

'Spatial Constructions and Immanence: The '-realism(s)' of nowhere.

[SLIDE 1]

The recurrence of the term 'realism' in investigations into spatial fictions continues to the description of recent works such as *The Wire*, the novels of Jonathan Franzen, narrative non-fiction such as Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun*, [SLIDE 2] and generally, to the description of a dominant mode of the contemporary novel. I believe that this usage traces an essential tradition. The contest over this term stems from its multiplicity of uses:

'Realism' with a capital 'R' best refers to the turn-of-the-century 'movement' (*that Tim has spoken of*) and from this 'high Realism', to its descendent sub-genres and variants. In that period, which explored extensive possibilities of the novel as the literary work of both the social scene and the individual subject, one may follow a trajectory from the less-specific 'Realism' to the smaller group of authors who have been included within 'Naturalism'.

[SLIDE 3] Foremost of these, Emile Zola described in *Le Roman Experimental* (1880) what he considered to be the essential relationship between 'human beasts' and their surroundings, in the artistic work. George J. Becker has described the theme of the Naturalistic novel concisely, as: 'pessimistic materialistic determinism'. Yet the definitions of Naturalism circle the same questions as the problem of 'realism': we must be clear that the terms refer both to a thematic priority, and mode of representation.

Unsurprisingly, then, in histories of American literary 'Realism', the most frequently identified authors are those who have also written specifically (and often at length) about their vocation 'as author' and theories of writing, as well as their themes: for example, Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, and those of the so-called sub-genre of 'Regionalists' such as Sarah Orne Jewett. For these authors, the natural landscape was, perhaps, the foremost recurrent component in their fictions. When buildings, cities and homes appeared, they seemed to exist to create contrast with the much larger forces, vistas and reflections of the open world outdoors (think of the various spaces of Hemingway's *Fiesta: The Sun Also Rises*: Paris, fishing, the bullfight and festival in the streets).

How do 'realist' texts use space to represent division and connection, and *why* does this seem to be such an important emphasis for such authors? The metaphor of 'prose as architecture' has a long history, but seems especially fitting for the moment when 'Postmodernist' texts found their points of departure from the large, urban fictional projects of Modernism. Frederic Jameson acknowledged in his defining work the debt to architecture, and novelists such as Tom Wolfe, who claimed the 'realist' title in the 1980's, was preoccupied with the material make-up of cities, and saw the imaginative and architectural construction of spaces as paired projects. As part of the same moment, other literary voices theorised that in architecture as well as imaginative constructions, 'theory' had been the problem. **[SLIDE 5]** In *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981), Wolfe argued that applying political theory to lived spaces was inappropriate.¹ Wolfe's history of modern architecture rails against the box-like constructions that were appearing in New York: to his eye, these were totally lacking feature and ornamentation, in thrall to the pursuit of the avant-garde. In his 'literary manifesto for the new social novel' eight years later, 'Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast', he called for the renewed emergence of 'the New Journalism' in fiction.² Wolfe bemoaned what he saw as a lack of concern for realistic location in then-contemporary novels. He wrote, as a central tenet of the essay: 'It strikes me as folly that you can portray the individual in the city today without also portraying the city itself.'³ The essay demonstrates 'prose as architecture' in a double sense which interests me: it's theme is to write against an imbalance of power and it's attendant divisions and literatures, while simultaneously emphasising fictional form and its representation of space as a means to redress that imbalance.

In this important sense, Wolfe's commentaries and the novels that followed were a fictionist's materialisation of the 'spatial turn' in the academy that occurred in the 1980's. Even if Wolfe demonstrated a knowledge and distaste for the influence of Postmodern theory, it can be argued that the 'turns' in both criticism and fiction towards new spatial conceptions were parallel responses to the historical moment and literary context of high modernism. America's written and material landscapes were 'crying' for renewal. **[SLIDE 7]**

¹ Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Picador, 1981).

