

# Many representational artistic practices have claimed to involve 'realism'. Illustrate and discuss some of the diverse ways in which 'reality' can be represented.

By Roderick Munday

## Introduction

There is a story about a man confronting Picasso. “Why don’t you paint things realistically,” the man said. “I do,” Picasso replied, “every painting, no matter how strange is a version of the truth.” At this the man reached into his pocket and pulled out a photograph of his wife.

“Can you paint my wife realistically like this?”

“Is that really what she looks like?”

“Yes,” said the man.

“Then she must be very flat,” said Picasso, “and quite small.” (Sagan 1990, 101/102)

This, no doubt apocryphal, story illustrates that visual codes can become invisible with habitual exposure. As Charles Pierce remarked, “in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears” (Chandler 2002, 61) It is the habit of our culture to view realistic painting and photographs as a “window on the world”--the Latin word *perspectiva* literally means seeing through. (Panofsky 1991, 27) Historically, paintings that were the most faithful and accomplished in their representation, were also the most highly valued.

But what is realism in art, and what is the ‘reality’ that it claims to depict? Given that there have been a great many ‘realities,’ depicted over time and across cultures, do we assume--as is often the case--that they are staging posts of some great teleological quest for fidelity in art, or could different cultures have possessed equally valid, equally stable and equally self-consistent views of reality, that just happen to be different from our own?

## What is real?

There are two competing philosophical camps that attempt to answer the question, what is real? The first, the *Objectivists*, state that reality exists in the world *a priori* to our perception of it. The second, the *Idealists*, state that the world--if it exists at all--is entirely mediated by our perceptions.

Both these camps are in agreement that art represents reality. Where they disagree is in their claims for the ontological status of the representation. The objectivists, broadly speaking, see art as a kind of mirror held up to reality, a first generation copy of the world. Idealists on the other hand turn the mirror in on themselves; arguing that if human perception creates reality, then art is really the representation of that perception.

## Looking without prejudice

For the purposes of this essay, I will focus primarily on technical realism as opposed to realistic subject matter. But firstly a point that needs to be made is that not all art is successful at producing a realistic depiction of its subject, no matter how objective its intentions are. For instance, children's art is judged to be naïve --and while often charming—lacks the technical command of form and line seen in the work of the practised artist. *A propos*, it has often been assumed that so-called 'primitive' artists have a child-like (i.e. poor) command of technique, which is symptomatic of their undeveloped psyches. But as



*Figure 1*

Margaret A Hagen points out, this line of reasoning extends from nothing more than ignorance and prejudice. Moreover it “would condemn all the un-artistic... modern Western adults to a very disconcerting developmental level.” (Hagen 1986, 287)

## What creates realism in art?



*Figure 2*

If we see a stick drawing, we can tell that it is the representation of a person; from the information in a line drawing, we may even be able to recognise a particular person. But a picture will not strike us as realistic unless it has shading. This is for the obvious reason that there are no lines in nature only light and shade. With the possible exception of chiaroscuro, a line drawing is generally considered to be more stylised than a shaded drawing (style being a technique that calls attention to itself). However, as Daniel Chandler notes, “the mental schemata involved in visual recognition may be closer to the stereotypical simplicity of cartoon images” (Chandler 2002, 61) in other words, we may judge a shaded picture to be more realistic, even if it takes our brains slightly longer to work out what we are seeing.

## Prehistoric Art

It is a widely held speculation that the first art was a form of magic. Frazer writes in *The Golden Bough*, the first principle of magic is “like resembles like. [By] making a faithful copy...the magician can in some sense control the original.” (Frazer 1974, 14) Traces of that antique power linger in the modern psyche, as Freud attested: “everything which now strikes us as uncanny fulfils the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression.” (Freud 1990, 363)

Susan Sontag, Walter Benjamin, E.H. Gombrich and others, all subscribe to the theory that primordial art was a form of magic. To be able to draw an animal is in some sense to possess it and gain mastery over it, and it is thought that the hunter-gatherers who created images, like those in the Lascaux caves in France, may have done so for use in rituals.



*Figure 3*

## **Ancient Greece and Rome**

The Roman military commander and author, Pliny, told of a competition between two painters, the first one painted grapes on a vine so realistically that birds flew down and tried to eat them, the second painted a pair of curtains. When the first painter asked that the curtains be drawn so that he may see the painting, the second painter claimed victory for his art, because he had fooled a fellow artist. (Evans 1999, 23).

