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Realismer i norsk samtidsprosa

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SUMMARY

Contemporary culture shows a renewed interest in the real, as well as in the intimate and private. Television programmes like *Big Brother* and other reality soaps try to convince the public that their staged 'reality' is authentic, nor is it only popular cultural expressions which return to the real. Contemporary fine art, with its rediscovered concern with more figurative modes of expression, shows a similar interest in the real.

The same tendency is reflected in modern literature. Although realism never really disappeared, it seems recently to have regained a more prominent place in the literary landscape. That might come as a surprise, as realism has often been associated with a naive, essentialist form of art which neglects formal, deconstructive and post-structuralist objections to referential and iconic representational forms.

Realistic literature can still be naive. When Erlend Loe's *Naiv.Super.* was published in 1996, some critics wondered whether or not the novel should be regarded as literary fiction, but the book induced half the Norwegian population to buy a Brio *bankebrett* and came to be an icon of 1990s Norwegian literature. The question raised by the critics is significant, because it reveals one of the main features of realism: that it is an aesthetic where the line between art and reality is both strong and delicate.

One of the explanations for the return to the real, apart from the *Zeitgeist*, is the inclination of the post modernists to reduce reality to a pure textual entity. Both fine art and literature have recently tried to overcome textual dominance and to find new ways to describe reality without setting aside 20th century literary innovations.

On the contrary, contemporary literature provides a mixture of a realist and post modern aesthetic, which is what made Winfried Fluck characterize it as post modern realism in his article "Surface and Depth: Postmodernism and Neo-Realist Fiction" (1992). This mixture is evident from the observation that authors no longer hold that it is impossible to render experience, but neither do they present a closed system nor a single absolute meaning to their readers. They renew the aesthetic experience by putting forth a number of meanings, with temporal validity, which can be deconstructed when they cease to be tenable.

Even though it is tempting to apply a term like 'post modern realism' to contemporary literature, that could easily cast a shadow over the complex structure of

modern realist literature, which is – like realism in general – a kaleidoscopic aesthetic which needs more qualification than ‘post modern realism’ can possibly provide.

The kaleidoscope view is inherent in realism, first of all because one of the premises of the realistic is that it relates to an ever-changing world. An author in the year 2008 cannot describe the world in the same way as did a 19th century realist novelist, for to do so simply wouldn’t make sense. One could easily claim that every period has its own realism, and that the *Zeitgeist* is inevitably reflected in realist literature, for it is always contemporary. When existence is conceived of as fragmented, arbitrary or meaningless, there is no point in rendering it in a synthetic manner, with causal logic, if we assume that the aim is to represent it in a realistic way. Under those circumstances, a synthetic, closed novel form would seem more fantastic or idealistic than realistic.

That kaleidoscopic nature is reflected in the hybrid character of realism and of the realist novel. Ever since realism gained literary ground it has been pushing the boundaries of the novel, its main form. The realist novel has adopted elements of journalism, documentary, reportage – one need only think here of Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) – and among other things contemporary realist fiction plays with the autobiographical genre, the essay form, and cinematography. It seems as if realism is driven to seek out the edges in an attempt to represent reality so as to seem plausible.¹

Realism could be defined as a hybrid of the aesthetic, the epochal and the narrative, a hybrid that is often associated with the post modern, but as Robert Rebein states: “realism has proven itself far more adaptable and, paradoxically, more open to new techniques and influences than has literary postmodernism.”² One of the reasons that realism has survived despite all the criticism it has been confronted with, is its ability to incorporate other aesthetic movements. That is something illustrated by the innumerable adjectives which must be used to qualify ‘realism’: we have critical realism, psychological realism, social and socialistic realism, photo realism, hyperrealism, magic realism, kitchen sink realism, post modern realism and post realism. And these are just a few examples.

Post modernism seems to lack qualifications. Instead of talking about realism, it would be more appropriate to use the plural: realisms, to regard realism as a relative

¹ But unlike 19th century realism, contemporary realist literature doesn’t cross many moral borders, something which probably says more about contemporary culture than literature.

² Rebein, 2001, s. 21.

term, just as Roman Jakobson argued in favour of in his *On Realism in Art* (1921). The same conclusion could be drawn when taking a closer look at contemporary realist literature.

I have stated above that every period has its own realism, and the same could no doubt be said of every individual work of art. It might seem in fact that each work represents in itself its own realism. The difference between Lars Saabye Christensen, the author of *Halvbroren* [*The Half Brother*], the epic bestseller of 2001, and Jon Fosse, the minimalist playwright, poet and novelist, is enormous, but each of them is interested in finding a way of rendering the world, and human experience of it, in a realistic way. If we take a closer look, their dissimilar projects have much in common.

