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Vocality in Contemporary Realism

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Vocality in Contemporary Realism

- 1 ,Realism‘ is a term that stirs up emotions among critics and readers alike. It is not just its polysemy (Weidhase/Kauffmann 2007: 628) that can pose a challenge, but also the aesthetic and ideological battlefronts surrounding it. The term, originally used to describe a principle of Scholastic philosophy, is now mainly known as period distinction for a literary and artistic style that became prominent in the late nineteenth century. Beyond this, it can also serve to describe a general poetic principle of representation (sometimes dedicated to a literal interpretation of *mimesis*). Staunch proponents of Realist works have turned it into an ideological rallying cry whereas their opponents use it for aesthetic disparagement (Herrman 2008: 608f.). Most recently, Pop-Culture critic Moritz Baßler bemoaned the wide-spread use and enthusiastic reception of what he dismisses as mediocracy in the ,Popular Realism‘ of contemporary German and American literature. He is adamant that the tendency to cater to mainstream values and stylistically limited notions of literariness reinforces simplistic expectations which maintain that human suffering or major societal problems can be adequately addressed without reflecting the implications on linguistic style or narrative complexity. He concludes by arguing that Pop Literature is an aesthetically much more viable alternative (Baßler 2021). In the context of this debate about the viability of Realism, this essay does not contest Baßler’s critique so much as amend it.
- 2 Realism in contemporary literature comes in many forms, and there are those Realist narratives that do achieve aesthetic complexity and societal relevance, even if this cannot be said for all. In placing contemporary approaches to Realism within the context of the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, I want to offer an understanding that goes beyond Realism as it originated in the nineteenth century. To make this point, I juxtapose the narrative styles of the Turkish Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk and the award-winning Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, two world-renowned, prolific contemporary novelists whose books achieved commercial success, but also received ample critical acclaim. These two texts, so I contend, offer complementary perspectives on how realistic modes of representation can contribute to a viable contemporary aesthetics of Realist literature. I contrast Pamuk’s theorems on Realism presented in his 2009 Norton Lectures at Harvard University with Atwood’s 2016 novel *Hag-Seed* to point to a need to overcome the primacy of the visual in Realism as inherited from the nineteenth century. While Pamuk elaborates on aspects of visuality in a Realism based on seeing with the eyes of others, Atwood’s novel practices a Realism that is based on hearing other voices and speaking in different ways. This gives us good reason, so I argue, to elevate the significance of vocality in our understanding of Realism as it models how voices and modes of speaking intersect to represent experiences of reality. Rancière’s notion of the *distribution of the sensible* serves to outline the larger significance of such an understanding of Realism, an understanding that equally takes into consideration forms of visibility along with modes of speaking and that casts them as political insofar as they provide interventions in societal discourses. What my argument shares with Baßler’s is a want of literature that reflects on its own constructiveness. Both Pamuk’s endorsement of Realist writings and the choices Atwood made in her prose highlight the staging of experiences as key narrative strategy. In exhibiting perspectives and perceptions as singular experiences and in drawing attention to the performative nature of the Realist text, these two examples

read together point to a viable form of contemporary Realism, one that pays tribute to the complexity of sense perceptions beyond the visual, that exhibits its own constructiveness, and that offers interventions in what is commonly seen and commonly heard within shared public discourses.

