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Realism under Duress

The 1930s

Andrew Hemingway

Postmodern canards that realism is merely a form of naive and deceptive illusionism deserve to be contested in relation to the visual arts as in relation to literature.[1] Realist art generally was not presented as providing transparent access to social realities, and its practitioners were anything but unreflective about the representational and symbolic strategies they used. Rather, realism implied an attempt to extend the social range of art and displace other modes of art making judged inadequately real, thereby entering into a moral dialogue about the nature of the society in which it was produced. As such it involved an epistemological claim that was also an evaluative one.[2] Over time realism's assumed prerogative on the truths of social reality has been challenged, in part by modernist artists and their critical defenders. But this is in some degree because similar claims have been advanced in modernism's name.[3] This chapter explores debates around realism in 1930s America that responded to the challenge of a newly minted Socialist Realism emanating from Soviet Russia. Through analysis of works by Reginald Marsh and Philip Evergood, I show that the realist distinction between surface and depth in social representation remains illuminating—although not in the way it was commonly understood at the time. The chapter also illustrates how historically mutable and politically invested the concept is.

Earlier American Realisms

The realism of the 1930s differed from earlier modes of American realism in both critical outlook and form. Although Eakins served as an exemplar of native achievement in the realist mode, his quasi-scientific conception of pictorial truth was already obsolete before 1900; the middle-class culture that had formed it had largely disappeared and the positivist ideology that underpinned it was increasingly discredited.[4]

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A measure of this is the fact that Hamlin Garland made no mention of the eleven paintings Eakins exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 in his review of the art section or in the other essays on realism that make up *Crumbling Idols*, instead recommending the outdoor effects of Dennis Miller Bunker and Dodge MacKnight. In contrast to Eakins's systematic and methodical painting of representative types,[5] Garland asserted vaguely that, "Realism is not a theory, it is a condition of mind, of sensibility. The realist has only one law, to be true to himself; only one criterion, life."[6] Instead of the truths of positivistic science, he advocated relativism; reality was in a condition of constant change, and literature (and art) must change with it: "The business of the present is not to express fundamentals, but to sincerely present its own minute and characteristic interpretation of life."[7] In their insistence on the primacy of individual vision and sensibility, these statements illustrate vividly the corrosive effects of the spread of aestheticist doctrine on the model of art as knowledge Eakins's work represented.

Although the realism of the Ashcan School is rightly understood to represent a critique of the American Impressionism Garland favored, it too was marked by aestheticist assumptions; this is evident in the intuitionist conception of pictorial expression and insistence on individualism central to Robert Henri's teachings.[8] The Ashcan School represented that more distanced perspective on social life associated with the literary naturalism of later nineteenth-century writers such as Flaubert and Zola at the same time as it distanced itself from pictorial naturalism in the narrow sense of truth to the contingencies of observed appearances.[9]

Both aestheticist and naturalist tendencies are evident in the work and theory of the School's most sophisticated artist-thinker, John Sloan, who immersed himself in the writings of Flaubert, Maupassant, and Zola from an early age. In his main theoretical statement, *Gist of Art*, Sloan refers repeatedly to the impact that the "ultra-modern art" he saw in Stieglitz's 291 Gallery and the Armory Show had on his thinking.[10] Since *Gist of Art* was not published until 1938, it has to be used cautiously in interpreting his output as an urban realist, the bulk of which dates from 1904 to 1914. On the one hand, without the example of pictorial modernism and the critical discourse that surrounds it, it is hard to imagine Sloan being so insistent that visual art was grounded in "plastic consciousness," that "the subject is of no aesthetic significance," that mathematical perspective has no truth, that paintings are "ideographs" or "graphic signs," and that "imitation of superficial effects has nothing to do with art, which is and always has been the making of mental concepts."[11] On the other hand, given Sloan's accomplished work in the art poster mode during the 1890s, he was probably aware of early modernist theory well before he moved to New York in 1904.[12] This, together with the essentially fictive nature of his illustrational work for the *Philadelphia Press*, makes credible his claim that his early street paintings were all done from memory in the studio. Yet a nebulous notion of authentic experience governed his vision, and Sloan rejected the idea of "art for art's sake," regarding the artist as "the custodian of life consciousness."[13]

The Ashcan School was a cultural formation of a modern type that was simply not present in the United States when Eakins returned from Europe in 1870.[14] There were no American socialist or anarchist groupings of any significance in the early years of Eakins's career; the Ashcan School's heyday coincided with the peak of both the American Socialist Party and the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World. The mass radical politics of these organizations partly made possible the bohemian

subculture of Greenwich Village that nurtured the Ashcan artists; small socialist and anarchist magazines such as *The Masses* and *Mother Earth* contributed to the idea of an oppositional artistic identity and politicized the concept of realism in a new way. But this politicization rubbed against the individualist strand in the thinking of Henri and Sloan.