Ironically, Plato's complaint about art in *The Republic* can be summarised by the fact that you could never open the curtains in Pliny's story. Plato believed that art was mimesis--or imitation—and therefore didn't have any value, either for utility or for truth (what use are painted curtains for shutting out the light?). Plato believed the objects of the real world were themselves merely imperfect copies of 'ideal forms,' found in the transcendental world. (Plato XXXV, vii: 595)

## Medieval Art

The commonly held view of what a medieval painting looks like is probably this.



*Figure 4*

A naïve depiction with no grasp of three dimensional space. It may come as a surprise therefore, that medieval art could also be this:



*Figure 5*

This detail from Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Peace*, appears far more realistic to our modern eyes, especially in its depiction of three-dimensional space. Although the

perspective does look slightly suspect, this is because we are more accustomed to objects being represented from a fix point of view, rather than from the multiple points that Lorenzetti adopts.

Erwin Panofsky explains that medieval perspective is based on a pre-Renaissance conception of curved space, especially noticeable in the extremities of vision. Euclid held this view also (despite being the popular 'inventor' of geometry) he formulated a rule that accounted for differences in the size of otherwise identical objects when perceived over distances, explaining the phenomena as due to differing angles. (Panofsky 1991, 5/36) When an artist adheres to this conception of space the perspective of a painting emanates from a 'vanishing line' rather than a point and the effect is like a herring-bone.

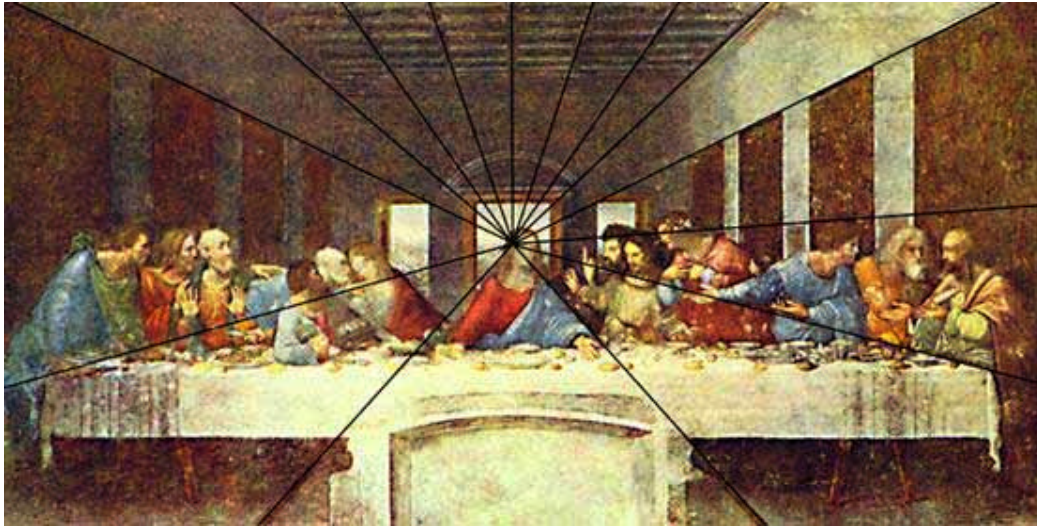


*Figure 6*

## **The Renaissance and perspective**

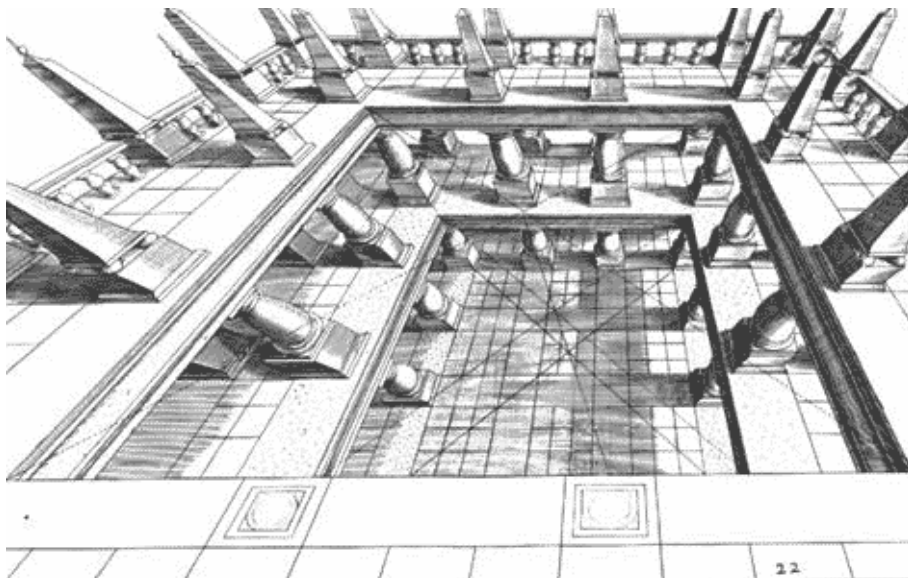
Linear (or mathematical) perspective is said to have been invented by the architect Filippo Brunelleschi in 1425. (Chandler 2002, 183) It is perhaps not so surprising that the invention should have been by an architect rather than an artist, because linear perspective is most visible in the depiction of constructed urban spaces. The new style flourished under the patronage of a rich merchant class in Italy and artists created spectacular perspective views of cities, like Canaletto's paintings of Venice. Paradoxically, as art brought a new realism to the depiction of architecture in art, architects were using their new-found knowledge of perspective to create illusions in real life. For example, the *Piazza San Marco* in Venice is not a regular rectangular but converges at one end, creating a forced perspective that makes it appear larger. (Gregory 1998, 184)