1. On Representing the Invisible, Intangible, and Inaudible

- 3 In his explorative essay *Mute Speech* (Rancière 2011), first published in 1998, Jacques Rancière, takes us back to the age of Romanticism, specifically Victor Hugo and his 1831 novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (although Rancière insists on calling it a poem and not a novel). He lauds Hugo's text as a landmark that greatly promoted the shift to a then-novel, non-Aristotelian poetics of expression. What makes the narrative so remarkable for Rancière is precisely what Hugo's contemporary critics bemoaned and despised about it: his style which makes the stones of the cathedral speak. Hugo's text „stages its characters as figures drawn from the stone and the meaning it incarnates“ (ebd.: 43). The cathedral of stone turns into a cathedral of words, so he insists, which is far more than an architectural model, it is a „scriptural model“ (ebd.: 53) pointing to a new paradigm of what literature is and can do. Rancière marvels at how Hugo's writing makes the mute material speak, gives voice to stones, carves characters out of inanimate material, and thus demonstrates the very principle of expressive poeticity that is rooted in „each particular language's power of incarnation“ (ebd.: 54). In return, so he contends, it also opens the possibility of muteness and petrification in poetry as later practiced by writers like Stephan Mallarmé. This leaves behind the notion of literature as representation in the Aristotelian tradition. This principle, so Rancière argues, is a new way of engaging with and in literature, one that by far transcends Hugo's particular style or the Romantic art movement he was part of. In this new paradigm, „the poet is the one who speaks the poeticity of things“, and this may very well be „the Homeric poet as described by Hegel who expresses the poeticity of a collective way of life“ as much as „the Proustian novelist who deciphers the hieroglyphs of the book printed within him“ (ebd.: 61). In this fashion, Rancière challenges the primacy of mimetic representation and adamantly insists on literature's power to give words, i.e. to find expression from that which is hidden, unheard, mute, concealed, or even inanimate.
- 4 I want to follow this notion of poeticity and foreground the poetic capacity for giving voice to other people, other things, or other creatures, real or imaginary. Rancière casts literature as a mode of deciphering the hieroglyphs within someone or something, and this needs to be understood within the larger context of Rancière's socio-political theory. For him, art, any type of art really, contributes to the „distribution of the sensible“, and this is precisely what makes literature political. He defines politics as „delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise“ (Rancière 2004: 13), in other words, it is constituted of all that can be seen and all that be heard within the public discourses of a community. Aesthetics and politics are thus no longer categorically different or for the most part mutually exclusively types of discourses. Within the distribution of the sensible, art and politics are both factors contributing to the larger system. Each creating conditions for and eliciting responses from the other. What makes literature politically relevant is its capacity to give voice and make visible, as well as to distribute these voices and perspectives widely among readers. Rancière is adamant that „the politics of literature are not the politics of the writers“ and that we should not understand the political exclusively or even primarily as „their personal engagement in the political or social battles of their times“ (Rancière 2007: 11, translation and emphasis G.H.). It is important to note that Rancière's concept of giving voice is not the same as for example, Gayatri Spivak's question „Can the Subaltern Speak?“ (Spivak 1988). The postcolonial project of giving voice to those who have long been unable to make their interests and perspectives heard and

thereby bringing awareness to historical injustice, is, of course, a critically important and worthy cause, however, this type of engagement does not constitute the dominant mode in which literature can or should be political according to Rancière. When Rancière speaks of the politics of literature he refers to the way in which „literature as literature intervenes in the partition of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise“ and he highlights literature’s capacity to „intervene in this relation between the practice, the forms of visibility and of modes of speaking which divide one or several communal worlds“ (Rancière 2007: 12).

- 5 Against the background of this theoretical canvas, I want to approach the question of what literary Realism means for contemporary literature and what it can accomplish. To examine contemporary practices of Realist writings I am consulting texts by the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk (born 1952) and the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood (born 1939). They provide excellent examples for employing this particular literary capacity – to decipher the hieroglyphs within the Other – and their texts offer us viable models for interventions in common forms of visibility as well as common modes of speaking. Pamuk’s lectures demonstrate that the nineteenth-century paradigm of representation as visual representation continues to be highly relevant in contemporary Realist practices, however not as *mimesis* in the Aristotelian tradition. Long before Jacques Rancière, Wolfgang Iser had alerted us that „there can be no representation without performance“ (Iser 1993: 281) and suggested to think of representation as „phantasmatic figuration“ which serves, so he contended, „as means of staging that gives appearance to something that by nature is intangible“ (ibid.: 296). My argument here is that Rancière’s phrasing of „forms of visibility“ needs to be understood as means for rendering both the tangible and the intangible perceptible and I will use Pamuk’s commentary on his literary Realism to illustrate this. With the help of my second example, a novel by Margaret Atwood, I will then proceed to show how Rancière’s phrase „modes of speaking“ similarly can entail giving voice both to the audible and to the inaudible. In either example, aspects of performance and staging are critical to their implicit theorems of what Realism can be and how it can be accomplished.

2. Representing Visual Experiences of Reality

- 6 „What takes place in our mind, in our soul, when we read a novel?“ (Pamuk 2010: 4–5) This is the question that Orhan Pamuk asked himself and his audience at Harvard University when he delivered his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures in 2009. Pamuk, Turkey’s best-known novelist and Nobel Laureate, does not intend to engage in religious debate, much rather the question is a springboard that enables him to dive into a thorough self-inspection of his experiences with and in literature. He speaks of reading other authors and of aspirations he harbors for readers of his own novels and thus embarks on an introspective journey. He tells his audience about a time in his life when he read voraciously, staging, as it were, his former reading personas for the purpose of self-reflection. What he enjoys most is how books, especially novels, stimulate his visual imagination. He compares reading to encountering paintings, photographs, or drawings in a museum, nodding to Horace’s famous formulation „ut pictura poiesis“, as in painting so in poetry (Pamuk 2010: 95). Similarly to Horace, Pamuk likens the pleasure of reading to the pleasure one can get from those pictures that avail themselves to a detailed study of visual effects and as such invite readers to pay close attention to light, colors, perspective, and atmosphere in a text.
- 7 It comes as no surprise that Pamuk evokes authors of grand Realist literature like Stendhal, Leon Tolstoy, Henry James, or Marcel Proust. He revels with apparent joy in the memories of the lavish visuality in *Anna Karenina* or *The Red and the Black*. He literally *re-views* literary atmospheres, perspectives, and landscapes.