Sloan's active involvement with socialist politics in the years 1909–16 overlapped with his most productive phase as an urban realist.[15] In retrospect he felt his early work was "socially conscious," but unconsciously so; at the time he gravitated to socialism he was determined not to subordinate his paintings and etchings to "any Socialist object."[16] His later collision with the editors of *The Masses* over the subordination of art to propaganda confirms that this remained his view.[17] Socialism, Sloan later said, disturbed his "thinking as a painter" and put him off his urban subjects, which he had been drawn to by "interest in life and the poetic beauty of things seen when I moved about the city." In a radio interview of 1938, he dismissed contemporary proletarian art as an imagery of "the working man bulging with muscles … or bowed down under his burden." Drawing on a repeated distinction in his writing between imitative art and the form of the pictorial ideograph, he observed that "the realism of modern proletarian art is realism based on subject-matter and has not enough to do with realization," "realization" being Sloan's word for plastic order.[18] In essence, Sloan noted that a new conception of realism had become associated with the left that did not recognize the interrelated values of aesthetic autonomy and individual freedom so central to his own.[19]

Soviet Socialist Realism

The emergence of Socialist Realism marked a rupture with earlier notions of realism and reinforced crude conceptions of the instrumentality of art among the communist left.[20] Although the term was in currency from 1932, it was given substance as a concept and received the imprimatur of officialdom at the Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934, where the writer Maxim Gorky drew a clear line between it and the "critical realism" of bourgeois literature. The latter had helped forge the technical means for socialist literature and was valuable as testimony to the "process of the bourgeoisie's development and decay," but was now obsolete. Present-day bourgeois society had "completely lost the capacity for invention in art"; writers who defended the bourgeois order sank into a despairing individualistic Romanticism, the antithesis of the revolutionary optimism of those who identified with the proletariat and were oriented to changing the world.[21] While the Congress defined the method of Socialist Realism for the literary arts, organization for the visual arts lagged behind.[22] Even so, Soviet policy direction in the arts was clear enough before it took place.

In December 1933, Clara R. Mason of the Philadelphia Art Alliance reported in the College Art Association's magazine *Parnassus* on the "Exhibition of Fifteen Years of Soviet Art," held in Moscow that summer and comprising nearly 3,000 works. Sounding like an official policy statement, she observed blandly that modernist tendencies in Russian art had been "curbed by what the Soviets call 'natural means'," while "the will to battle for socialist construction" had been roused among creative workers. No "art for art's sake" was on view, but only paintings and sculptures "used as chronicles to define and interpret a varied new life to an untutored illiterate

people." Realism—"largely documentary and nationalistic in form and socialistic in content"—was the keynote; "gloomy, dreary, morbid subjects" were notable by their absence.[23] Describing the traveling exhibition organized by the Pennsylvania Museum of Art working with VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations) in 1934–36, *Fortune* struck a similar note, observing that "the principal preoccupation of the artists is not revolution but utopia. Canvas after canvas is filled with the cheerful laughing faces of workers … the cheerful wholesome Russian world where everyone laughs at his work, everyone sings in his rest."[24] Not surprisingly, faced with the ravaged landscape of American capitalism in the Depression era, most American leftist artists felt they had nothing to learn from the "revolutionary romanticism" of Soviet art in formulating an effective realism. But how to picture social life in a way that penetrated beneath surface appearances to apprehend the underlying forces of historical and social change was an intractable problem.

Reginald Marsh's Baroque Realism

In the early years of the Depression, the artist who represented the most sophisticated image of the American city—the fulcrum of capitalist modernity—was Reginald Marsh. The child of artist parents who lived off inherited wealth, Marsh was Yale-educated and "upper-class," although in the words of his close friend Lloyd Goodrich, "his attitude was that of one who was of it but not with it."[25]

In the 1920s Marsh worked as an illustrator for magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*, the *New Yorker*, and *Vanity Fair*, as well as spending three years as staff artist with the sensationalist tabloid, the *Daily News*. He became a relentless documenter of New York City, of which he made countless drawings and numerous photographs.[26] Successive critics and scholars have emphasized the selectiveness of Marsh's vision, his obsessive preoccupation with the proletarian female body, burlesque, homeless men, and drunks.[27] But Marsh's typology of urban life should not be reduced to the quirks of an individual personality; there was a larger ambition behind it. A contrast between imageries of social abjection and vulgar pleasures structures his art and echoes that of Hogarth, perhaps his most important exemplar.

By his own account, Marsh passed through a phase of modernist enthusiasm in the early 1920s.[28] During a long trip to Europe in 1925–26 he began to study the Renaissance tradition seriously and in 1927 fell under the spell of the conservative painter and ideologue Kenneth Hayes Miller.[29] By 1933 he was complaining that "many able talents of today are committing artistic suicide on the artificial gas piped commercially into America by the Ecole de Paris," and describing modern artists as "the great deniers."[30] In contrast to Sloan's receptivity to modernist devices, Marsh increasingly structured his compositions through formal tropes borrowed from Renaissance and Baroque art that enabled him to impose order on the chaotic experience of the contemporary crowd and gave his art an increasingly formalist character.[31] After struggling to translate his graphic conceptions into oil paint, in 1929 Marsh discovered in egg tempera a medium that seemed perfectly adapted to his needs; he used it for most of his major pictures for the next ten years.[32]

In Marsh's hands familiar Ashcan School themes were recast and given a new iconography for the Depression era. For instance, in *Chatham Square* (1931; Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin), one of a series of paintings of destitute

men loitering on the Bowery, Marsh refashioned the motif of Sloan's *Wet Night on the Bowery* (1911; Delaware Art Museum) so that in place of a few solitary figures we see a conglomeration of bedraggled men in lumpy overcoats idling disconsolately before illuminated store windows displaying women's fur coats and dresses. This conjunction emblematized the way male unemployment had become associated with the idea of inadequacy and sexual impotence.[33] The iconography of destitution was also developed in images of the breadline, a quintessential symbol of the Depression, as in *Holy Name Mission* (1931; private collection).[34] The title of the related etching, *Bread Line—No One Has Starved* (1932), made quite clear the artist's opinion of president Herbert Hoover, whose glib comment "no one has starved" even *Fortune* criticized.[35]