In its most simple form, linear perspective emanates from a central vanishing point situated at eye level. Leonardo's *Last Supper* is a famous example of the technique.



*Figure 7*

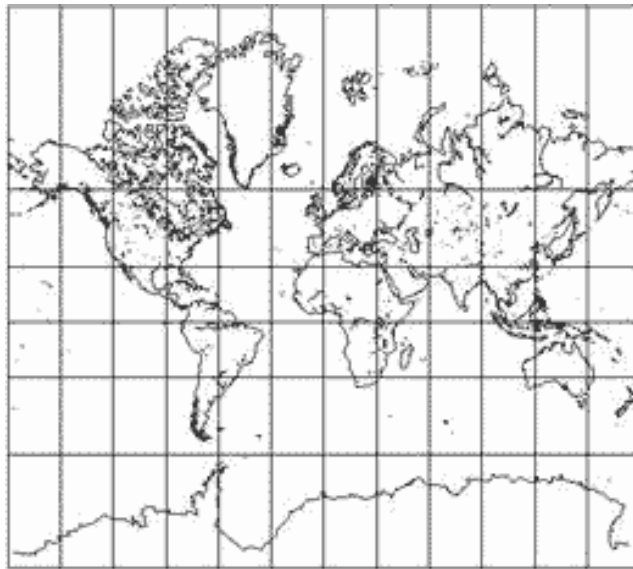
Leonardo himself called perspective the "rein and rudder of painting" (Panofsky 1991, 66) and since the renaissance the convention of perspective has dominated the graphic arts, fulfilling the aspirations of the objectivists, because it "[elevated] art into a science [in its] translation of psychological space into mathematical space" (ibid.) Although almost all artists and critics accepted the realism of perspective, it has been criticised by some art theorist in the last century, most notably by Edwin Panovsky. His argument is that we do not see the world as an objective mathematical construction foregrounded by linear perspective. Certainly, as the illustration below shows, an artist can create some very unnatural effects by slavishly adhering to the conventions of linear perspective. Although many critics stop short of Nelson Goodman's opinion that realism only depends upon "how stereotyped the mode of representation is [and] how commonplace the labels and their uses have become. (Goodman 1976, 36)



*Figure 8*

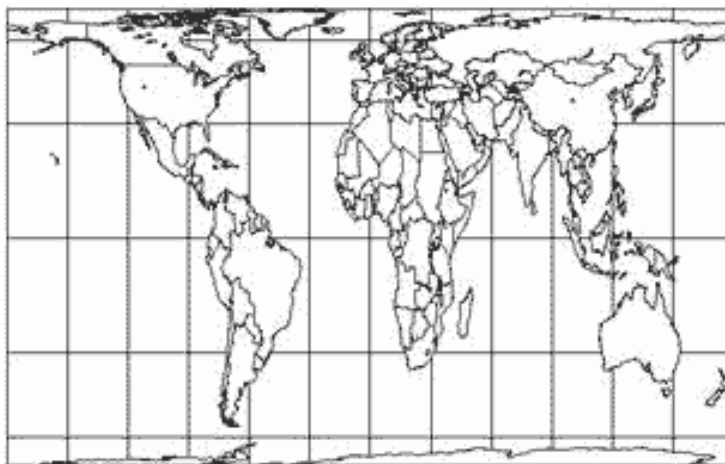
## The Map is not the Territory

Map makers, like artists, faced the problems of how to render a three dimensional object (the world) onto a two dimensional surface. However, because navigators depended on the information of maps to be accurate, the map-makers problems were not just of aesthetic interest. In 1569, a Flemish cartographer, Gerhardus Mercator, devised a map which showed true directions from any point to another. Mercator projection is still used as it gives accurate compass readings.



