

**Reproducing and Reconstructing Reality:
International Conference on Realism(s) in Post-WWII Literature**

**University of Nanjing, China
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Main organizer Professor Wang Shouren. Nanjing University, with Professor He Zhengzhou (MEA), Nanjing University, and Professor Svend Erik Larsen, vice-president of AE, representing the Leverhulme project “Landscapes of Realism”, endorsed by AE, with Professor Dirk Goettsche (MEA), Nottingham University, as PI. Follow the conference website: <http://literature.njboso.com/en/>.

See course description

Living in an era dominated by documentaries, reality TV shows, first-person narratives like autobiographies, memoirs, etc., we have a burning thirst for reality as David Shields boldly declares in his 2010 *Reality Hunger*. Not surprisingly, this shared longing for reality, despite a dazzling amount of reality-based media as well as many other cultural and literary products around the world, is also intellectually registered by a resurgent interest in realism in the past decade. Emerging from an imperative to revisit, reassess and reconfigure the variables and potential of the allegedly outworn 19th century literary concept as the realism/modernism divide subsided and a post-anthropocentric shift to materialism invites an expanded vision on a longer time-scale, an impressive scholarship of realism has risen including Fredric Jameson’s *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), Alison Shonkwiler’s *Reading Capitalist Realism* (2014) and *The Financial Imaginary: Economic Mystification and the Limits of Realist Fiction* (2017), to name just a few, and not to mention *Novel’s* 2016 special issue on Worlding Realisms and *MLQ’s* 2012 special issue on Peripheral Realism.

Yet admittedly, it is one thing to agree on realism’s current purchase on the critical agenda, but quite another to decide what it means by the term realism or realist. The answer if any, given by the editors of *Worlding Realisms* who build their argument on the world literature model structured by Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, lodges a frontal attack to “the autarkic creatures of London and Paris” in the 19th century by radically worlding the term as “a transnational medium shot through with aesthetic possibility” (Goodlad). In 20th century China, the idea of realism or rather, critical realism as a transported catchphrase from the 1930s-60s Marxist criticism championed by Georg Lukacs, established its aesthetically renovative and politically progressive reputation in Chinese critics’ and readers’ cultural encounters with Charles Dickens, Balzac, Thackeray, the Brontë sisters et al. But the moment of eureka with realism so far as contemporary Chinese writers are concerned was not reached until China adopted its opening policy in the late 1970s and early 80s when the Latin American Boom stroke a reverberating albeit belated note to awaken the counterparts in China to a new possibility of realism, i.e. magic realism. The most prominent and heavyweight Chinese writers of today, like Mo Yan, Yu Hua, Su Tong, Yan Lianke, Ge Fei, Ma Yuan and

many more are invariably proud to acknowledge their indebtedness to Garcia Marquez, Luis Borges, Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes et al in their formative years as budding writers.

China's cross-cultural encounter with realism and its permutated variants in the 20th century does not stand as a case in isolation. It has to be approached in a broader context of post-WWII revival of realism. In Britain, critics such as Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge believe that liberal realism features much of the English literature after the 1950s, which runs in parallel to the French existentialist fiction and American Jewish moral realism embodied in Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. The crossroads dilemma facing the postwar British writers between conventional realism and experimentation turns out to occasion the emergence of "the crossover fiction" which freely sources from different literary conventions and techniques on the market of literature. The general academic attitude is increasingly in favor of the merging between the mimetic impulse with postmodern techniques and variously frames it as "self-conscious realism" (Byatt), "experimental realism" (Gasiorek), "postmodern realism" (Alias), etc. The derivative naming reveals a significant fact about the developmental mutation of realism after WWII when the realistic impetus inspired writers as diverse as French avant-gardist Alain-Robbe Grille who advocated a pathbreaking new realism in the 1960s, or the Chinese Nobel laureate Mo Yan whose mesmerizing mingling of folk tales, history and contemporary life was encapsulated by the Swedish Academy as "hallucinatory realism". Almost in response to realisms of all descriptions that compete for academic attention, umbrella terms like neo- or postmodern realism are created supposedly to facilitate a periodic understanding of the term, but oftentimes compound the issue by incorporating elements new or not so new which seems to undermine the whole concept of realism altogether.

It is at this moment that a reevaluation of the poetics of realism by both charting its contour from the origin and expatiating its renewed vitality on a global scale entails a new sense of urgency. A host of questions must be addressed for an encompassing study of issues related to realism: To what extent does the ethical values embodied by the characters, interrogated by the ambivalent author, and imbibed or challenged by the reader in the literary realism of the new era live up to or eschew the realist commitment for moral edification? If we accept Fredric Jameson's interpretation of realism as "seeing things, [and] finding out things, that have not been registered before", how does the artist's mimetic stance interact with his natural desire for constructiveness or the blurred borders in between speak for the essential lure of literary registration? It is against this background that an international conference on realism in post-WWII is being organized at Nanjing University, China. We are very sincere to invite you to take part in this event, and enjoy the intellectually stimulating and culturally enriching experience.