



## International conference “Material Realisms in Contemporary British Literature”

Université Paul Valéry – Montpellier 3 (EA741 EMMA: Études Montpelliéraines du Monde Anglophone - <https://emma.www.univ-montp3.fr/fr/>) / Université Paris Cité (UMR CNRS 8225 LARCA: Laboratoire de Recherche sur les Cultures Anglophones - <https://larca.u-paris.fr/>) / SEAC - Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines (<http://www.laseac.fr/>)

Conference website: <https://mat-real.sciencesconf.org>

Venue: Université Paul Valéry – Montpellier 3

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**\* Co-organisers:**

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**\* Keynote lectures:**

- Émilie WALEZAK, Professor of contemporary English Literature, Nantes Université
- Peter BOXALL, Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature, University of Oxford

Responding to the novelistic production of the 1960s and 1970s, and its experimental vein, of whom such authors as B.S. Johnson, Christine Brooke Rose, Alan Burns, were obvious representatives, British fiction of the 1980s took its distance with the late-modernist reflexiveness of experimentation and, in the wake of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), attempted to reimagine the logic of mimesis in order to revitalize the dialogue between form and reality. Such a dialectical reappraisal of the interaction of realism and metafiction fuelled the works of Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, Salman Rushdie, Graham Swift, Jeanette Winterson, or David Lodge. In the field of literary theory, Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), Margaret Alexander's *Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction* (1990), or Andrzej Gasiorek's *Postwar British Fiction. Realism and After* (1995) also contributed to redefining the relations between realism and what was considered to be its rival, disruptive form, *i.e.* metafiction. Realism and experimentation were seen then to function in dialectical combination. As Amy J. Elias, or Catherine Bernard, also pointed out in a 1994 issue of *Postmodernist Studies*, realism had to be subverted, disassembled, in order for the truth of writing to be metafictionally and heuristically disclosed. Realism had not lost its hermeneutic relevance, but had acquired self-reflexive critical leverage in its relation to reality. Interestingly, renewed interest in realism was also later expressed by writers like David Shields, in his essay *Reality Hunger* (2011) in which Shields called for new forms of realistic takes on our experience of the contemporary. In his 2015, *The Value of the*

*Novel*, Peter Boxall also engaged with the conflicted forms realism had adopted in contemporary fiction, and similarly stressed our ongoing urge to read the world through its fragmented prism.

Yet, at the same period, the conflict between realism and metafiction seemed also to lose some of its traction, as it was displaced by concerns very much inspired by what was known at the time as “the ethical turn.” Concurrently, other types of realism, like “traumatic realism” (in Michael Rothberg’s 2000 eponymous study) appeared, voicing a demand for both documentation and a reflection on the limits of representation, possibly a heritage of the discrediting of grand narratives engineered by postmodernism, as defined by J.F. Lyotard. Interestingly, such a proposal contributed to reviving the ethical concerns at the heart of the debates on mimesis, and its engagement with its own *episteme*. This new situation was reflected in Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen’s *Metamodernism: History, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism* (2017) that proclaimed the end of “-isms” and the advent of a new period characterized by hesitations between realism and other modes of presentation, and the triumph of the aesthetics of negotiation and compromise. With the historicizing of postmodernism, the confrontational understanding of realism lost some of its relevance, representation opening itself again to “depth,” “affect,” “attention,” and a reinvented investment in materialities (Ganteau).

With the rise of new-materialism (Coole and Frost) and the fresh concerns for environmentalism that have recently become prominent in contemporary discourse, in an era dominated by the increasingly tangible menaces of global warming and anthropogenic change, a new type of realism seems to have come into existence. It should not exclusively be perceived through the perceptual frame provided by the ecological crisis but also through the prism of what has been termed “the Fourth Industrial Revolution” that marks a radical shift in the history of industrial capitalism and is associated with the rise of robotics, artificial intelligence and gene editing, most notably. In that sense, the Anthropocene and the Fourth Industrial Revolution seem to have dealt a radical blow to the vision of the human subject as sovereign, clearly circumscribed, autonomous in its masterful rationality, underscoring instead its vulnerability (Goh) and entangling with its environment. In fact, these two paradigm shifts share an engagement with the limits of the human. More precisely, and paradoxically, the human is grasped in its relationality to what Jane Bennett defined as “vibrant matter.” It is seen as both situated on a continuum involving all elements of the living world, and as engaging with new forms of (artificial) life, through the means of implants, prostheses, and other modalities of enhancement that put it in relation and competition with AI (Winterson, Parker). The new-materialist turn clearly goes along with a posthuman turn whose radical proposal lies in the demise of anthropocentrism, which echoes calls for a more realistic approach to science made by such influential philosophers as Bruno Latour.