Seeing with Anna Karenina's eyes showed him facets of life in 1870s Russia, but more importantly, it enabled him to relate to the clouded vision of a distracted and troubled mind and to empathize with her predicament. „What Anna Karenina felt on the train is so similar yet at the same time so different from our own experience that it has the ability to enchant us“ (ebd.: 46), he explains. Literature's capacity to enchant stems, according to Pamuk, from a mixture of realistic and imaginary elements which allows readers to oscillate between a naive and a sentimental state of mind, between „times we believe the fictional world to be actual“ and those when we are aware of its fictionality. He insists that there cannot be such thing as a writer's „perfect mirror“ for portraying reality, but that „every reader [...] chooses a mirror according to his or her taste.“ (ebd.: 48)

- 8 This capacity to trigger a reader's empathy is his personal litmus test for the quality of literature and has long been his leading goal in writing novels. For him, a good novel is aesthetically and politically relevant when it compels its readers to exercise compassion, to think beyond the confines of their own lives and routines, and to expose themselves with wonder to the complexities of the human spirit. Not unlike Rancière, he states: „The art of the novel becomes political not when the author expresses political views, but when we make an effort to understand someone who is different from us in terms of culture, class, gender“ (ebd.: 69). Not the representation of an external reality matters, but the mode of how the visible is experienced, what even becomes visible to a certain individual of a certain standing, in a particular place, during a particular time, and what remains invisible.
- 9 While I appreciate and relate to Pamuk's poetics of the novel, it still seems incomplete to me. When I activate my memory of the reading states of mind that I enjoyed as well as those that irritated me, I do not, unlike Pamuk, see pictures of rooms, people, or landscapes. When I think back to past readings, I start hearing fragments of conversations. My reading memory registers not so much what I see in my mind's eye, but more so what I hear with my inner ear. Phrases, commentary, or compelling characters and their dialogues float through my mind, and I often recall my inner responses to them. Like Pamuk, reading is for me an act of listening in and conversing with other minds, but unlike Pamuk, my pleasure of the text is neither the elation of a museum patron nor the rapture of a movie spectator, but the exhilaration of a conversationalist. So, when I think of Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible, modes of speaking as well of silence or noise are for me personally more important than the forms of visibility. I contend that literature's capacity to incarnate does not just give shape and provide perspectives, but it entails giving voice and intervening in modes of speaking, that is in ways of being vocal or remaining silent, just as Rancière elaborated in *Mute Speech*.

3. Representing Auditory Experiences of Reality

- 10 Aspects of an auditory dimension of reality play a central role in Margaret Atwood's 2016 novel *Hag-seed*, a critically acclaimed retelling of Shakespeare's drama *The Tempest* (Lanier 2018; Smith 2017; Muñoz-Valdivieso 2016). This is a novel about actual and virtual prisons, it is about material as well as mental limitations and about ways to overcome them. Set in a Canadian correctional facility, it tells the story of Felix Duke, an ostracized former theater director now turned prison coach, who teaches inmates literacy skills with the help of Shakespearean plays. All along, two issues hold Felix mentally and emotionally captive: He cannot come to terms with the loss of his daughter Miranda, whose ghost haunts his imagination so persistently that he regularly talks to her; and what is more, he is possessed by an intense loathing of the individuals who abruptly terminated his former tenure at the theater. Then there are the prisoners who, of

course, long for release from prison, but also seek to break free from the sheer monotony of prison life. The plot culminates in a prison performance of *The Tempest* which turns out to be liberating in several ways. As Paul Zajac puts it, the Shakespeare play provides the occasion to relive and work through traumatic experiences (Zajac 2020: 324).