It is in those new realisms that my interest lays. Why do so many contemporary authors have such great interest in reality? Where does it come from, and how is it being articulated? In chapter one, I have presented a bird's-eye view of the development of realism during the past 150 years. In the first chapter, which concentrates on the literary-historical reception of realist literature, a frame of reference is being offered for the analysis of contemporary realist literature. As Frits Andersen pointed out in *Realismens metode* (1994) most literary histories contain synthesizing presentations of the different literary movements, and in the case of realism that presentation is characterized by opposing realist works to either romantic or modernist works, but the great disadvantage of that kind of labelling is that it fails to acknowledge realism's complexity.

By contrast, chapter two will in its critical and theoretical approach present a clear appreciation of that very complexity. There, Lillian Furst's eminent work *Realism* (1992) has been very useful, because she neatly describes the main reflections on the subject. Furst differentiates humanist, structuralist, rhetorical, reader-orientated, psychoanalytic and post modern ideas about realism, and her study clearly points out that history has led to multifarious and very different understandings of the concept, even though it concentrates almost exclusively on the 19th century ideas.

The same can be said about Nordic contributions, which almost all refer to the Modern Breakthrough in Scandinavian literature. Even though they are of great help, those explanations are not sufficiently developed to analyse contemporary realist literature, but that has to do mainly with the fact that they look upon realist fiction as

either referential or self-duplicating, and in the traditional critical approaches those two views are mutually exclusive. As contemporary realist literature connects a more ‘traditional’ realist aesthetic to a post modern one, the resulting literature is both externally and internally referential.

The recent return to the real has promoted research into the topic in several fields of interest. Art critics and philosophers especially have put forward new thoughts about realism, and Hal Foster was one of the first to point out that modern art movements like pop art and hyperrealist art needed new analytic models. In an attempt to provide a more ‘complete’ interpretation of hyperrealism, Foster introduced traumatic realism as a third model to connect the two traditional models, relying on Lacan’s theory of the traumatic, defined as “a missed encounter with the real”.³

According to Foster, many contemporary artists adopt the view that it is possible to say something meaningful about reality, but the reality they want to depict is traumatic, and therefore difficult to represent. One of the means of expressing traumatic events is to present them again, and to do so artists make use of techniques generally associated with post modern aesthetics: duplication or repetition.

That is a view, which can be very usefully applied to the analysis of many contemporary realist novels, for they want to seize hold of matters, which seem to recoil from narrative. In some cases they address traumatic events or experience, as in Hanne Ørstavik’s novel *Tiden det tar* [*The time it takes*] (2000), and Per Petterson’s *Ut og stjele hester* [*Out Stealing Horses*] (2003), or the subject might be intimate feelings like shame, or might be existential themes like birth and death. *Morgon og kveld* [*Morning and Evening*] (2000) and *Det er Ales* [*It is Ales*] (2004) by Jon Fosse, or *16.07.41.* (2002) by Dag Solstad are fine examples of that. The presenting again or re-rendering of those experiences, events or feelings can challenge realism, because they are bordering on the transcendent, or the abstract. But at the same time, realism is about looking up, and testing boundaries.

Foster’s third model represents a middle course, and that offers more reflections on contemporary realism. Britta Timm Knudsen and Bodil Marie Thomsen, participating in a network concerned with *avant-garde* realism, both came to the conclusion that modern realist forms of representation were referring to an area effectively mediating

³ Foster, 1996, s. 132.

between the fictional and real worlds, fields they referred to as *mellemfelter*. They are conceived of as meeting places for the self referential and referential, where meanings can be constructed and deconstructed, and where a literary work can be received as a construct. In my opinion, *mellemfelter* constitute an interesting view on the notion of modern realist literature.

Thomsen and Timm Knudsen as well as Foster made it clear that contemporary cultural expressions cannot be thought of as purely referential. That thinking underpins new reflections on realism provided by American post positivists such as Linda M. Alcoff, who has reconsidered *essence*, one of the main pillars of realism, by looking more closely at Locke's essentialism.

Critics of realism have often stated that *essence* implies ontological absolutism, which Alcoff rejects, for in her view, *essence* can be considered as an open form, depending on the variables of language. That view too, however different it might seem from Foster's traumatic realism, or Thomsen and Timm Knudsen's *mellemfelter*, stresses that realism doesn't automatically close off a plurality of meanings.