In this context, (one of) the purpose(s) of this conference will be to assess the persistence of realism in contemporary literary production, thereby taking up Emilie Walezak’s contention that “not only are writers reinventing realism today, but that there are also new ways of reading realism” (Walezak). (One of) its main hypothesi/es is that, paradoxically, realism is back with a vengeance so as to chronicle the demise of the stable, enclosed, sovereign human subject that was, precisely, at the heart of the realistic idiom of the past decades. Owing to the influence of feminist theory in such areas as the ethics of care, vulnerability studies and posthumanism, among others, the contemporary subject is seen to be caught in a mesh of interdependences with its environments. A great deal of emphasis naturally falls on the ways in which s/he is both “embodied and embedded” (Braidotti), how s/he is entwined with the rest of the living, vibrant world (Bennett) through the means, notably, of “entanglements” and “contact zones” (Haraway), at times envisaged in terms of “trans-corporeality” (Alaimo), and how s/he emerges out of intra-actions in which relation precedes existence (Barad). When Barad evokes the category of “agential realism” to reconceptualise our understanding of the subject, or when contemporary scholars unearth John Dupré’s notion of “promiscuous realism” (Dupré) to account for the way in which the human is a series of assemblages and entanglements, a holobiont that is “both an individual and an ecosystem” at the same time (Brandt), they do so to describe a reality that has evolved radically – unless it is our frames of perception that have adapted

to our understandings of the contemporary crises. In fact, they refer to a subject that is steeped in a materiality that can no longer be denied or overlooked and that presents itself as a priority.

One of the objectives of this conference will be to address the ways in which such new perceptions are remediated by new realistic idioms that take into account manifestations of a new ordinary, hitherto unidentified forms of life, and inventory them. We aim to engage with texts that process our new experience of such realities and present a universe characterised by an “enmeshing of matter and thought, of embodied aesthetic experience and critical experience” that Catherine Bernard calls a “neo-empiricism” (translation ours), a far cry from the binarisms of yesteryear and the metafictional defamiliarization that went along with them. In other terms, we aim to address the ways in which realism redefines itself from inside, by postulating and presenting continuities as opposed to breaks, and by favouring ontologies relying on connections, interactions and intra-actions. Crucially, such a turn (back) to a materialist-realist agenda entails radical aesthetic issues, among which that of the scalar poetics of fictions intent on making us see such entanglements with the micro-reality of organic life forms (Campos). A case in point has been provided by the recent bout of Covid fictions struggling to disclose the organic materiality of our historical condition.

Ultimately, such a program comes with momentous questions: why do we still need the category of “realism” (as distinct from “mimesis,” “representation,” or simply “materialism”) to account for contemporary production? How does our new interest in and concern for materiality lead fictional writing to re-think itself in relation to a specific reality? And, in that sense, how does this new realism succeed in making the world and our experience of it legible again? Or does it, on the contrary, embrace the uncanny opacity of reality? Ultimately, what does this materialist turn share with historical materialism and its critical political agenda? Thus, might such materialist mediations harbour alternative forms of praxis?

Possible and not exclusive lines of enquiry are listed below:

- The precursors of contemporary material-realist texts.
- The relevance of naturalism in relation to material realism.
- The persistence of historical realism in contemporary, material realism.
- Material realism as inventory.
- The perception and consideration of the material.
- The prevalence of metonymy.
- The presentation of scale effects.
- The issue of narrative care and the reparative function of material realism.

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**Deadline to submit proposals to the two co-organisers (300 words + working bibliography): Friday May 17<sup>th</sup> 2024. The decisions of the scientific committee will be communicated mid-June 2024.**

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### **Scientific committee**

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