The Ashcan School had taken up the working-class beach scene at Coney Island, Rockaway Beach, and Staten Island as a riposte to the decorous Impressionist imagery of bourgeois leisure by Chase, Benson, and others.[36] However, the embracing couples in swimwear in Sloan's *South Beach Bathers* (Figure 35.1) belong to an era before "skin-tight bathing suits" appeared at Atlantic City's first bathing-beauty contest in 1921, before what was perceived as the revolution in manners and morals of the 1920s. Marsh, who lived through the extraordinary transition in attitudes to public display of the body in the first three decades of the century, quoted the oft-cited statistic that at Coney Island "a million near naked bodies could be seen at once, a phenomenon unparalleled in history."[37]

This spectacle was made possible through the transformation of Coney Island into a working- and middle-class resort in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, facilitated by the new trolley line opened in 1895 and then by the extension of the subway in 1920, which finally made Brooklyn's weekend getaway easily accessible to day-trippers from other boroughs. On Sundays especially, huge crowds flocked to the amusement parks (Steeplechase Park [1897], Luna Park [1903], and Dreamland [1904, destroyed by fire in 1911]), the beach, and the Riegelmann Boardwalk inaugurated in 1923.[38] What struck commentators about the great heaving panorama of humanity on the beach was the exposure of the nation's racial and ethnic diversity. In 1925 an Italian American writer observed:

> When you bathe at Coney Island you bathe in the American Jordan. It is holy water. Nowhere else in the United States will you see so many races mingle in a common purpose for a common good. Democracy meets here and has its first interview skin to skin.[39]

But representatives of white Protestant groups were acutely aware of a sense of difference. The Midwestern hero of Homer Croy's 1929 novel, *Coney Island*, was struck by how many people "seemed to be foreigners": "sometimes, when an eddy of people swirled about him, he heard no word of English. He hardly seemed to be in America."[40] Writing eight years earlier, the liberal writer Bruce Bliven was more specific: "Coney Island is one more place from which the native Yankee stock has retreated before the fierce tide of the southern European and Oriental [i.e., Jews]."[41] While Marsh's beach scenes (Figure 35.2) seem like a celebration of plebeian energies, there is a feeling of frenzy and excess about them that speaks of an underlying anxiety around the accumulation of desire and diversity absent from the Ashcan School precedent. Marsh also extended the iconography of Coney Island by picturing the sideshows and seems to

FIGURE 35.1 John Sloan, *South Beach Bathers*, 1907–08, oil on canvas, unframed $31\frac{13}{16} \times 36 \times 1\frac{1}{4}$ in. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. *Source*: © Francis G. Mayer / Corbis / © Estate of John Sloan. ARS, New York and DACS, London 2014.

have been particularly drawn to the Bowery—the sleazy thoroughfare of amusements jammed between West 16th Street and Jones Street—where the crowds were especially intense and the notorious overload of sounds and smells was most overwhelming.[42]

Goodrich aptly observed that Marsh's "first temperas of the early 1930s had a quality of coming directly out of reality. They were a continuation of his reportorial illustrations, on a much larger scale."[43] The coloring of paintings such as *Wonderland Circus Side Show* (Figure 35.3) is far more garish and gaudy than that of the artist's works from a few years later, giving them an almost Expressionist quality. The crowd in this painting is racially differentiated, but proximity does not translate into community. Women clutch kewpie dolls or devour hotdogs—Coney Island's signature food[44]—and ice creams. The girl left of center with exposed thighs and arms leans back into the embrace of the man behind her, whose hand lies just under her breast. Another girl, in high heels, to our right, catches the viewer's eye with a provocative look. Meanwhile, her male companion tries to sell a wristwatch to a disinterested soldier. Over the whole the barker, with his curvaceous companions, one of whom is tied up as if crucified, gestures fruitlessly against an inky sky in which a single streetlight stands in for an absent moon. The pyramidal structure—a compositional device conceived to project subordination and hierarchy—produces no psychological unity beyond a common mood of aimlessness. Litter covers the foreground. In *Wonderland*

FIGURE 35.2 Reginald Marsh, *Coney Island Beach*, 1935, tempera on panel.
Source: Collection of Bruce & Robbi Toll, © ARS, New York and DACS, London 2014.

Circus Side Show, Marsh took the theme of Rubens's *Kermesse* (1635–38)—a painting he copied in the Louvre in 1925 or 1926—and reworked it for modern times, converting its wholesome rural revelry into something sickly and discordant.

One contemporary critic described the figures in such images as "distorted to gain intensity, but an intensity of emptiness, this mental underworld of people whose brains have been shot to hell by the radio, the moving pictures and the press, shows the strains of modern life affecting it in its lowest strata, depicted in the vacuous expressions of shop girls, clerks and their families on a holiday."[45] Marsh's paintings play on this fear of the mass for their moral frisson, a fear grounded in a sense of social distance that had been a *sine qua non* of his work as an illustrator for fashionable magazines. In Croy's *Coney Island* a rube from the Midwest must choose between the alluring tightrope walker Queenie Johnson, the "queen of Coney Island," and a refined daughter of the bourgeois Charmian De Ford, who plays classical piano and sings on the radio. For all her fine qualities Queenie is "bizarre and showy," sometimes chews gum, and says "ain't," while Charmian is "a stable, dependable, cultured girl."[46] The socially aspiring hero is fascinated by Coney Island but in the end chooses the bourgeoisie. Through the increasing conservatism of his pictorial style Marsh made the same choice, or at least aligned himself with a cosmopolitan liberal fraction of that class.