*Figure 9*

However it creates large distortions of landmasses, and moreover these distortions privilege the northern and wealthy areas of the world, which has in recent years led to criticisms of ideological bias. This even provoked historian and cartographer Dr. Arno Peters to create his 'politically correct' Peters projection in 1974, which, although correcting the biases in the relative size of countries, creates some noticeable distortions of its own.

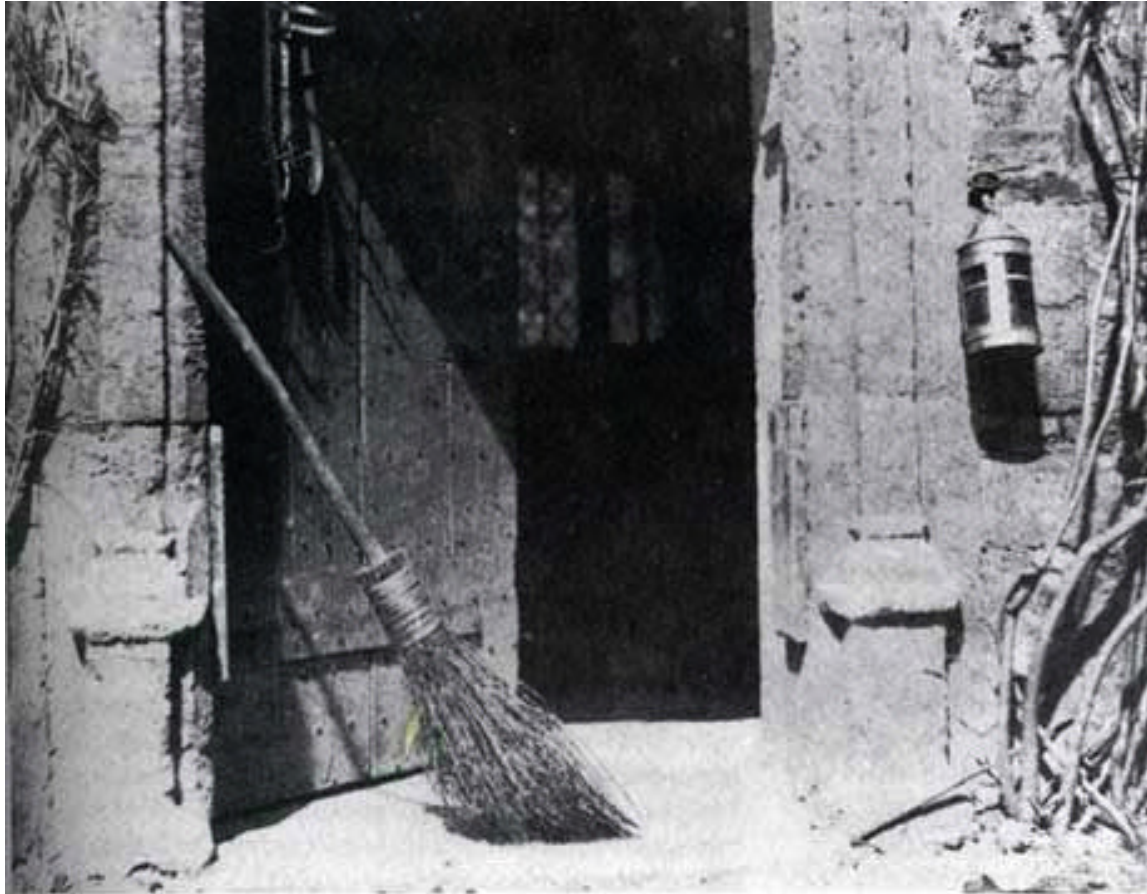


*Figure 10*

There are of course many other methods of drawing maps. I chose these two because they directly antagonise one another, which suggest to me a parallel--albeit an oblique one--to the tensions created between Renaissance and Medieval art. One of the lessons of map making is that all methods of rendering three dimensional space on a two dimensional surface are illusionary: distortions are inevitable and if you look, you will find them. The fact that, in linear perspective, they have been so well concealed over centuries should be regarded more as a commiseration of our culturally motivated deficiencies in perception, rather than a celebration of the unimpeachable fidelity of a particular style of representation.

