

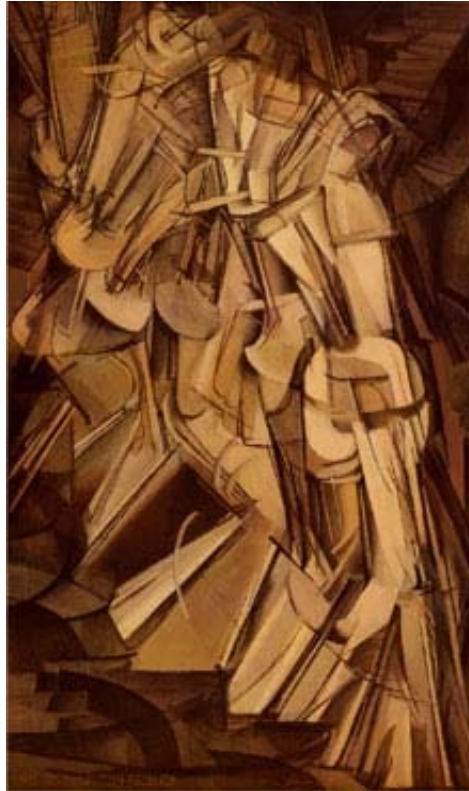
Authenticity after Postmodernism: Expert Knowledge, Formal Innovation, & Literary Contexts for the Science Novel

Bremen, 29 February 2016

Realism, Modernism, Postmodernism and then what?



Mel Ramos, *Nude
Descending a Staircase*
(1989)



Marcel Duchamps, *Nude
Descending a Staircase*
(1914)

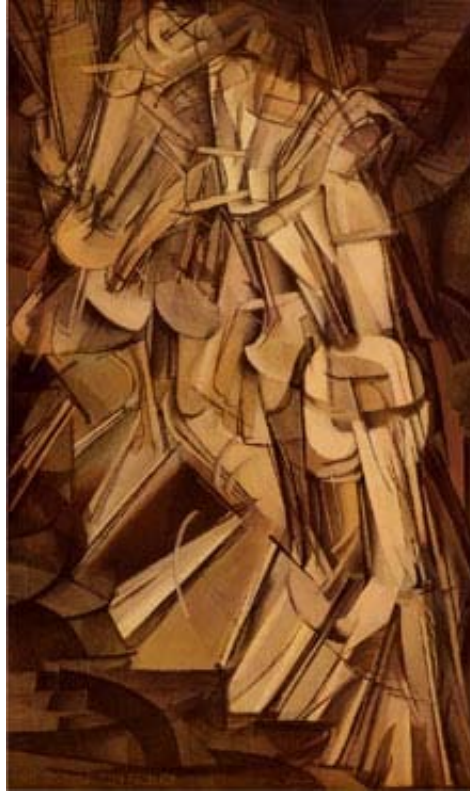


Jim Beaman, *Nude
Descending a Staircase*
(1965)



Realism

(trying to depict reality in order to avoid questioning it)



Modernism

(uncovering the techniques of depicting reality; nostalgia for reality)



Postmodernism

(playing with the notion that there is no representable reality)

Postmodernism ⇔ Reconstruction

Some Key Differences

Language

Reality/ Representation

Communication

Deconstruction/ Reconstruction

Authenticity

- Defining the Undefinable
 - Etymology
 - Forms
 - Historical Development
- Aesthetics/Formal Characteristics
 - Black Box
 - Paradox
 - Emergence
 - Metareference
- Case Study: Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

Authenticity

Etymology:

αὐτο ('self') + *ἀνύειν* ('to bring about')

Forms (cf. Knaller 2007):

subject authenticity

referential authenticity

aesthetic authenticity

Development (Turns)

- Renaissance (Hamlet)
 - “that within which passes show”
- Romanticism (Rousseau)
 - “sentiment propre de mon existence”
 - “the self just is this search” (Guignon 2004: 69)
- Modernism (Benjamin)
 - “Noch bei der höchst vollendeten Reproduktion fällt eines aus: das Hier und Jetzt des Kunstwerks – sein einmaliges Dasein an dem Orte, an dem es sich befindet” (1963: 13)