Goodrich acknowledged that Marsh was attracted to socialism and contributed drawings to the communist magazine *New Masses*, insisting at the same time that "as a painter he was completely apolitical."[47] However, Marsh's concern with the theme

FIGURE 35.3 Reginald Marsh (American, 1898–1954), *Wonderland Circus Side Show, Coney Island*, 1930, tempera on canvas stretched on Masonite, 48¾ × 48 in. *Source*: SN951 Collection of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the State Art Museum of Florida. © ARS, New York and DACS, London.

of unemployment in the early 1930s when he dallied with the communist left belies this claim. If he did not sign the call for the American Artists' Congress in 1935,[48] it was perhaps because by then he was alienated by communist criticisms of his work such as a review of December 1934 that complained "he seldom tells you what he thinks of his material" and confined himself to "the surface aspect of the people and things he paints."[49] Marsh was caught between communist friends such as Jacob Burck, who ardently endorsed Soviet denunciations of "naturalism" and "formalism," and liberals such as John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton, who were the objects of such attacks and whose works he also respected.[50]

In *The Park Bench* (Figure 35.4) Marsh positions three sleeping men with bundles and an African American woman next to a bareheaded man reading the Communist

FIGURE 35.4 Reginald Marsh, *The Park Bench*, 1933, tempera on Masonite mounted on panel, 24 × 36 in. Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, NAA-Nebraska Art Association Collection. *Source*: Photo © Sheldon Museum of Art. © ARS, New York and DACS, London 2014.

Party's *Daily Worker* in Union Square.[51] The reader is the antithesis of the man to his left, hunched over with head on hands and hat over his eyes; an emblem of alertness is contrasted with one of apathy. For a while Marsh may have hoped that communist organization offered a solution to the fragmented hedonistic crowd of *Wonderland Circus Side Show*, but if so the message was obscured by the structural harmonies of his style. A review of the artist's 1934 one-man show observed perceptively that his increasingly "adequate technique" had led to "mellowness," so that in *The Park Bench* "the usual group of dirty loungers and job-hunters … have been looked at as a compositional unity against a dusky sordid background and … are related to each other by the surrounding air and a flowing rhythmical line."[52]

Another newspaper in a 1935 painting implies a different political direction. In *Coney Island Beach* (Figure 35.2), a heaving throng of robust men and women engage in good-humored play under the banner of the Brooklyn Roosevelt Club. In the left foreground lies a copy of the tabloid *Daily News*—then the largest-circulation paper in the United States—with the banner headline, "U.S. THREATENS SOVIET RUSSIA."[53] This refers to the Roosevelt Administration's complaints to the Soviet government over speeches on US domestic politics by American communist leaders at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in Moscow in August 1935, which were taken to violate Ambassador Litvinov's promise to Roosevelt at the time of US diplomatic recognition of the USSR in 1933 that his country would not interfere in American internal affairs.[54] Given that Marsh himself had been a high-salaried employee of the *Daily News* from 1922 to 1925, the positioning of the paper opposite his signature on

the far right seems significant. Further, the painting suggests that the rambunctious crowd of American proletarians, united under the Roosevelt banner that tops the pyramidal scheme, are behind the president and indifferent to the promises of the coming People's Front. Just as the Roosevelt Administration responded sharply to a perceived attempt to import Soviet-style politics into the United States (partly with its eye on the right-wing maneuverings of the National Civic Federation and the Liberty League),[55] so Marsh responded to the challenge of Socialist Realism, perhaps thinking of Nina Kashina's vapid holiday beach scene, *Sunshine and Sea at Koktebel, Crimea*, in the Pennsylvania Museum's traveling *Art of Soviet Russia* exhibition.[56] But Marsh had also engaged in romanticization, substituting ideal bodies with bland faces for the emphatic ethnic and racial diversity of *Wonderland Circus Side Show*.

To Marsh's left-wing detractors his art represented a form of surface naturalism that avoided the gritty realities of the factory and picket line.[57] For his critical admirers, his perceived non-judgmental stance was intrinsic to the value of his work; the fact that "he does not pretend to be a judge of existing conditions" was admirable and constituted his realism.[58] Such commentators found in Marsh's works confirmation of their view of mass culture as vulgar and tawdry, the working class as pleasure-seeking and individualistic, and the unemployed as degraded and impotent. In brief, liberal critics discovered in Marsh's imagery symbols of the times that accorded with their ideological preconceptions. Although his iconography was novel, the form of his work—with its many allusions to Renaissance and Baroque precedents—was essentially conservative, and became increasingly so, representing the type of realism that Roman Jakobson labeled "the conservative tendency to remain within the limits of a given artistic tradition."[59]

Philip Evergood's Expressionist Realism

What Jakobson saw as the opposite form of realism, "the tendency to deform given artistic norms conceived as an approximation of reality,"[60] is best represented by the work of Marsh's sometime friend Philip Evergood, whose background was also bourgeois—if perhaps more bohemian. Evergood was educated mainly in England, including spells at Eton and Cambridge, before a two-year stint at the Slade School of Art in 1921–23.[61] From 1923 to 1931 he divided his time between the United States and Europe, developing a cosmopolitan knowledge of modern art. Evergood returned to the US for good in 1931, and in 1933 began to attend the John Reed Club.[62] He was friendly with Marsh, whom he met in 1932; they shared an interest in themes of street life and popular entertainments but diverged over the question of didacticism in art.[63]

