Perspectives on Reality

What is Realism?
Defining Realism in Representation

A set of visual conventions that are used to reproduce what is seen, or ideas, beliefs, politics and a culture’s worldviews in what is believed to be an accurate way.

The notion of realism is context-specific. Art has not always aimed for pictorial realism.

Various art forms use some conventions of realism: linear perspective, symbolism, reflexivity and a focus on materiality are a few examples of this.
Conventions & techniques of representation

Conventions of seeing/worldview
Visual Styles

• Aesthetics are indicators of historical & cultural periods.

• They reflect:
  - different ways of seeing
  - technological capacities
  - politics of the time
  - popular taste
Constructivist Realism (the avant-garde), & Alexander Rodchenko vs. Socialist Realism (state sanctioned)

A CASE OF OPPOSING “REALISMS”
Soviet Constructivist Realism

• Described in the *Realistic Manifesto* (1920).

• Rejected “art for art’s sake” and aimed to put art in the service of social and political goals.

• The *Avant-garde* style used a geometric, machine aesthetic, and emphasized the artwork’s materials and structure as a kind of realism.

• Geometric abstraction was used to promote an entirely new Soviet Union: modern, revolutionary, and forward-looking.
Dance, Alexander Rodchenko (1915)

This geometric abstracted style was the approach of Russian Constructivists and Suprematism. We can see that the breakdown of pictorial representation is used as a way of shifting the Russian understanding of the world.
Construction No. 108, Alexander Rodchenko (1919)
Questions:

How does Rodchenko understand reproduction/mimickry and representation?

What ideologies does he subscribe to?

How did he understand his shift from painting to photography? Why was the medium/style so important to him?

*Construction No. 126*, Alexander Rodchenko (1920)
Stairs, Alexander Rodchenko (1930)
Fire Escape (with a man), Alexander Rodchenko (1930)
Girl with a Leica, Alexander Rodchenko (1934)
Working with an Orchestra, Alexander Rodchenko (1933)
The Live Badge, Alexander Rodchenko (1936)
The Rhine Wheel, Alexander Rodchenko (1940)
Socialist Realism

- A state policy on pictorial representational style as part of the counter-revolutionary dictatorship in the Soviet Union (1932).

- This reveals the government’s counter attack against revolutionary politics (against the Russian Constructivists and Avant-garde).

- Politically, this style of representation was used as a form of propaganda and aims to glorify the role of the poor as a way of upholding Communist state values.
Here we see the dictates of Socialist realism: the paintings needed to represent a positive vision of Communism in conventionally realistic terms. This worker is proud and respectable, not poor, starving and under the thumb of the government.

*Female worker*, Boris Vladimirski (1929)
Roses for Stalin, Boris Vladmirski (1929)
Socialist Realism vs. The Constructivist’s Realism

• Both were focused on what they saw as representing the **reality of Soviet life** and aimed to shape this reality through representation.

• **Socialist realism** was pictorially realistic in its figurative approach and focus on the proud proletariat. It aimed to employ artists to replicate its political views and express these to the public. It censored experimentation.

• **Constructivist realism** was pictorially abstract and focused on introducing a modern (multiple) perspective as a way of transforming Soviet life and thought. It was **avant-garde** in its opposition to state censorship.
Episteme:

An accepted dominant mode of acquiring & organizing knowledge in a given period in history.

We can look at the difference in aesthetic conventions throughout each of these movements/styles as structured around a particular episteme.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984)
Perspicere: “to see clearly”, “to inspect”, “to look through”: a convention of representation that aims to reproduce three dimensional space onto a two dimensional surface. It reproduces a Rationalist worldview that is less sensory and more based on deduction.
Renaissance Painting

School of Athens, Raphael 1509-11

Uses linear perspective as a style of describing a link between Renaissance ideals and their foregrounding in ancient Greek knowledge & philosophy that had been previously lost.
Pythagoras, Heraclitus are reading and writing, representing the ability of society to now spread knowledge through new printing technologies.

A globe is spun, a compass is held: knowledge in the maths and sciences, and **Rationalism** now takes a more central role in this culture’s **episteme**.
Vanishing point on the horizon creates a sense of 3-dimensional space. Shows a rational understanding of space.

Foreshortening gives the sense that Raphel here is situated in space. Creates an understanding of how man fits into his environment.

This perspectival system implies the fixed position of a viewer instead of multiple perspectives.
Here, the **iconic meaning of each figure as a classical Greek philosopher, writer, geographer or mathematician** begins to converge with the **iconic meaning of perspective which is scientific**. Both a rational in the way they attempt to understand the world through systems of logic.