Postmodern Authenticity

“I believe that in our culture of simulation, the notion of authenticity is for us what sex was for the Victorians – threat and obsession, taboo and fascination.” (Turkle 2011: 4)

“A postmodern version of authenticity [...] is the ideal of clear-sightedly and courageously embracing the fact that there is no ‘true self’ to be, of recognizing that where we formerly had sought a true self, there is only an empty space, a gap or a lack.” (Guignon 2004: 119)

Formal/Aesthetic Characteristics

- Authenticity cannot be Defined → Black Box
 - “device which performs intricate functions but whose internal mechanism may not readily be inspected or understood; [hence] any component of a system specified only in terms of the relationship between inputs and outputs” (OED)
 - “Authenticity [...] shall be known by its fruits, that is, by investigating how it impinges on concepts with which it comes into contact. I contend that it can be described as a catalyst which collapses what are traditionally considered to be binary oppositions.” (Funk 2015: 55f.)

- Paradox

- “The paradox [...] is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes.”
(Culler 1988: 164)
- Christoph Zeller: *vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*
(mediated immediacy)

- Emergence

- “the emergent is unlike its components in so far as these are incommensurable, and it cannot be reduced to their sum or their difference” (Lewes 2005: 413)
- “The impenetrable process of emergence always produces excess value which oscillates between its constituent parts and the emergent effect. It is this paradoxical residue, transcendental to observable reality and in excess of conventional systems of reference, which can be aesthetically described in terms of authenticity and which metareference formally re-enacts.” (Funk 55)