Formally speaking, the basis for Evergood's aesthetic was laid in the 1920s when he painted chiefly biblical subjects. At his 1933 show at the Montross Gallery, works such as *Hagar and Ishmael* mixed with others with titles like *Negro Communist*. The *New York Times*'s critic suggested the artist was "playing a game of European pastiche" and associated his style variously with those of Delacroix, Cézanne, and Picasso.[64] Another commented on the strident color of some of the works on view.[65] However, if the foundations of a broadly Expressionist style were already there, it was utilized to new effect at Evergood's 1935 Montross show, where the central work was the imposing *Thousand Dollar Stakes*, painted in 1934, and now known as *Dance Marathon* (Figure 35.5).

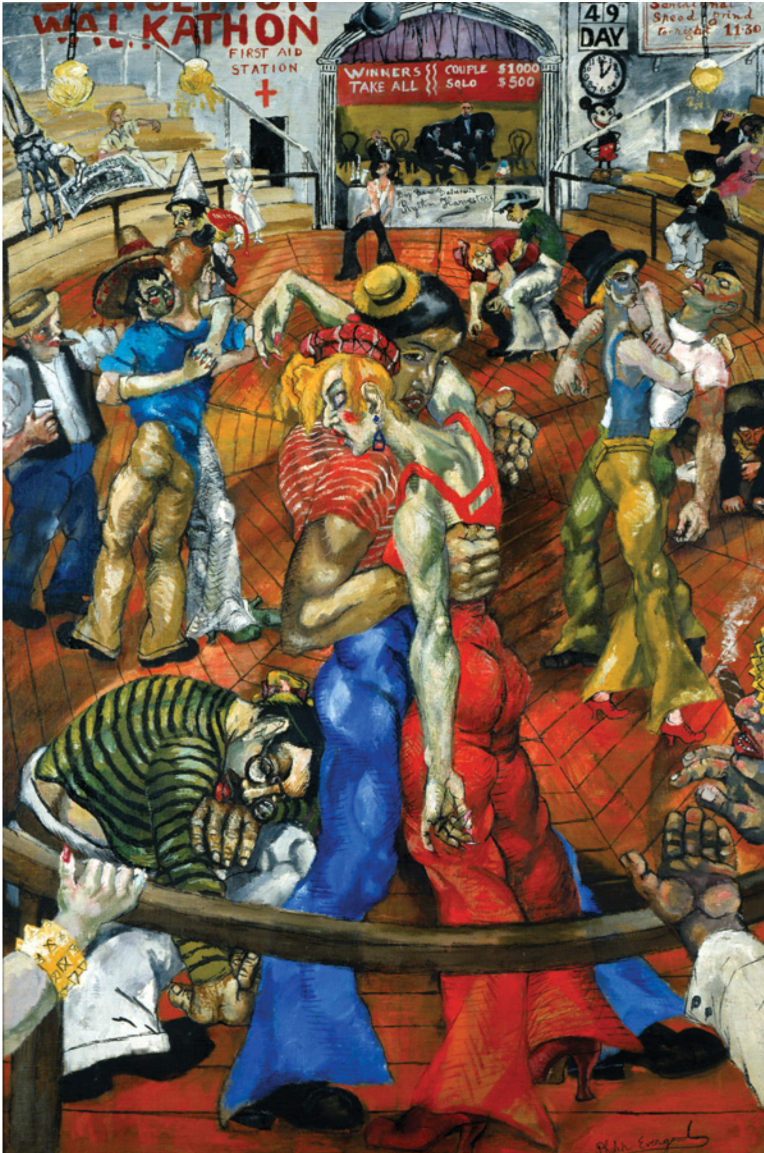

FIGURE 35.5 Philip Evergood, *Dance Marathon*, 1934, oil on canvas, 60 1/16 × 40 1/16 in. (152.6 × 101.7 cm). *Source*: Blanton Museum of Art. The University of Texas at Austin. Gift of Mari and James A. Michener. 1991. Photo: Rick Hall.

Dance marathons began as one of the record-setting fads of the 1920s when Alma Cummings danced for twenty-seven hours at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City in April 1923 to best earlier English feats.[66] They quickly turned into a potentially lucrative business in which endurance tests became a highly structured form of theatrical spectacle organized by promoters. Milton J. Crandall's "Dance Derby of the Century," which ran for nineteen days at Madison Square Garden in June 1928, epitomized the

shift.[67] Contestants, who needed no dancing talent, competed for monetary prizes; regular rest intervals protracted contests for days or even months, while a vaudeville component was introduced to maintain the audience's interest. The tone of marathons changed in the Depression, when economic desperation drove many young people to take part and a cheap entertainment of melodrama and romance appealed to those with time on their hands. By 1935 it was estimated that 20,000 people were employed in the business and almost all cities with a population of over 50,000 had hosted a marathon.[68] Rebranded as "walkathons"—as in Evergood's painting—dance contests were increasingly dominated by professional dancers and fixed by their promoters.[69]