The **paradox** is the position of this fresco on the walls of the Apollo cathedral in the Vatican.

In this fresco, **how the world is framed** becomes equally important to what is in the frame. It expresses that the viewer participates in this tradition by viewing the scene as a **unique center of the universe** (fixed position).
The Case For Perspective as a Distortion of Reality

• By using a tool to replicate what the eye sees, the viewer is distanced from reality as the artist’s eye was at the time of the work’s creation.

• The single fixed placement of the viewer is unrealistic as a philosophical worldview.

• Perspective can be equally used to distort what the eye sees through techniques such as composites (Durer) and Anamorphosis (Davinci).

Example of anamorphosis: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8owCtUTaMd0
Impressionism: *empiricism* and the dynamics of light and colour
Cubism: breaking down space into multiple fragmented perspectives
Surrealism: the reality of the unconscious (symbolism & metaphor)
Dadaism: The play on context and the arbitrary link between signifier & signified.
Action Painting: materials & form become content & an indexical link to the artists’ process.
New Realism: a poetic appropriation of urban, industrial and advertising reality.

OTHER REALISMS AND THE AVANT-GARDE
The Avant-Garde

• Translates as the vanguard or the advance guard. This was a term originally given to front line soldiers who were sent out to survey and plot the course for battle.

• Now a term given to artists who push the boundaries of social norms and status quo with experimentation & innovation.

• Stemming from the Bohemians of early industrial times, the avant-garde are a lineage of modern artists who used the arts as a way to social change.

• The avant-garde is oppositional to “high” and mainstream culture (the Bourgeois), often marginalized for their oppositional views, and have been increasingly co-opted by the mass culture to deflate their political power.
Dancer with a bouquet of flowers (star of the ballet), Edward Degas (1878)
L'Absinthe, Edward Degas (1876)

Artist Marcellin Desboutin

Actress Ellen Andrée

The painting depicts absinthe, the very potent hallucinogenic liqueur as a metaphor for the increasing isolation in modern Paris.

The café is called La Nouvelle Athens, a place that French Bohemians regularly frequented.

Barely mixing colours, but placing them side-by-side, and using black pigment, Degas gives the painting a sense of movement and dynamism.
Still Life with Chair Caining, Pablo Picasso (1912)
Analytic cubism uses multiple perspectives and connects visual planes at the edges.

In this case the subject begins to blend with the background as a monochromatic pallet is used.

Colour was mostly avoided to keep the focus on the forms & shapes.

The planes become smaller and smaller toward the man’s face, making it appear to recede (similar to perspective).

Portrait of Ambrose Vollard, Pablo Picasso (1910)
Fountain, Marcel Duchamp (1917)
Automatic Drawing, Andre Masson (1924)
Jackson Pollock painting in his studio, Martha Holmes (1949).
Travailleurs Communistes, Raymond Haines (c. 1962)
PERSPECTIVE IS NOT A UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLE

Abstraction in *avant-garde* movements of various forms has made us aware that perspective is culturally situated and reflects a particular social and cultural *episteme*.
Project 2
Representing Real Experience

Style/ Method used indicates the specific episteme that creates/ is created in that space
View as a response to the experience of a space

PREVIOUSLY SEEN IMAGES
Robert Doisneau. *Un regard oblique*, 1948
Just What Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?

Richard Hamilton (1956)
A site specific intervention using Yarn directly on chain link fencing.

"Catch of the Day" (2010)  
“Butts-and-Bits, Venice Beach, CA”  

A site specific work made in 
collaborative effort by the social-environmental organization 
Surfrider and the Design company 
Saatchi & Saatchi LA.
A German street artist (anonymous) leaves Plasticine models of fast food on the sidewalk outside of particular institutions as a response to these spaces.
The work of BC artist Brian Jungen & French artist Christian Boltanksi

USING “FOUND OBJECTS” TO REPRESENT REAL EXPERIENCE
Prototype for New Understanding, Brian Jungen (1998)
Nike Air Jordon shoes
Prototypes for New Understanding, Brian Jungen (1998)
Nike Air Jordon shoes
Cetology, Brian Jungen (2002)
Plastic Lawn chairs, 41’x8’
Isolated Depiction of the Passage of Time, 
Brian Jungen (2001)

Video installed inside playing sound from the film “The Great Escape”.

The number and colour of the trays correspond to the population of aboriginal men incarcerated in Canada’s prisons.
No Man’s Land, Christian Boltanski (2010) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIGg7fKKwH8]