## Photography

The invention of photography seemed to confirm the 'reality' of linear perspective, although the conditions for creating a photograph (frozen moments through pinhole apertures) conveniently mirrored the conditions necessary to create perspective paintings. Pierre Bourdieu suggests that the invention of photography, far from setting its own standards for realism, merely fell into line with the dominant ideology laid down by painting: photographs themselves even trying to ape a painterly style. (Evans 1999, 162) Certainly this early compositions of Fox Talbot seems to borrow heavily from those of the Dutch masters.



*Figure 11*

One common complaint of photography is that it shrinks spectacular landscapes: and makes molehills of mountains. Here are two pictures that illustrate the shortcomings of the fixed point of view image. This is the view from my back yard.



*Figure 12*

Here is the same view as a series of twenty, loosely interconnecting photographs, in a style pioneered by the artist David Hockney.



*Figure 13*

Although the second view appear strange and distorted, I would argue that it gives a far better impression of what my backyard actually looks like. Certainly it is closer to my own recollection of what the view from my backyard is like (which always takes the form of a panorama, rather than a peepshow.)

## Modern Art



*Figure 14*

To illustrate that a tension still exists between the mathematical objectivist view of the world (now exemplified in photography) and the subjective idealist view. I include this work by Matisse--although I could have easily chosen a work by Van Gogh, Picasso, Munch or any other 'modern' artist. Note the return to a non realistic use of medieval perspective. Perhaps this bears-out Louise Brogen's maxim that, "true revolutions in art restore more than they destroy." The artist Paul Cezanne believed that artistic representation had to include the possibility of doubt in what it depicts, "the appearance of light is affected by rapid movement... we don't see things as fixed, but as shifting." (Appignanesi 1995, 14) Cezanne's remarks are typical of a move in artists towards subjectivity, which paved the way for the multiple viewpoints of Cubism and ultimately to the visual solipsism of abstract expressionism.

## Conclusion

All art claims to be realistic, either by its objective distancing from, or its subjective commitment to the world it depicts. Realism is just another artistic style; one that tries to conceal--rather than flaunt--the artifice of its own construction. The existence of discernible epochs, and changing artistic fashions over time, attest to the fact that human conceptions of the real are never stable or immutable, which in turn exposes the relative nature of reality itself, (or perhaps only our human failure to maintain the posture of an objective stance). The history of art, rather than being a teleological quest for the real, resembles more a journey of self-discovery, but one with no discernable beginning or end in sight. The question: What is real? is continually posed, but never answered to the satisfaction of everyone. For this we can only be grateful.

## Afterword

In 1967, Guy Debord's book the Society of the Spectacle spoke of: "societies [where] all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*." (Debord 1995, 12) In the society of the spectacle, lives are lived vicariously in images of possessions, or in aspirational dreams of things we like to own. With the rise of virtual reality--the embodiment of mathematical linear perspective--the purely psychic edifice of the spectacle have gained a virtual form:

In the past, artists tried to depict the world through images, today: images, in a very real sense, create the world.



Figure 15

## Illustrations

- Figure 1** *Elephant* by Arwyn Munday (aged six) 2002
- Figure 2** *Line and Shaded Self Portraits* by Author, 2003
- Figure 3** Cave painting at Lascaux, France 16,000 BC, (Honor 1999, 38)
- Figure 4** *Battle of Flanders* by artist unknown, circa 1240 (ibid., 311)
- Figure 5** *Allegory of Peace* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 1339 (ibid., 414)
- Figure 6** *Fragmant of a wall decoration from Boscoreale, 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D.* with medieval perspective lines (Panofsky 1997, 157)
- Figure 7** *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci 1496 with perspective lines by Author (URL: <http://www.leonardomd.com/corporate/fullview/thelastsupper.asp>)
- Figure 8** Illustration showing the distortions that can occur in technically correct perspective (Hagen 1986, 133)
- Figure 9** Mercator Projection Map of the World (URL = <http://members.shaw.ca/quadibloc/maps/mcy0101.htm>)
- Figure 10** Peters Projection corrects the 'ideological' bias (URL <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/EART/arcview.html>)
- Figure 11** *The Open Door* by William Henry Fox Talbot 1843, (Honor 1999, 667)
- Figure 12** View from the Author's back yard, 2003
- Figure 13** Collage of photographs of View from the Author's back yard, 2003
- Figure 14** *Harmony in Red* by Henri Matisse 1908 , (Honor 1999, 779)
- Figure 15** Collage of *detourned* images by Author, 2003
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