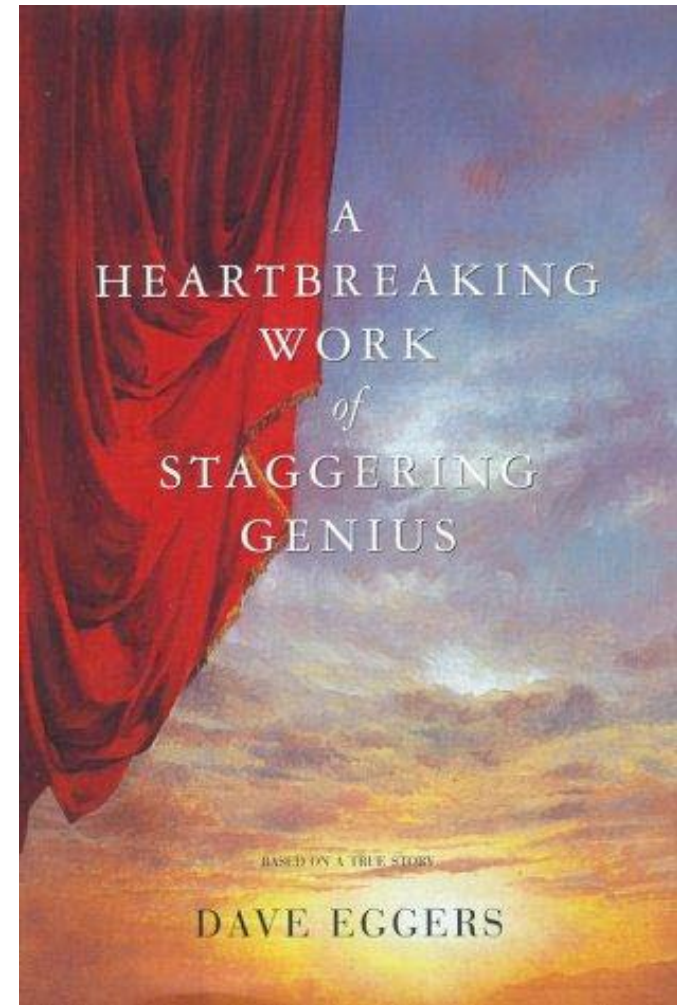
Authenticity and Metareference

“an inquiry into various historical and contemporary configurations of authenticity shows that the term is structurally ambiguous, paradoxical and oscillating. In consequence, it is impossible to define it directly and positively. It is emergent in the sense that it cannot be broken down into the sum of its constitutive factors. As it evades direct terminological access, it can only be detected in the impact it has on other discourses and concepts. This black-box character of authenticity, in turn, is a prime cause for its construction as both postmodernism’s ultimate symptom and its most significant other. In terms of epistemology, ontology and aesthetics, authenticity’s inherent and fundamental resistance to unambiguity finds its structural and objective correlative in the formal aspect of metareference, which [...] is based on similar premises of essential paradoxicality, ambiguity and oscillation.” (Funk 64)

Metareference

- Oh God comma I abhor self-consciousness
(John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*)
- a special, transmedial form of usually non-accidental self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a 'metalevel', within an artefact or performance (Wolf 2009: 31)
- *any media display which reveals its status as a media display by inserting an additional level, which is called a metalevel, into the self-same display on which the basic level of the text is reflected. The relationship between these two levels must involve a fundamental epistemological ambiguity or ontological paradox which cannot be resolved on the level of the source text (Funk 87)*

Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000/2001)



- “Trust is fun. It is fun to trust strangers. It is fun to risk what you can reasonably risk— like, your car, or your reputation— on the trust of people you know only through something ephemeral shared, something like taste in books or cartoons, or having watched people suffer.” (12)
- “I could be aware of the dangers of the self-consciousness, but at the same time, I’ll be plowing through the fog of all these echoes, plowing through mixed metaphors, noise, and will try to show the core, which is still there, as a core, and is valid despite the fog. *The core is the core is the core.* There is always the core, that can’t be articulated.” (270; emphasis added)

I lean my shoulders against the wall then rest my head against it and watch for a while, palm on the white cinder block. [...] I try for a second, something to do, to time my breaths to his, watching his chest rise and fall, the rest of his body immobile, the hands in fists, the hands tied down, as the color continues to drain I watch the stupid fucking dickhead asshole sleep.

Then he gets up. He is awake and he is standing, and pulling the tubes from his mouth, from his arms, the nodes and electrodes, barefoot. I jump.

‘Jesus fucking Christ. What are you doing?’

‘Fuck it’

‘What do you mean, fuck it?’

‘I mean fuck it, asshole. I’m leaving.’

‘*What?*’

‘Screw it, I’m not going to be a fucking anecdote in your stupid book.’ (272)

Reconstruction and the Fantastic

- Tough times for the fantastic?
 - Return to Realism
 - End of Subversion
- Fantastic hesitation
 - Epistemological
 - Ontological
 - Pragmatic
- A reconstructive fantastic
 - Mise en abyme
 - Example: A.S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*

Return to Realism?

- “[A] change has occurred within the landscape of American literature – or so it seems. The fabulators of postmodernism are on the demise and about to be displaced by a literary mode and generation that have become known as Neo-Realism and Neo-Realists respectively.” (Claviez 5)
- “contemporary realist writers have *absorbed* postmodernism’s most lasting contributions and gone on to forge a new realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but is at the same time self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis.” (Rebein 20; original emphasis)

Fantasy: A Literature of Subversion?

- “many fantasies from the late eighteenth century onwards attempt to undermine dominant philosophical and epistemological orders. They subvert and interrogate nominal unities of time, space and character, as well as questioning the possibility, or honesty, of fictional re-presentation of those unities. [...] the fantastic can be seen as an art of estrangement, resisting closure, opening structures which categorize experience in the name of a ‘human reality’. By drawing attention to the relative nature of these categories the fantastic moves towards a dismantling of the ‘real’, most particularly of the concept of ‘character’ and its ideological assumptions, mocking and parodying a blind faith in psychological coherence and in the value of sublimation as a ‘civilising’ activity.” (Jackson 175-6)