In 1935, a National Endurance Amusement Association was set up in an attempt to regulate dance contests and rid them of their association with fly-by-night promoters, sexual license, and crime. It scarcely got off the ground, and concerted opposition from middle-class morals organizations, public health officials, and movie theater owners led to bans in an increasing number of states and cities. By October 5, 1935, twenty-four states were enforcing statutes against endurance contests.[70]

The unsavory reputation of the business is well illustrated by the 1933 Warner Brothers comedy *Hard to Handle*, in which James Cagney plays a small-time con artist who co-organizes a crooked dance marathon in which his girlfriend is to win the prize money. Further testimony is the novelistic depiction of marathons as squalid spectacles in Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* and James T. Farrell's *Judgment Day*, both of which appeared in the year Evergood's painting was exhibited. In 1934, Farrell—who had earlier produced a report on dance marathons for University of Chicago sociology students[71]—also wrote a short story representing the dance marathon from a participant's standpoint, with the ironic title, "The Benefits of American Life."[72]

Although I have found no direct evidence that Evergood knew about this, he and Farrell both moved in the circle of the New York John Reed Club in 1934 and personal contact between them is not improbable.[73] Moreover, there are striking parallels between *Dance Marathon* and Farrell's story, in which an impoverished Greek immigrant, Takiss Fillios, enters a marathon because he yearns for enough money to escape from menial jobs and return to Greece a wealthy man. Like Evergood's swarthy male protagonist, Takiss is partnered with "a beautiful blonde American girl of the type he had always dreamed of as a possible wife." Farrell also describes the dance hall as a "ring"—as it appears in Evergood's painting—whereas most marathon halls were quickly constructed rectangular affairs.

The novelty of Evergood's conception becomes evident by comparison with Marsh's painting, *Zeke Youngblood's Dance Marathon* (Figure 35.6).[74] In the latter work we view the dancers from within the floor space as a frieze of women, some exhausted and supported by their male partners, others talking nonchalantly; at far left a woman combs her hair in a vanity mirror while behind her a bizarrely costumed partner reads a newspaper. The coloring of the figures has numerous bright accents, but the hall behind them recedes into a darker shadowy space, and the figures flow together like a group by Poussin.

By contrast, Evergood's composition is all disjunctions and awkwardness, reminiscent of Max Beckmann, whom he discovered in the mid-1920s and greatly admired.[75] Marsh's coloring has an almost Rococo softness about it; Evergood's contrasts of red, blue, and yellow are jarring and unmodulated. His elongated and disproportioned figures wear absurd hats and, as in Farrell's story, the women all wear beach pajamas.

FIGURE 35.6 Reginald Marsh, *Zeke Youngblood's Dance Marathon*, 1932, tempera on gessoed canvas mounted on wood, 24 × 36 in. (overall). Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, New York, Edward W. Root Bequest. 57.197. *Source*: Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute / Art Resource, NY / Scala, Florence. © ARS, New York and DACS, London 2014.

(Women were normally permitted to wear trousers only late at night, which matches the glaring lights and the clock's hands indicating two o'clock.) At lower left, the awkward posture of the solo male dancer in striped sweater bottom is probably adopted to avoid the disqualification incurred if both knees touched the floor. Above him a couple is reprimanded by the floor judge, with cigar and drink in hand; floor judges often played villains in the spectacle. The overgrown hands of the central male figure support the woman who sleeps on his shoulder; contestants learned to sleep while walking as well as in their break periods. To their right a female contestant supports her partner. The fulcrum of the composition is the blonde woman's small breast at the center of the canvas, resting on her partner's forearm; above that their limp embrace echoes the grip of the web that contains them.

Dance contests forced men and women into intimate contact in public. Romances, jealousies, and staged marriages were regular features of the show, but the passions involved could be real. Farrell writes of Takiss and his partner Marie Glenn, "Again and again their bodies were jolted, shoved, pushed against each other, and he began wanting her so that her very nearness became excruciating."[76] In some contests participants—among whom there could be prostitutes—had sex in a so-called snake room.[77] Promoters pretended concern for the welfare of the contestants, but the skeletal hand in the upper left of Evergood's design, close to the nurse and first aid station, points to the shallowness of such claims. After a while Takiss's Marie "became haggard and blowsy and looked like a worn-out prostitute," she "used more and

more cosmetic, and her face became like a ghastly caricature of the pretty girl who had entered the contest."[78] The scarlet lips and rouged cheek of Evergood's central figure contrast with her unwholesome pallor. The event is on its forty-ninth day and a speed grind—a type of race designed to eliminate competitors and maintain audience interest—is promised for that night. The early morning crowd at walkathons often included a criminal element; Evergood's leering man with a stogy at lower right and the woman opposite him, with her pointed red thumbnail and knuckleduster bracelet, may be intended to suggest this clientele.

In Farrell's *Judgment Day* the radio announcer tells his listeners that the Silver Eagle Ballroom—where the dance has been going 367 hours—"is one place these days that is always open, always interesting, always exciting, with thrills and humor and pathos galore." The main character, Studs Lonigan, persuaded to go by his girlfriend Catherine, initially dismisses the idea of "watching a bunch of damn fools sleeping on their feet." "When is something going to happen?" he asks—a question he repeats two pages later. Catherine too cannot see "anything interesting" to begin with. But both become absorbed by the interactions between the contestants and the spectacle of their collapses. "It is kind of interesting, though. It gets you interested without you realizing it, once you get to know who they are," Catherine says when they finally leave.[79]

Dance marathon contestants and audiences alike entered a liminal space in which normal time was suspended and real suffering turned into a form of theater.[80] The stasis of Evergood's composition captures this perfectly. Whereas Marsh generally used Renaissance and Baroque forms as devices to suggest movement, Evergood thought within the surface structures of modernist painting, which tend to exclude or reduce markers of time. His contestants are pinned down like insects on the picture surface just as they are stuck in the spider's web of the floor pattern. The ring of the space is a serpent biting its own tail.