- 11 This novel, so I contend, demonstrates how highly subjective, intensely personal realities co-exist and that these find their expression not just visually, but more so vocally. Of course, one may laude Atwood's novel for its depictions and negotiations of spaces. The novel speaks eloquently – and scholars pointed this out – of the reality of imprisonment, of prisoner's daily lives, of confined spaces and trauma (Jayendran 2020, Zajac 2020), of humiliating security protocols, of the lowly status of those employed to work for prisons, as well as of theaters and of the sad reality of funding cuts, limited resources, and cut-throat competition. More important to me is how the novel speaks to the powerful impact and representational potential of distinct modes of speaking, thus offering us a commentary on the potential of literature in general.
- 12 Take for example, the intervention with Shakespearean curses. Harsh and often abusive language is part of the reality of prison life, and as the novel reminds us, that is in large part due to harsh and abusive experiences inmates made throughout their lives. Atwood points to this mode of speaking neither by imitation nor by moral repudiation, but by substitution. Among the first and foremost rules for prisoners who participate in Felix's literacy program is that they learn to spell and to memorize the curse words used in the specific Shakespeare drama they are rehearsing. The novel's title, *Hag-seed*, is one of them, but there are also: „Born to be hanged. A pox o'your throat. Bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog“, and the list goes on for an entire page (Atwood 2016: 92–93). During rehearsals, prisoners are expected to limit their cursing to phrases from this list, violations are penalized in a points-for-cigarettes-system (ebd.: 90). The effect is comical, but also revealing. It is one of several ways in which Felix as he makes explicit, „conjures up demons in order to exorcise them“ (ebd.: 79). In defamiliarizing profanity, much of the abusive force behind it is diluted, and instead, makes room for an awareness of profanity's origins, both historically and biographically. The novel draws attention to this particular modality of speech as an expression of pain, not necessarily immediate physical pain, but more so sustained or repeatedly felt emotional pain.
- 13 Modes of speaking are central to the novel because it is deeply concerned with drama, and not just one, but several types of theatrical play. In addition to the prisoner's performance of *The Tempest*, it mixes in memories of Felix's previous work as theatre director as well as elaborately staged conversations that only occur in Felix's mind. In this way, the reader becomes witness to a father's difficult and prolonged mourning. Felix conjures up entirely plausible interactions and even intergenerational conflicts in imaginary conversations with his daughter who passed away at the age of three (ebd.: 164). The first time when Felix hears his deceased daughter sing, he realizes that what started as „wistful daydreaming to the half-belief that she was still there with him, only invisible“ (ebd.: 45) had changed profoundly: „He didn't daydream it. [...] It wasn't one of his whimsical yet despairing fabrications. He actually heard a voice“ (ebd.: 47). The daughter's presence is primarily a vocal presence from the onset on. From this moment, Felix continues to interact with a make-believe incarnation of a growing and developing daughter, observes her grow, homeschools her, reads out books from the local library to her, and plays chess with her. Contrary to his fatherly worries that he is isolating his daughter, the reader soon understand that is it Felix who is held captive by his guilt inside his own inner theater. This is a clever commentary on the father-daughter relation in Shakespeare's drama, but it reveals his mind to be a stage-turned-prison just as his workplace is a prison-turned-stage. On this mental stage, we find an excellent example for literature's power to incarnate and give voice as theorized by Rancière.