Fantastic hesitation

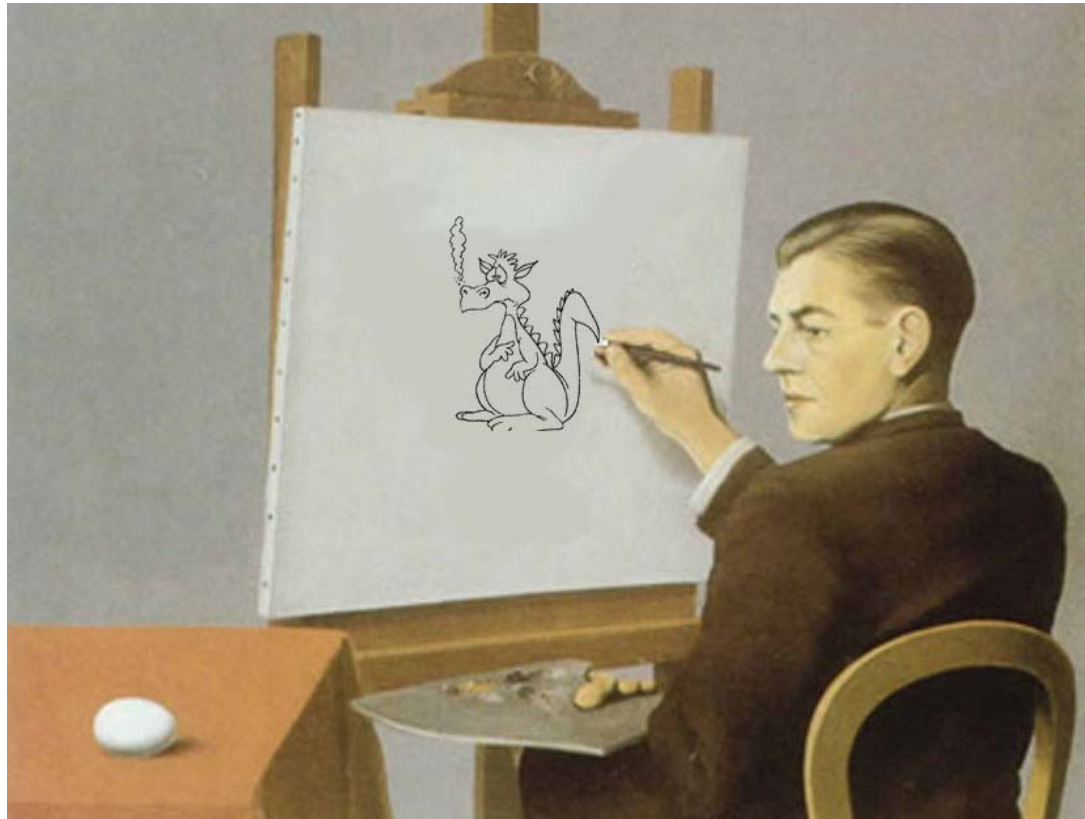
- Epistemological:
“The person who experiences the [supernatural] event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.” (Todorov 25)
- Ontological:
“The fantastic [...] involves a face-to-face confrontation between the possible (the ‘real’) and the impossible, the normal and the paranormal. Another world penetrates or encroaches upon our world [...] , or some representative of our world penetrates an outpost of the other world, the world next door [...]. Either way, this precipitates a confrontation between real-world norms (the laws of nature) and other-worldly, supernatural norms.” (McHale 75)

Pragmatic hesitation

- The combination of the everyday and the supernatural leaves the readers in doubt as to which meaning they should assign to the text, as to which stance of reading is the more appropriate one. In other words, the text forces the reader to hesitate between two stances of reading: one mimetic, presuming that a text tells us something about perceived reality; one marvellous, presuming that the text's connection to reality is mostly indirect, that it does not portray a reality that could possibly be experienced by its readers but rather, if at all, refers to extratextual reality symbolically or by analogy. If a text with referential claims includes elements which its readers assume to be quite impossible, they will be forced to reconsider their reading strategies. Thus fantastic texts not only ask an epistemological question (is our knowledge about the depicted world reliable?) and an ontological one (what kind of world does it show?), but also a pragmatic question (what is the appropriate reaction to it?). (Huber 59)



(René Magritte. *Clairvoyance*.)