Writing in the *New York Sun*, Henry McBride likened *Dance Marathon* thematically to Toulouse-Lautrec, but also noted that the drawing was closer to Grosz or Jules Pascin in its calculated naivety.[81] An emphasis on the element of grotesque humor in the painting runs through the reviews, but McBride and others found it uncomfortable viewing. Only one critic used the term "realist," and he saw Evergood's work as a "coarse and disturbing commentary on contemporary life."[82] The most effective characterization came from Robert Godsoe, director of the Uptown Gallery and a proponent of modernism who later supported The Ten:

> Of the many anecdotalists showing about town these days Evergood has infinitely more strenuous concern with his exceptionally gruesome story. His composition shatters itself, his colour is viciously incisive, his joke is a complete blasphemy. He never snickers but likes the decisive guffaw and plays about with an imagination that is convincingly and burningly morbid with the debris of our civilization, obsessed with putrescence and vulgarity and conveying his imagery with an acute technique which is extraordinarily well-subjugated to the matter at hand. Like Cadmus he laughs and blasphemes but unlike Cadmus he never swathes his indictment in the velvet of a popular technique.[83]

That is, Evergood eschewed that ingratiating sheaf of tradition in which Cadmus, like Marsh, clothed his subjects. It is not surprising that John Sloan advised the artist to "smooth" his conception; Evergood declined.[84]

As Raymond Williams has shown, the concept of realism is shot through with a distinction between surface and depth, appearance and reality.[85] For Marsh's critics on the left, his art remained "primarily … epidermal," too concerned with pleasures of observation from a comfortable social distance.[86] By 1934–35 the edgy qualities in his work that discomforted some critics at the beginning of the decade were being ironed out. At the same time, "realists of the Coney Island stripe," who looked to the street only "for an exciting spectacle," were criticized for failing to make "a definite alignment … with the working class as a progressive force," failing to represent "the will for struggle."[87] In some works of the 1930s—and notably *American Tragedy* (1937; private collection)—Evergood depicted figures that might be seen to embody this quality; but not in *Dance Marathon* or most others.[88] This was not where the substance of his realism lay.

Realism did not consist in packaged truths to be handed over to the audience like moral homilies as more simple-minded communist critics assumed. The ugliness and disharmony of Evergood's art by comparison with Marsh's was jarring; his pictures prohibited simple enjoyment or absorption, refusing the spectator the familiar comfort of perspectival space, with its illusions of distance and omnipotence. Like Brecht's ideal audience in the epic theater, the spectator was invited not to identify with the characters depicted but to "observe them as interested outsiders," who would be prompted to reflection and action.[89] "The artist-innovator must impose a new form upon our perception, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before," Jakobson observed.[90] It is the jolt of the unfamiliar and unexpected in Evergood's art that raised it above the depiction of surfaces, inviting the spectator to a fresh understanding of familiar experience. As was frequently observed, Marsh's art depicted kitsch and the vulgar, but he represented them in the forms of High Art. By contrast, Evergood assimilated these qualities into the very form of his art. This was a far more risky strategy, as his numerous failed pictures show. But such risk-taking—which often involved playing with the popular and grotesque—was necessary to modern "artist-innovators" as Jakobson defined them and is the quality that distinguishes critical realism from conservative realisms such as Marsh's, socialist or otherwise.[91] Marsh's example illustrates the exhaustion of traditional modes; Evergood points to the far more uncertain character of realism in art after modernism and its dependence on the "vulgarity" Robert Godsoe recognized.

Notes

1 Matthew Beaumont deals effectively with postmodern misrepresentations of realism. See Beaumont, 2007.

2 My argument here is indebted to Denith, 2007, pp. 33–34.

3 See Hemingway, 2007; Leslie, 2007.

4 For Eakins's reputation in the early twentieth century, see Troyen, 2001. For the relationship between science and pictorial vision in Eakins's work, see Leja, 2004. I use "middle-class" in the sense of Blumin, 1989; Eakins did not belong to the bourgeoisie. The most useful account of Eakins's ideology is Braddock, 2009, though in my view Braddock assumes too neat a consonance between Eakins's outlook and that of the bourgeoisie.