Identity politics is in fact Alcoff's main interest, and she wants to find an alternative for the post structuralist reduction of the individual as a linguistic phenomenon. She agrees with post structuralist theorists that identity is shaped by dominance, but considers that identity is human and real, and therefore capable of rendering experience: "Real identities are indexed to locations in which experience and perception occur and from which an individual acts".⁴

Identities, or rather subjects, mediate between fiction and the outer world. Subjects are not static but depend on time, place and circumstances, which isn't all that different from what Ian Watts thinks about the value of the subject in realist fiction. Many contemporary realist novelists discuss the ability of subjects to render experience. Some of them, like Dag Solstad, Nikolaj Frobenius and Frank Lande, explicitly question the mediating function of the subject by inserting subjects or narrators who bear the same name as the author. Indeed, the title of Solstad's *16.07.41* is a reference to his own date of birth, and so they have created a form of 'auto-fiction', a hybrid genre which challenges fundamental assumptions about fiction and reality.

⁴ Alcoff, 2000, s. 339.

In Frobenius' novel *Teori og praksis* [*Theory and practice*] (2004) and Frank Lande's *Frank Lande* (2006), the relation between fiction and reality is also problematized by those authors' use of photographs. Frobenius inserted a number of pictures from his childhood and youth, whereas the cover of Lande's novel is decorated with digitally manipulated pictures of the author, intended to illustrate the story with pretended authenticity.

Others, like Hanne Ørstavik, Lars Saabye Christensen or Per Petterson are more concerned with the ability of their subject to render the past. All of them emphasise that the version being provided in the novel is not necessarily true, nor complete, but they still believe they can render experience. Apart from the 'dirty realists', individuals in all other varieties of realism seem to refer to experiences firmly lodged in those so-called *mellemfelter*.

Since modern realist authors are aware of post modern doubts about language, they look for other ways to render experience. The result is apparently highly various realisms, which I have reflected upon in the last five chapters. In chapter three I take a closer look at the realism, which concentrates on the bodily and the visual, by analyzing Lars Saabye Christensen's *Halvbroren*. In chapter four I focuss on the performative realism, which concentrates on the writing process, as Dag Solstad does in his latest novels. But the search for other ways to render experience can just as well result in the minimalist and repetitive prose we see in Jon Fosse's novels with its Christian-mythical touch as I show in chapter five, a minimalism which can take a naive form too, as in Erlend Loe's rendering of experience in *Naiv. Super*.

There is of course a vast number of authors who produce a more traditional form of realism – especially the kind produced by young men and labelled 'dirty realism' (chapter six) – although the writers of mimetic realism, whom I have considered last, acknowledge that post-modernist achievements can't be set aside.

In the practical section of this thesis I examine more closely the varieties of this post-post modern realism, and to do so I focuss on individual authors. My chosen method of classification might lead to an impression that the differences among the varieties are explicit, which of course they are not.

How individual novels and novelists deal with the representation of experience, and the sort of experience they want to render, is on the one hand unique and on the other

hand common practice. Lars Saabye Christensen's *Halvbroren* explicitly focusses on visual and corporeal representation, which makes his work an eminently suitable exemplar for analysing the relation between the physical or carnal and the realist aesthetic. But 'dirty realist' and more traditional mimetic novels alike show a great interest in the visual.

As Peter Brooks pointed out in *Body Work* (1993), the representation of the body is part of representing reality, and therefore of special interest to realist fiction. Interest in the body can be understood as a means of visualizing reality by producing poetic images. "To know is to see, and to represent is to describe" Brooks states.⁵ The body does indeed partly fill the gap created because reality is far too complex to be caught by language.

The body can help to represent in writing the appearance, or the experience of the visible world, and so has a semiotic function. However, that is not a feature found only in modern literature, as Auerbach writes in *Mimesis* (1946). Homer had already used descriptions of the corporeal to tell stories, which evaded narrative, but the body, or bodily nature, has a far more prominent function in modern literature, and art for that matter. Lars Saabye Christensen is among those who have shown that experience can be written on the body. One could put it even more explicitly: Christensen's characters are first and foremost bodies, marked bodies, and on that point his use of the body differs from former realist descriptions of it.

Christensen's body is not transparent, and that has much to do with the fact he uses it to embody several meanings. The main character in *Halvbroren*, Barnum, is a small man, or rather half a man, who has learned from his father how to create an illusion, and for him the body plays a central role. The body constructs and deconstructs meaning and so raises doubts about the individual's identity. Barnum's mother, Vera, exemplifies the signing of the body in another way. She was raped on the day Norway was liberated in 1945, and because she is unable to talk about this traumatic incident, she becomes mute. But her neck shows a bruise and after a while it turns out she's pregnant, so that her body 'speaks' for her, thus illustrating what Hal Foster said about the traumatic in *The Return of the Real*.

⁵ Brooks, 2003, s. 54.

