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Thomas B. Connery. *Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life.* Medill School of Journalism Visions of the American Press Series. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011. xxi + 281 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8101-2733-3.

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While the primary focus of the historian's task is to uncover new information about the past through diligent, sometimes serendipitous archival research, an important corollary involves the teasing out of new connections among primary sources, and the discovery of unexplored details along well-trodden historiographical paths. In his recent book *Journalism and Realism*, Thomas B. Connery tends toward the latter approach. This is certainly not a drawback of the book. Though he makes no claims of producing new historical knowledge about American journalism in the nineteenth century, Connery brings into conversation writers, journalists, and illustrators identified with American realism.

Like several of the writer-flaneurs he describes, Connery guides his readers on a walk through a moment of transition in the history of American journalism–and elsewhere in nineteenth-century American culture–from romantic idealism to the realist's obsession with the authentic. Throughout this perambulation, ample quotations and passages from newspaper and magazine writers (e.g., Walt Whitman, George G. Foster, Rebecca Harding Davis, Mark Twain, Lafcadio Hearn, and Stephen Crane) provide local "color" and samples of their writing that describe the complex interplay between an aesthetic of transcendent idealism and an emerging sensibility insistent on visible, positive reality. In part, Connery has been inspired by historian David E. Shi's survey *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture, 1850-1920* (1995), which explores realism as concept and aesthetic disposition in American arts and literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Connery, however, is concerned more narrowly with the impact of realism on journalism and with the emerging practice of what he calls "cultural reporting."

The published stories, which were bound up with what Connery calls a "paradigm of actuality," employed a literary style aimed at capturing slices of daily realities–at times scandalous, at times quotidian–of American life. According to Connery, this paradigm could be "defined by a focus on the actual and real, on people, events, and details that are verifiable and based on observation and experience" (p. 14). The impact of realism on American journalism therefore, he emphasizes, is not restricted to the nineteenth century, but is a tradition whose legacy has continued to influence American journalism. It can be glimpsed in Tom Wolfe's New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s, and continues in human interest reporting today. This paradigm of actuality is not a purely aesthetic predilection either. Drawing on James Carey's assessment of the role of journalism in ordering and giving meaning to life and culture, Connery maintains that actuality, with its attendant thirst for authenticity and fact, is a form of cultural expression and interpretation bound with contemporary values and ideals. It is through this realist lens, he argues, that nineteenth-century Americans made meaning out of the rapidly industrializing and urbanizing society around them. "By its fascination and constant, repeated attempts to feed the curious reading public with depictions, accounts, and stories about themselves and many types of Americans," Connery explains, the vogue for realistic magazine and newspaper writing, photography, and illustrations signified the growing importance of "the actualities of life being lived … in knowing and understanding America" (p. xx).

Beginning with contemporaries Whitman and Foster in chapter 3, several of Connery's chapters are structured as comparative biographies, which allow him to parse the nuances and idiosyncrasies of the realist aesthetic through the style and careers of its practitioners. In no way, then, does Connery conceptualize American realism as a totalizing category, or as a formal movement or school. Instead, he is careful to note realism's organic development as a broad cultural shift–one that did not simply announce the end of its romanticist predecessor. For example, where Whitman's vignettes of

bustling city life and urban marketplaces evinced a latent idealism fused with a realist interest in capturing everyday life, Foster's contribution was far less romanticized, moving to the scenes of poverty, crime, and life on the margins of society that would come to dominate the work of later realists. In chapter 4, Connery examines Davis's depiction of hardscrabble life in a midwestern iron mill alongside Twain's witticisms, and his rather unromantic satire to illustrate the variety of literary and fictional approaches employed by realists. Subsequent chapters examine the style and subject matter favored by newspaper crime writer Hearn, *Harper's* editor Henry Mills Alden, *Atlantic* writer and champion of realism William Dean Howells, fiction writer Hamlin Garland, Crane, Jacob Riis, and others, whose writing lingered on the mean realities of life on the margins in America–of prostitutes, tramps, down-and-outers, seething city jails, and squalid tenements.

Though Connery claims that his project is not necessarily to interrogate the realist paradigm or determine its validity, a full assessment of American realism as a cultural paradigm would not be possible without some engagement with and questioning of its underlying assumptions and biases. Throughout the book, Connery points out a few of the inconsistencies and criticisms of the paradigm, noting for instance how some authors alloyed the "real" of observed experience with subjectivities, with tendencies to moralize or pass judgment, or by using composite descriptions of people and places. These practices reveal a double fidelity–at once to a truth of the observed and of the present, but also to a real present that was "shaped by the imagination, popular sentiment, or common beliefs and values" (p. 109). These strategies are manifest in the work of later authors described in chapter 7, "Experiments in Reality," in which Connery examines styles of literary journalism that mixed verisimilitude with conventional narrative tropes, interviews, and constructed–though "realistic"–dialogue.

Connery's focus on the practice and styles of literary journalism means that some things are left out. For all of the visual metaphors deployed by both Connery and his subjects through the course of the book (snapshots, sketches, vignettes, etc.), not to mention the section on Riis, Connery's discussion of contemporary technologies of representation and reproduction is somewhat thin. Of course as a paragon of actuality, photography entranced many of the realists, and the technology is mentioned here and there in the book, especially in terms of its perceived ability to capture the real in all of its vivid detail. Beyond these several references to the medium however, the book may leave readers wanting a more extensive study of the intersection of technology and culture. Emerging technological systems and mechanization inspired popular imagination and became a significant trope within realist writing, making the production and distribution of mass newsprint and illustrations possible (the last of these is only briefly mentioned in terms of photography). Making these connections between technology and realism seem warranted, particularly in light of a quote from Charles Godfrey Leland that Connery summons early in the book, in which Leland championed the paradigm of actuality, "declaring that a 'higher art' would be attained through a 'dusty, steam-engine whirling realism"' (p. 16). Finally, as Connery fully admits, some readers may take issue with the book's nearly exclusive focus on eastern writers and publications. Without engaging with other realists throughout the nation during this period, Connery may be susceptible to criticisms of overstating the extent of the realist paradigm in nineteenth-century American journalism. Surely there is room here for further analysis.

But by drawing into conversation several diverse and prominent voices of realism, Connery's book makes for a compelling–though by no means exhaustive–analysis of an emerging trend in American journalism, and offers a perspective that implicates journalism in American perspectives on life and society more broadly. This perspective, together with Connery's accessible writing style, makes *Journalism and Realism* a welcome addition to Medill's long running Vision of the American Press series.

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