson and Tobey for example, but reject biomorphic shapes, intimacy of scale and a more unitary structure. His work equally compares with the spontaneous and gestural approaches of early Kandinsky, later Klee and contemporaries such as de Kooning, Still or Hoffman but rejects brushstroke and drawing by standard or mere easel-scale means, and more discrete composition. Further derivation arises among the characteristic large-scale work of the New York School, and Pollock's distinctive approach of an unstretched canvas laid upon the floor, and worked from all four sides, contrasts with for example, the work at this time of Newman, Rothko or Kline. Indeed even dripping has its precedents and parallels but the point here is just that it is a mix and match of styles; that derivation is necessarily in a variety of directions and not from any single version of abstraction, or an obvious schema, and that as many are pursued as scope of study allows.

It is Pollock's work that connects these features, or in effect makes them into a single schema. Without his work or preceding it, they share no compelling link. They are not the only versions of abstraction available, nor are they necessarily the most prominent or accepted. Abstraction therefore also comes in many, if any, right versions. With Pollock's work, meaning changes for such features by his combination or connection. The work recasts surrounding styles of abstraction, draws attention to surprising links, to realisms for materials as noted, and so places itself at the centre of this arrangement for a moment; becomes its fullest expression or the most complete of such works. Whether these derivations or influences are the only or most accurate ones for Pollock is of course, a matter of interpretation.

But there is no way to admit all of Pollock's influences; historical derivation is not absolute. To insist that influences must only be direct for example or only those

that the artist acknowledged or demonstrably had knowledge of, is of course also to limit the influence of remaining influences, to deny that some lead to others. The 'direct' influence rules out other than manifest replication by this route, and the whole point of influence. Then again, not all influences are as interesting or important as others. Derived features are interesting in proportion to their source, to preceding and prevailing values within a stylistic framework, but the historian cannot look for or find just any influence or derivation within a given framework. Equally, the historian cannot accept any feature as somehow derived from an accepted style or work, either. No style can be so porous as to absorb all and any features of a work, nor so potent as to project all and any features to works. Derivation must therefore balance the direct against the indirect, the meaningful, if more far-fetched, against the less meaningful, but strictly measured. Practice generally involves a two-way adjustment, some derivations reform style; others adjust work or source. To the extent that works or sources enlarge the stylistic framework while coherence is maintained, the exercise counts as successful.

All the same, there is a fundamental difference between the historian committed to styles before works, and works before styles. The first allows style generous extension, embraces works and a broader source by more indirect derivation, or spirit. Interpretation is for a time or place, personality or people, culture, economy, ideology or faith for example, and sorts works 'top down'. The second allows style much less latitude, demands more direct derivation and priority to material differences for works, interprets by intrinsic or formal means, and builds styles 'bottom up'. Of course it is rare to find an historian wholly committed to just one or the other, but plain to see how easy it is to lean one way or the other, and why Goodman's irrealism, supported by a view of depiction as exemplification, might be bracketed with Gombrich's schema and correction. But the irrealist here is not necessarily or only the formalist, and while the study argues for the replacement of Gombrich's schemas with sampling, irrealism equally supports spirits to styles, for the idealist or ideologue, asks only that they identify consistent stylistic features, although perhaps would only feel right allowing enough to cancel out each others' magic. The point thus remains that one is never enough; that when or where schemas or spirits are taken depends upon the stylistic frame.

To return to the example of Pollock, it is scarcely conceivable to offer a history of abstraction in painting without granting Pollock prominence, and what margin for interpretation this allows is all the more tantalising for this entrenchment. The more versions offered on Pollock, the more latitude they gradually win. Pollock becomes more entrenched, although his standing may yet be diminished in further versions. For example, one might then accept that Pollock must be included in some way, if not quite as big a way. But with this, Pollock then ceases to be such an enticing target. Conversely, such proliferation of versions permits other work or styles to be included. Distribution of versions thus gradually shifts the focus of art history, and distribution and focus of versions may thus enter the irrealist's calculations of rightness here. The irrealist here acknowledges not only multiple right versions for art history, but to some extent where they are too many or too few. In this, method and story are again some distance from *The Story of Art*, schema and correction.

A story of art nevertheless emerges, grants that some styles gain prominence, are influenced by preceding ones, variously influence others. An irrealist art history, as the name suggests, does not quite ignore realism but rather allows that this collects and connects styles, is traced in various directions and tailors numbers to the scope or frame of a history. This historical method will presently be tested against painting in the second half of the twentieth century. However painting and period present special issues and attention must next be given to painting and the materials of depiction. Just as irrealism allows realisms to styles, pluralism is also extended to materials and the practices of painting.