² Tom Wolfe, 'Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast', *Harper's Magazine*, (1989) 279, 45-56.

³ Wolfe, 'Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast', 51.

Thus, from an environment distant from the academy, and far from the urban fictions of Tom Wolfe, Paul Auster and others, a revival of spatially-signifying form was occurring. Raymond Carver's short fiction was the subject of much critical interest from the moment of publication, and theorisations of literary 'Minimalism' grew up around a closely-watched group of authors that included Carver, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, Amy Hempel, Ann Beattie, and Bobbie Ann Mason. Richard Ford said of himself and Carver: **[SLIDE 9]**

Ray and I were so typical of Americans who decide to try being writers, and were products of the environment that included college, writing workshops, sending stories to quarterlies, attending graduate school, having teachers who were writers... all of us seeking improvement in the standard postwar American way: through some sort of pedagogy.

(Richard Ford, 'The Good Raymond', *New Yorker*, 5 October 1998, 70)

In turn, Carver's non-fictional writings always acknowledge his position within a social fabric: in both supportive and contested aspects of the figurative sense of the 'text'. He frequently commented in these pieces, on the craft of his fiction, and his sense of writing as a vehicle to express a certain set of human dynamics and relations. Yet the prominence of his voice in relation to his fiction is not, as one might think, a dominating 'limit' on those texts: rather, there is always a sense of the provisional, or the lack of finality, in his writings: they imply an array of responses to follow. Appropriately, several of the most prominent publications on Carver in the years following his death took the form of interviews, 'conversations' or memories. When thinking about representations of American space in fictions such as Carver's, I would draw attention to the need for an appropriate sense of 'construction', and a set of terms that emphasise the functionality of these spaces, beyond and through their boundaries and formal limits.

So, considering the ways in which Carver's writings use 'prose as architecture' to construct in a contested textual landscape, let's turn first, to the question of 'form'. Carver never wrote a novel (though its appearance was constantly speculated). However, his short stories have been read as an 'oeuvre' that approaches the large 'Realist' novel in their combined scope. In his book *The Carver Chronotope*, G. P. Lainsbury applied the novelistic theories of Bakhtin to Carver's story as a body of work, and read a number of spatial categories over the stories: such as 'the wilderness idyll' and 'family life'. This mode of

reading Carver's essentially short forms contrasts with the other dominant mode of criticism, that occupied the bulk of the single-author monographs in the 1980's and early 1990's. These primarily addressed the stories individually, and connected thematically between perceived 'early' and 'late' style. Yet a combination of the 'oeuvre' and close-focus readings of short story writers such as Carver, I will argue, best reveals the dual functionality of the short story as part of 'the short story collection', and its prior or subsequent publication in periodicals such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Yorker* or *Esquire*. Prior to Carver, the short story, according to Robert Rebein, had become almost confined to either a 'regional' form in the most pejorative sense of that term, either confined to small-press publication and the limited dissemination of those channels; or a vanity project turned out by already successful and profitable novelists.⁴

A 'dual functionality' is still, however, constructed in dualistic terms, and as I have shown the proliferation of dualisms and oppositions, boundaries and borders that surrounded short fiction in the 1980's, I want to suggest the creative necessity of the dissociation that 'Minimalism' or 'Dirty Realism' enacted against binary terms. **[SLIDE 11]** True, Carver's first short stories rose to acclaim because of their context in opposition: a 'Minimalism' against the implication of 'Maximalism' in Pynchon, Bellow or Nabokov. But following Carver's death, the extensive changes made to the stories by editor Gordon Lish highlighted the importance of the publications and drafts produced before and after this collaboration. Carver writing in proximity to the urban literary establishment produced the terse, pressurised stories of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981): but Carver writing on his own terms offered something different: an expansion that surrendered nothing in power, but constructed new configurations on the pages that prior success had bought him.

