



## **ESSE-8: LONDON 2006**

**29 August – 2 September 2006**

### **S58. The Relevance of the Real: Contemporary Reflections**

**Thursday 31 August: 2.30-4.30pm & 5.00-7.00pm**

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The concept of reality, like, indeed, that of referentiality, is crucial in the discourse of modernity, whether in its “classic” variants (Habermas, Blumenberg, Lowith), or in more recent approaches (Cascardi, 1992, Venn, 2000, Jameson, 2002). It is also basic in any understanding of literature as mimesis, a stance whose long-lived tradition extends all the way from Plato to Baudrillard. With the advent of modern technology, as part of a long process inaugurated by the 17th-century “crise de la conscience”, reality has undergone radical changes in its “reflections” in literature and the arts, as, in fact, in its everyday unfolding. Reflections on such phenomena are in themselves forms of reality-effect and raise fundamental questions of axiological, epistemological, and, obviously, ontological relevance.

This seminar aims at singling out strategies of reality reflection / deflection / conflation and appended manoeuvres, with samples from various works used as illustrations in our debate.

#### **Session 1**

##### **Recreating Aura: On the Uses of Visuality in Benjamin’s Artwork Essay and John Banville’s *The Sea***

Julika Griem (University of Darmstadt)

There exists a productive tension in Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” between the essay’s political teleology and its poetic texture of the essay, which tension materialises in the key concept of aura and its notoriously misty connotation. Benjamin celebrates the destruction of aura as a liberating move from religion to politics, but there is also a sense of mourning the decay of auratic uniqueness, authenticity and presence. This paper reads the essay’s paradoxical structure differently, accounting for Benjamin’s ongoing fascination I suggest that he invites us to no longer mourn a lost aura but to explore newly auratic ways of writing about the reality of loss.

##### **Jouissance and Reality Checks: Creative Tensions in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement***

Hedwig Schwall (Catholic University of Leuven)

In *Atonement* McEwan highlights the ironies involved in writing and the discrepancies inherent in this praxis. The narrative hinges on the relation between the two dimensions Freud distinguished in the psychic system: the primary system which subjects perception to the unconscious (Lacan's principle of jouissance) and the secondary system which is ruled by reality checks. The tension between jouissance and reality tests lie at the heart of the protagonist's very definition of literature as the art of verisimilitude. An analysis of this concept, which contains tensions between truth and likeness, the constative and the performative, will further reveal how "discontent" is the very motor of the writer's production which is celebrated as one of civilisation's most subtle achievements.

### **A Sense of the Real through Guilt, Remorse and Atonement: from Awfulness to Aura in Ian McEwan**

Eduard Vlad (Ovidius University Constanta, Romania)

McEwan's novel *Atonement* is set in the same decade in which Freud's 'Civilization and Its Discontents' and Benjamin's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' were published. They are points of departure, ominously anticipating the terrible effects that instinctual aggression and its large-scale expression, war, upon perceptions of art and a sense of reality and identity. McEwan's fiction prominently features glimpses of the dark side of the human self, whereas *Atonement* accommodates the power of artistic sublimation as a response to fatal flaw, guilt and remorse. It is a masterful tour de force both undermining and supporting a sense of the real, fusing and confusing epistemological and ontological parameters, the kind of strategy that McHale considers marks the change of dominant, the transition from modernist to postmodernist fiction.

### **The Real, Imaginary and the Possible in Robert Coover's Short Stories (*A Child Again*, 2005)**

Jaroslav Kušnír (University of Prešov)

In his "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin points out a difference between the past and present forms of art, a different nature of art in the age of "mechanical reproduction" as well as a status of the original and a copy in the modern times. In their literary works, many contemporary postmodern and experimental authors treat the relationship between the original and a copy and the way a mass reproduction of popular culture in media blurs a difference between reality and its mediated and simplified image thus producing an alternative, virtual and manipulated perception of the physical reality. In his short stories and novels, Robert Coover often parodies popular literary genres in which the real, the imaginary, and fantastic overlap. With this narrative strategy, he does not point out only a consumerist character of contemporary culture, but also a changed status of arts in the age of new sensibility influenced by mass media, speed, new technologies (Sontag) and virtual reality. In my paper, (seen in the context of the theory of possible worlds as applied in literary theory), I will analyze Coover's depiction of different versions of "reality" (Benjamin Harshaw Hrushovski, Lubomír Doležel, Ruth Ronen) as manifested in some of his short stories from the collection *A Child Again*; a relationship between the "actual" and "fictional" realities and the role of parody of popular literary genres (fairy tales and their Disney film versions) in Coover's depiction of the character of contemporary consumerist culture, a

relationship between the original and a copy, and between the past and contemporary forms of art.

## **Session 2**

### **Meta-Realism in the Postmillennial Moment**

Philip Tew (Brunel University)

This paper explores the possibilities of a critique of transcendent aspects of reality, situated in a range of philosophies as a supplementary quality. Theoreticians have labelled identified: chiasm, difference, intuition, impossibility, chronotope, trans-linguistics, and according to Ernst Cassirer with an innate continuity of being underpinning all of them. These represent precursory moments in their unification as meta-realist critique. This conjoins language with nature, an epistemic sense, but as evolutionary and instinctual. Meta-realism conveys an overriding sense of the world as a kind of expanded reality, one open to certain thematic and theoretical principles that comprehend fully the mythopoeic origins of language.

### **The Relevance of the Real; the “Real” or Reality; or, what is “Real” actually?**

María Jesús Perea Villena (University of Granada)

The paper explores the possibility in semiotics to decode in a meaningful way a meaningless outer world, gives us the chance, probably the obligation, to be suspicious of any meaningful so-called “reality” which our own cognition and senses perceive from our particular restricted knowledge of the world and ourselves. The “World” is not something which, in general, appears to us in a certain way which we can easily call “reality” or “the real”. Perhaps our understanding and approaches towards “the real”, a desire or actual necessity, or rather the evidence of the cognitive and psychological parameters reflected in our restricted approach towards “reality” and assumed relevance of “the real”, if any “real” ever existed?

### **to be confirmed**

Mihaela Irimia (University of Bucharest)

### **How Real is the Real? The Fact-Fiction Game in Dickens’s Hard Times**

Adina Ciugureanu (Ovidius University Constanta, Romania)

The nineteenth century novel, generally labelled “realist”, is described in Marxist criticism as drawing on and mirroring “the reality of the age”. The question regarding the intrusion of the real (the Preston strike) in the fictional world of *Hard Times* produced contradictory critical views both among Dickens’s contemporaries and in more recent criticism. Confronted with this issue, Dickens denied any such factual inspiration, hard to believe given his letters and articles concerned with the strike when the novel was in progress. Starting from such hard evidence based upon the harsh reality of the workers’ strike, this paper will compare and contrast passages from the novel with excerpts from his other writings and the novel’s reception in various reviews so as to analyze the relationship between reality and fantasy in all three kinds of Dickensian discourse.