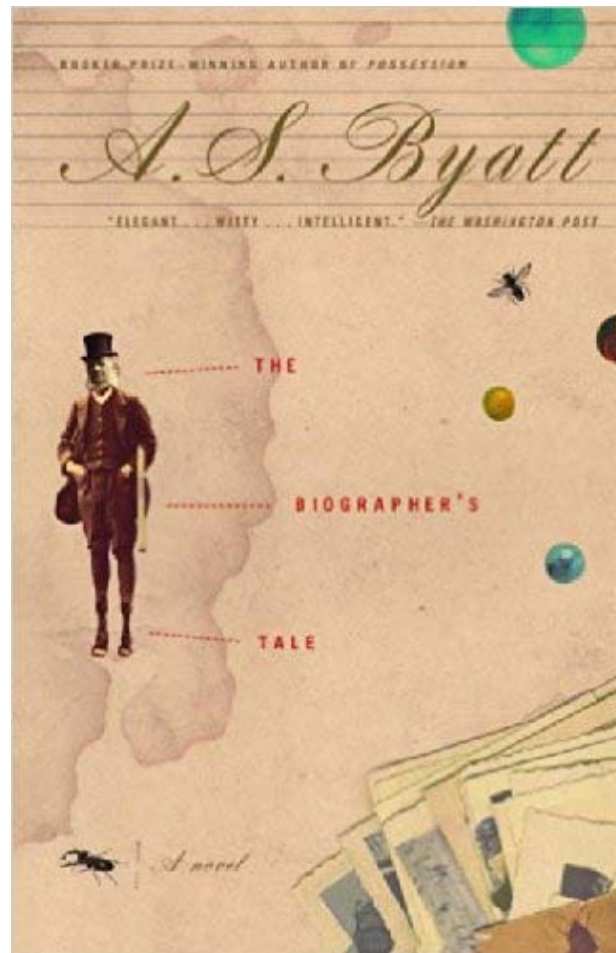


(René Magritte. *Clairvoyance*.)

Reconstructive Fantasies

- Explicit fictionality
- Ethical and pragmatic questions in the foreground
- If everything is fictional (postmodern panfictionality), what is our responsibility towards the kind of fictions we tell?

A.S. Byatt: The Biographer's Tale



- “All the seminars, in fact, had a fatal family likeness. They were repetitive in the extreme. We found the same clefts and crevices, transgressions and disintegrations, lures and deceptions beneath, no matter what surface we were scrying. [...] I went on looking at the filthy window above his head, and thought, I must have *things*.” (4)

- “What the vision of these very real, chattering birds said to me, was, that the senses of order and wonder, both, that I had once got from literature, I now found more easily and directly in the creatures. As a boy my hair had prickled at the beauty of a Shakespeare sonnet, or a Yeats rhythm, or Donne’s bright hairs and brittle bones. That was gone. But I was left with the peculiar conker-leather brown of the elytra of *Lucanus cervus* L, the pink hook of strong beaks, horns and claws, stamens and pistils, the beat of demonic wing-cases, and descending circles of brilliant rose and emerald wings.” (294-5)
- “Sir Philip Sidney thought that poets made better flowers than Nature. [...]
Not so. As long as we don’t destroy and diminish it irrevocably, the too-much-loved earth will always exceed our power to describe, or imagine, or understand it. It is all we have.” (300)

- “All Destry-Scholes’s fictions had concerned ghosts and spirits, doubles and hauntings, metamorphoses, dismemberment, death. There are a very few human truths and infinite variations on them. I was about to write that there are very few truths about the world, but the truth about *that* is that we don’t know what we are not biologically fitted to know, it may be full of all sorts of shining and tearing things, geometries, chemistries, physics we have no access to and never can have. Reading and writing extend – not infinitely, but violently, but giddily – the variations we can perceive on the truths we thus discover.” (274; original emphasis)

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