'Cathedral'

In examining just one of Carver's stories today, I will explore the narrative, subjective and formal modes that sought to overcome the divisions and minimising forces of the early

4

collections. The constructions are, throughout, spatially situated and functioning, and inscribe narratives onto architectural frames. **[SLIDE 13]** The story, entitled 'Cathedral', from the 1983 collection of the same name, opens with the voice of a narrator, who explains that he is about to receive a visitor (a blind man called Robert), an old friend of his wife's, who has just been bereaved and is travelling to visit family. From the start, the story interweaves two temporal modes: the immediate materiality of the house in which the narrator speaks and acts, and a reporting historical frame, in which he gives the reader gains extra information about the blind man and his past. This version-of-personal-history never assumes its objectivity: the markers of voice in dialect are regular and insistent.

The focal scene occurs late in the evening, as the narrator describes a documentary showing on TV about cathedrals in Europe. Overlapping layers of mediation, the narrator tells the reader that there's an 'Englishman' narrating the program, around which he tries to explain to Robert the visuals being presented onscreen. Seamlessly, we hear this same explanation, without speech marks – a switching between directed narrative voices occurs, initially without announcement or disturbance to the mimesis. **[SLIDE 15]**

The TV showed this one cathedral. Then there was a long, slow look at another one. Finally, the picture switched to the famous one in Paris, with its flying buttresses and its spires reaching up into the clouds. The camera pulled away to show the whole of the cathedral rising above the skyline.

There were times when the Englishman who was telling the thing would shut up, would simply let the camera move around over the cathedrals. Or else the camera would tour the countryside, men in fields walking behind oxen. I waited as long as I could. Then I felt I had to say something. I said, "They're showing the outside of this cathedral now. ..."⁵

At the end of this passage, the introduction of the classic 'realist' distinction between 'showing' and 'telling' the reader (and Robert) shows the awareness of problematic agency that marks Carver's fictions. Characters have little responsibility and few appointments, but are compelled: for example, watching television, they frequently sit 'centre stage' – a drama of watching. This quality of 'showing' is found in the descriptions of the movement of the

⁵ 209.

camera in 'Cathedral': named in its objectivity: 'the camera pulled away', or 'the camera move[d] around'. In framing a heard narrative voice and presenting the visual representation without the agency at work in its creation, the story again signifies the formal concerns of the representative process that underpins its own writing. Where does represented space stop being a function of media-saturated society, and begin to be a choice, with a politics of 'world-making'?

The question is explored further, as Robert confesses that he has no idea what a cathedral really is, and the narrator embarks upon another project of representation. Again, the passage is a narrative of observation, of mediated watching. **[SLIDE 17]**

I stared hard at the shot of the cathedral on the TV. How could I even begin to describe it? But say my life depended on it. Say my life was being threatened by an insane guy who said I had to do it or else.

I stared some more at the cathedral before the picture flipped off into the countryside. There was no use. I turned to the blind man and said, "To begin with, they're very tall." I was looking around the room for clues. "They reach way up. Up and up. Toward the sky. ..."⁶

Searching his immediate spatial coordinates for reference-points to help with the task of representing the utterly unfamiliar architecture of a European cathedral, the narrator seems to be heading for failure. But Robert then has an idea – they fetch a pen and paper, and set out to draw a cathedral together, the blind man's hand over the narrator's. **[SLIDE 19]**

So I began. First I drew a box that looked like a house. It could have been the house I lived in. Then I put a roof on it. At either end of the roof, I drew spires. Crazy.⁷

In an act of representation, the narrator has, with a minimum of self-consciousness, constructed a hybrid of immediate architectural surroundings, and a mediated architecture

⁶ 211.

⁷ 213.

completely foreign to his experience. At the close of the story, Robert tells the narrator that the drawing has been successful: and he tells him to close his eyes as he draws the last details. The final lines communicate a movement that has taken place for the narrator during this process, again, essentially both material and outside of objective or effable coordinates: **[SLIDE 21]**

My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything.