- 14 To understand how this can be a form of intervention, the term *catharsis* comes into focus, but again not exactly in the Aristotelean meaning as emotional „cleansing“ or „purification“ of the audience (Janko 1987: 200). Inwardly, Felix claims *catharsis* as goal of his pedagogy and course design (ebd.: 80), however, it is not limited to his intentional stewardship. I suggest understanding *catharsis* in this novel as intervention between the three levels of drama which Atwood seamlessly interweaves in one consciousness: Shakespeare’s play, the prison performance with the added revenge plot, and lastly, the broodings of a lonely, guilt-ridden father who harbors a behemoth of a grudge against his former coworkers. What makes the prison performance of *The Tempest* ultimately so powerful and liberating is the fact, that these three different modes of telling a similar story all intersect in one place and at one time. Felix manages to invite his former colleagues from the theater as audience members and imagines his daughter Miranda to support the actor who plays Ariel, the spirit. Through trickery and technological manipulations, Felix then succeeds in intimidating his former colleagues so much so that they ultimately confess to wrongdoing during Felix’s firing as director and even commit to using their political leverage to secure funding for the prison and to improve the conditions for the inmates. At the end of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, the main character, Prospero, releases the people he held captive on the island, releases his daughter Miranda from his care into marriage with Ferdinand, and releases Ariel, the weather spirit he controlled, from his duties, such that, in closing, he can ask the audience in return, „Let your indulgence set me free“ (Shakespeare 2016 [1623]: 84). Similarly, at a key point in Atwood’s novel, Felix makes peace with his former coworkers and releases his make-believe daughter in order to free himself from the captivity that he created for himself (Jayendran 2020: 15). The novel enacts, as it were, a metatheatrical unity of several dramas, thereby undermining the possibility of unity action, unity of time, and unity of place on the level of the dramatic plots. Each plot is always also commentary on the other, advances, if only as a possibility, the other stories. The diegesis of the novel consists of layered realities that reference one another. *Catharsis* occurs in the interaction and performance of all three dimensions of drama and results in a purge of emotional bonds for the characters.
- 15 In its modelling of a diegetic world, the novel foregrounds on a metafictional level how different ways of speaking shape such layers of reality. In interweaving historically different styles of profanity and in showing how an inner voice gives presence to a deceased person, the novel provides realistic representations of emotions. In fact, it is precisely its Realism that makes the novel so compelling. The inmates’ inevitable desire to curse, to bellow out their deep-seated dissatisfaction with each other, the prison they live in, and life in general, is entirely convincing and just as perfectly plausible as the elaborate parallel reality that a grieving father sustains over many years due to his inability to let go and accept the loss of his daughter. This aspect of reality where language, mind, emotions, psyche, and environment intersect cannot be described visually. This is an auditive reality which the novel constructs by layering several different modes of speaking on top of each other with the result that voices acquire psychological, emotional, and historical depth. This auditive reality includes both the audible and inaudible, or to be more precise, it shows how these terms are not mutually exclusive. What is audible to one, may be entirely inaudible to another, yet is its real.
- 16 Such a Realism of voices and ways of speaking that Atwood’s novel so elegantly performs must be understood, at least in part, as meta-fictional commentary. Just as Pamuk stages his own reading self to argue that Realism in literature stages and makes accessible ways of seeing, the novel *Hag-Seed* stages acts of staging and thus demonstrates how literature’s ways of voicing and speaking are pivotal in representing different experiences of reality. In this sense, the two texts which are from different genres and were

conceived entirely independently of each other, are complimentary and, taken together, provide a wholistic perspective on how Realism can be used to intervene in the distribution of the sensible. What Pamuk argues and what Atwood demonstrates is that literature has the capacity to make subjective, idiosyncratic *modes* of seeing and speaking accessible to its audiences. Their implied notions of Realism are not tied to the representation of a stable and unquestionable Reality (with a capital R), but by placing the focus on *staged* experiences of possible realities, the modality and subjectivity of perception comes into focus, as it is pre-conditioned by psychological, historical, social, economic, or political factors. It is in this awareness for the modality of perceptions that these two texts complement each other and exemplify Rancière's wide-spanning notion of the politics of literature.

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Zusammenfassung

Indem hier aktuelle Herangehensweisen an den Realismus in den Kontext der Theorie Jacques Rancières gestellt werden, antwortet dieser Beitrag auf eine Realismuskritik und bietet ein Verständnis an, das über den Realismusbegriff des 19. Jahrhundert hinausgeht. Texte des türkischen Nobelpreisträgers Orhan Pamuk und der kanadischen Schriftstellerin Margaret Atwood dienen als Beispiele, um zu argumentieren, dass diese beiden Schriftsteller komplementäre Perspektiven darauf anbieten, wie realistische Darstellungsverfahren zu einer tragfähigen, aktuellen Ästhetik des literarischen Realismus beitragen können. Hier wird umrissen, wie das Primat des Visuellen überwunden werden sollte, und die Vokalität als eine zusätzliche Komponente in einer gegenwärtigen Realismustheorie betont. Das Argument lautet, dass der Impuls, andere Stimmen zu repräsentieren, andere Sprechweisen (und damit auch andere Denkweisen) nachzuahmen, und gerade auch das hörbar zu machen, was nicht gesehen werden kann, elementar für einen Realismus des 21. Jahrhundert ist und auch deutlich über das etablierte ethische Unterfangen hinausgeht, historische Ungerechtigkeiten zur Sprache zu bringen

Abstract

In placing contemporary approaches to Realism within the context of the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, this essay responds to a critique of Realist writings and offers an understanding that goes beyond Realism as it originated in the nineteenth century. Citing examples by the Turkish Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk and the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, the essay argues that these two writers offer complementary perspectives on how realistic modes of representation can contribute to a viable contemporary aesthetics of Literary Realism. It points to a need to overcome the primacy of the visual and thus highlights vocality as an additional component in a contemporary theory of Realism. It argues that this impulse to represent other voices, to imitate other ways of speaking (and thereby thinking), and to make heard precisely that which cannot be seen, is critical to Realist literature in the twentyfirst century and goes beyond the well-established ethical commitment to addressing historical injustices.

Keywords: vocality, realism, Contemporary Realism

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