The act of visualisation is being carried out metaphorically too. By the use of a narrator who reflects upon his writing, and who is aware that he is visible (“everyone knows who you are”, says Barnum’s half brother Fred), Saabye Christensen visualizes the fictional character as well as the narrator, and consequently the narrative act. The same can be said about the ‘auto-fictional’ novels mentioned earlier.

Although visualisation of the body is an important feature of realist fiction it doesn’t render experience or appearances in a neutral way, as Unni Langås pointed out.⁶ That is because the body cannot be seen only as its biological essence, but is as much a social and linguistic construction, which means it is subordinated to conventional or traditional ways of thinking. The narrator in *Halvbroren* is fully aware of his restrictions in relation to truth, but that doesn’t stop him from telling his family’s history. One could state that the body, just like ‘auto-fiction’ itself, represents a *mellemfelt*. It is a point of reference, but produces meaning itself, something which is shown by ‘dirty realist’ novels like *Fatso* by Lars Ramlie (2003).

However important it is, the body is not so dominant a feature in all the novels examined. As shown in chapter five, Jon Fosse’s prose stresses the visual, but the visual is realized by other means, such as by the use of dramatic techniques.

Fosse’s novel *Det er Ales* shows a great resemblance to his play *Ein sommars dag* [*A summers day*] (1998). The novel describes Signe’s thoughts of her former husband Asle, who never returned from a boat trip on the fjord in 1979. Signe muses upon their life together in the remote old house she still lives in. Realism is thoroughly challenged when Signe *sees* Asle’s great grandparents and his grandparents entering the house. They are apparitions from a past Signe cannot possibly have real memories of. Different time levels are being placed on top of each other in one constant ‘room’ i.e.: the old house and its surrounding areas.

Fosse, who explicitly articulated the opinion that the post modern aesthetic could no longer be in the forefront of his writings because it focussed too much upon form, and who referred to his own fiction as “realist with a touch of formalism and postmodernism”,⁷ has found another way to deal with experience. He has laid aside the

⁶ Jfr. Langås, 2004.

⁷ Fosse, 1989, s. 149.

traditional plot with its logically developed story, to replace it with a fragmented, non-chronological description of scenes fixed in the same spot or *rooms*.

He thus produces an effect of simultaneity, because the appearances are experienced by the same individual. Signe reflects upon the cause of Asle's disappearance, but finds no explanation. That failure is reflected in the text's grammatical and typographical features: Fosse's use of paratactic constructions is striking, and he omits punctuation. The small number of full stops (50 in *Det er Ales* and 21 in *Morgon og kveld*) reflects the lack of final meaning.

This might appear to be a post modern technique, but Fosse does not decline to search for meaning, especially the meaning of existence, which is made clear in *Morgon og kveld*. There, he tries to grasp subjects like birth, death and the hereafter, which gives his realism a touch of Christian mysticism. Fosse refers to something between the concrete everyday reality and the transcendent, and that too can be regarded as a kind of *mellemfelt*, where Fosse attempts to deal with experience and appearance which may not be comprehended by a traditional realist aesthetic, or the traditional realist features described by Philippe Hamon in his article "On the Major Features of Realist Discourse" (1992).

Although Fosse seems to challenge traditional realism more than most of his younger colleagues, they, just like Fosse, are searching for new ways to render memories or experience while questioning the individual's ability to do so. In many cases, as for example in Hanne Ørstavik's *Tiden det tar* and the IMPAC prize winning Per Petterson's *Ut og stjæle hester*, those memories are of traumatic experiences which the individuals have tried to suppress and which defy narration.

But the way those novelists opt to realize the past has more similarity to the Proustian associative mode, than to Fosse's metaphysical or mythical realism. Nevertheless, the different modes have in common that they focus on the momentous, or on situations, thereby emphasising that they only represent a small part of a reality of which they have merely partial knowledge.

That too is revealed by the narrative mode they choose as well as by their choice of themes. The real Ørstavik and Petterson, and the real Saabye Christensen and the 'dirty realists' make reference to what is close at hand, and intimate. The individual is defined mostly in relation to himself, or herself, and his or her family. The relations of such

narcissistic individuals with wider society are only rarely depicted. Family life has traditionally been a frame of reference for realist fiction, but the way it is used in modern realist literature reflects the influence of the rejection by post modernism of the 'grand narratives'.

Contemporary realisms do indeed concede that it is possible to say something about the real, but they keep to a small scale. As Winfried Fluck put it, when he described modern literature as post modern realism: "It is a realism that does not claim to know the real, but wants to come to terms with the fact that it is nevertheless there in an amorphous, ever changing shape."⁸ In many cases realisms stick to the surface, but which are able to look for deeper meaning too, although realizing that fullness of knowledge must always remain an illusion.

⁸ Fluck, 1992, s. 85.