"It's really something," I said.⁸

Where are we at the end of this story? Between a represented, foreign object (the cathedral), a mode of media representation (the documentary on TV), the narrator of the story, the blind visitor, and the reader: a complex depiction of the process of literary production has taken place. Like in the vastly different short fictions of John Barth and other 'Postmodernists', narrative voice is an essential part of this process and its effect. Yet while we might very well say that Barth often reaches – or reaches for – some kind of transcendence from the paralysis resulting from the literary intertext, Carver's story remains explicitly 'in the house'. The difference, as his narrator says, is the '[not] feeling': an expression of multiple negation: the 'I didn't feel like I was inside anything', dislocation alongside specific location. Then the emphasis of the final line: recovering nothing but the abstract word: 'something', and in the final two words, the self and the voice.

Many of Carver's stories describe their architectural configurations – but they describe those buildings and places as 'no-places', *as a kind of place-making*: housing characters, narratives and domestic objects in relation to a presence of absence. In these terms, the imaginative world that emerges across Carver's fictions has come to be known in reviews as 'Carver Country': a geography defined according to the artistic coordinates of its author. **[SLIDE 23]** Such tag-lines ('Cheever Country' is another related geography) do a strange kind of work: they specify nothing but the text – perhaps this is why they're used so often in reviews, blurbs and marketing materials – they refer the reader back to the

⁸ 214.

imaginative worlds themselves. The conclusion of 'Cathedral' enacts a similar kind of reference – this is not 'transcendence' – in the final lines and their signification, the reader is held in a number of constructions: not opposing or contesting: but supporting 'something' which a cathedral drawn by a blind character and a sighted narrator can gesture towards.

Immanence

In the highly contested terms of late-twentieth-century American short fiction, what kind of fiction is a story such as 'Cathedral'? A key concept that has been introduced much less frequently than would have been useful, I believe, is 'immanence' (with an 'A'). Charles Altieri has advanced a theory of the essential role that an 'immanent poetics' has had on postmodern literature, elucidating the progression from the theological sense of the term as it applies to Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example, through a sense in which the Modernist authors employed an immanent 'event of seeing'.⁹ According to Altieri, this was a prime reason for the influence of the visual arts on these authors. He wrote: 'The visual arts could honor a new realism devoted to the events of seeing rather than to representation of what has been seen, and they provided a way of committing to the senses in a way that clarifies powers of mind in the world.' Thus, Altieri's account calls attention to the importance of the 'mind/world' relation in progressive realism, through an immanent poetics. The term describes a mode of avoiding the danger of objectivity collapsing into what he calls a 'dead' materialism, or 'collection of facts' that ignores the phenomenological aspects of lived experience. In addition, Altieri's conception connects with Deleuze's 'plane of immanence' in the claim to overcome binary oppositions of various kinds, including the immediate philosophical and theological opposition of Immanence and Transcendence. **[SLIDE 25]**

Carver's story 'Cathedral', I believe, is a fictionalisation of the same functionality: moving from a discussion of the material, subjective and transcendent coordinates of the everyday, to a space in a more fluid relation to place: able to disconnect from those boundaries and terms. The 'plane' in Carver's stories is achieved in the arrest of narrative movement: that nevertheless, has not been formally abandoned; the merging of individuals and subjects, that have not disappeared; the inadequacy of architectural spaces, that

9

remain both present and essentially functional. In all these cases, for Carver, it *is* the inadequacy that functions, and through the fiction, calls into question the dimensions of the structures it has moved within. In this mode, I might suggest, the 'realisms' of the late twentieth-century were as concerned with representing so-called 'failed' spaces, narratives and subjects as they were with overcoming the oppositional zero-sum of terms in which the categories are liable to failure. In this, the movements of 'immanence' as exemplified in Carver, can show us something essential about contemporary fiction, and, I would argue, the future of the 'realist' text. **[SLIDE 27]**