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Nancy Armstrong: Fiction in the Age of Photography. The Legacy of British Realism

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Nancy Armstrong: Fiction in the Age of Photography.
The Legacy of British Realism
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Despite the title, Nancy Armstrong's study will not only appeal to scholars of
the nineteenth century, or to a public interested in interdisciplinary research.
Its scope of enquiry is broad and varied, ranging from ideas of picturesque in
the eighteenth century to the supposedly anti-realistic fiction of modernism, and
its solid rethinking of many attested views and ideas around the working and
presence of visual issues in fiction and culture provides a very stimulating basis
for reflecting on the role of images in the making of Western culture and about
the cultural values that still produce and promote such images.

The declared purpose of the study is to identify when and how images became
the main instrument for educated people in most modern cultures for interpreting
themselves and their environment. Specifically, the author proposes to investigate
the mechanisms that enabled, in the Victorian era, "a differential system" (p. 4) of
images to become the substitute for writing in fiction, and does so convincingly
by illustrating how the type of visual descriptions usually associated with realism
actually referred to visual representation of things. These visual representations
were therefore „authorised" and themselves transformed into "the real thing" by
fiction, even before they became the common referent by which people lived and
conceived of themselves.

The book raises some very important issues; amongst them, is the rejection of
the idea that mass-reproduced images constitute a barrier between observer and
a reality that preceded the observation, and the consequent hypothesis that in fact
images have been since the nineteenth century the way we perceive reality, to
the point that they have become reality themselves. This is certainly not a new
idea, but the freshness (and also one of its weaknesses) is the careful avoidance of
reflecting on the political/ethical aspect of such a world-picture – a reflection that
characterises both Marxist thought and scholarship interested in gender, class or
race. Representations of gender, class and race in fiction and photography are of
course analysed in the text, but the adopted point of view is, with some exception,
a purely historical analysis, rather than a project of deconstruction and subversion
of such representations.

Photography, we are told, did not originate "realistic" desire and style of repre-
sentation: these were there before it was invented, and often fiction came first in
establishing a way of representing certain things or people that only later became

the code of familiar genres of photography. This is the case of the representation of sordid city environments and inhabitants, which only entered photography in the 1860s, after two decades of daguerrotype portraiture of generally respectable people. Thus, the author postulates the presence of a "photographic desire" before photographic technology was there – a desire demonstrated by the sheer amount of attempts to capture and produce unmediated images, before the invention of photographic techniques.

The reader is unfortunately not offered a precise definition of realism, but is provided with multiple interpretations of the topical word, continuously updated through the whole volume. One of the most convincing ones explains that the aim of the book is not to discuss realism as a genre or way of writing that tries to provide a document on social condition through visual description, but a "shared set of visual codes operated as an abstract standard by which to measure one verbal representation against another" (p.11). In this way, the author is able to consider also some works of fiction such as *Wuthering Heights, Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland, The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *King Solomon's Mines* and to show how, through their violation of the visual standard that underlies realism, we have come to read them as non-realistic. On the other hand, though, by examining the presence and function of such visual standards, the text offers readings of these works that betray unexpected points of contact with realist fiction. An illuminating example of this method is the chapter on Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, in which the investigation of the aesthetic of picturesque, of the development of regional photography and folklore and their supposed realistic intent serve to clarify the novel's story as a meditation on the consequences of abandoning realism.

The same criteria also enable the author to clarify modernism and its supposed break with realism and its language. Armstrong rethinks the aesthetics of modernism not only as the agent that reduced realism to a caricature of itself – which helped modernists to promote themselves as innovators and to construct themselves as the instigators of a radical breach from tradition – but also, and more interestingly, as a different type of realism. In their attempt to go beyond the visible, to render visible what was not, modernist artists relied on visual stereotypes and on the power of images just as much as their predecessors. In comparison to the attention dedicated to the nineteenth century and to the amount of research and information about realist authors (the footnotes and the well-researched index are in themselves extremely valuable research instruments), the part on modernism, which concludes the study, seems relatively incomplete. The reader is left with the impression that the author would have much more to say about the twentieth century, and with the hope that this might be the beginning of a new project, rather than just the conclusion of a thought provoking study offering a very convincing re-evaluation of realism.

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