5 On types in realist theory, see Wellek, 1963, pp. 242–246.

6 Garland, 1960, p. 93.
7 Garland, 1960, pp. 64, 63.
8 Henri, 1923.
9 For the realist/naturalist distinction, see Lukács, 1972, pp. 85–96, 140–147.
10 Sloan, 1944, pp. 15, 192; Loughery, 1995, pp. 186–192.
11 Sloan, 1944, pp. 16, 21, 41, 68, 18, 12.
12 Loughery, 1995, pp. 28–32.
13 Sloan, 1944, pp. 12, 42, 20.
14 On formations of this type, see Williams, 1981, pp. 71–86
15 Loughery, 1995, pp. 144–147, 154, 164–165, 172–185, 196–198, 216–220; Brooks, 1955, ch. 7.
16 Sloan, 1944, p. 3; diary entry for May 5, 1909, in Sloan, 1965, p. 310.
17 Zurier, 1988, pp. 52–57.
18 Quoted in Brooks, 1955, p. 99 and n.
19 Despite their differences over editorial policy Sloan and *Masses* editor Max Eastman were united in marking a clear-cut distinction between art and practical concerns—see Eastman, 1913, ch. 1. Eastman denounced the instrumentalism of Soviet thinking on the arts in Eastman, 1934.
20 Such instrumentalism had been a defining feature of the proletarianism current in communist artistic circles since 1928—see Hemingway, 2002, pp. 13–16.
21 Gorky et al., 1977, pp. 41–42, 44.
22 Taylor, 2007, p. 169.
23 Mason, 1933, pp. 24, 25.
24 Anon., 1935, p. 64. Christian Brinton's catalogue essay, "The Living Content in Soviet Art," confirms this. See Brinton, 1936.
25 Goodrich, 1972, pp. 24, 34. On Marsh's class and character, see also Todd, 1993, pp. 48–55.
26 Cohen, 1983, p. 11.
27 For example, Cohen, 1983, p. 2; Todd, 1993, pp. 108–120
28 Goodrich, 1972, p. 26. This is confirmed by the Expressionist style of Marsh's early linocuts. See Sasowsky, 1976, pp. 61–76.
29 Goodrich, 1972, pp. 28–30.
30 Marsh, 1933, p. 188, quoted in Blossom, 1933, p. 264.
31 "[H]e presents to us an ordering of chaos": Salpeter, 1935, p. 46.
32 Goodrich, 1972, pp. 30, 33–34, 161–162.
33 Louis Adamic gives a vivid description of the effects of the Depression on the standing of men in many families in Adamic, 1938, pp. 283–287.
34 Sasowsky, 1976, no. 139. On breadlines in New York, see Adamic, 1938, pp. 294–297.
35 For Hoover's statement, see Dawley, 1991, p. 335.
36 Zurier et al., 1995, pp. 51–52, 167, 171.
37 Quoted in Goodrich, 1972, p. 38.
38 Snyder-Grenier, 1996, pp. 186–191, 195, 196.
39 Cautela, 1925, p. 283. The same point is made in Federal Writers' Project, 1982, p. 473.
40 Croy, 1929, pp. 35–36.
41 Bliven, 1921, p. 374. Jews owned many Coney Island properties—see Snyder-Grenier, 1996, p. 194. In Croy, 1929, a Jew is the mastermind and effective "king" of the place.
42 Snyder-Grenier, 1996, p. 193; Federal Writers' Project, 1982, pp. 473–474. For evocations of the noise and smells, see Croy, 1929, pp. 36–37, 238–239.

43 Goodrich, 1972, p. 40.
44 Supposedly invented by the German immigrant Charles Feltman, whose restaurant was a Coney Island landmark. After 1916, the hot dog was particularly associated with Nathan's, which from 1920 stood opposite the Stillwell Avenue subway terminal.
45 Anon., 1932, p. 299.
46 Croy, 1929, p. 294.
47 Goodrich, 1972, p. 44. Edward Laning—another of Marsh's close friends—also claimed he was "aloof from every sort of politics." See Laning, 1973, pp. 12–13. Both Goodrich and Laning were writing during the Cold War, and in Laning's case he had his own flirtation with the communist left to disavow. In 1922 Marsh contributed eight works to *The Liberator*, precursor to *New Masses*.
48 Marsh was not a signatory to either the 1935 or 1936 versions of the call. He was listed as an exhibitor in ACA Galleries, *Exhibition: American Artists Congress*, November 10–23, 1935 (AAA D343: 88–91). Marsh's desk calendars of 1931–34 reveal him attending classes at the Workers' School, watching Soviet films, mixing with communist and socialist artists, and teaching at the John Reed Club. In January 1932 he exhibited at the club with Jacob Burck, one of the leading communist cartoonists and a model proletarian artist. In July 1933 he made a brief visit to the USSR. His first contribution to *New Masses* was in November 1926; as late as July 1935 he contributed a caricature of the Secretary of State for Labor, Frances Perkins. His painting *A Box at the Metropolitan* (whereabouts unknown) was illustrated in *New Masses*' "Revolutionary Art" issue of October 1, 1935.
49 Alexander, 1934, p. 27. Marsh was listed as an art editor in this issue.
50 On Socialist Realism, see Burck, 1936, and against Regionalism, see Burck, 1935. Burck accused Benton of practicing a superficial naturalism.
51 Marsh reportedly traded a picture for a subscription to the *Daily Worker* and read it daily. See Salpeter, 1935, p. 49.
52 Anon., 1934. The painting was originally titled *Park Bench in Union Square*.
53 The headline was carried by the late edition of the *Daily News* of Monday, August 26, 1935, and accompanied an article by Joseph H. Baird, "U.S. Threatens Soviet Break."
54 Maddux, 1980, pp. 38–42.
55 Maddux, 1980, p. 39.
56 Illustrated in Anon., 1935, p. 65.
57 Marsh's main images of manly labor are in his series of paintings and prints of railroad locomotives such as *Locomotives, Jersey City* (1934; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC).
58 Blossom, 1933, p. 264. Blossom placed Marsh "alongside" Curry, Benton, and Hopper (p. 265).
59 Jakobson, 1978, p. 41.
60 Jakobson, 1978, p. 41.
61 Evergood's parentage and formation are described in detail in Taylor, 1987, chs. 1–3.
62 For Evergood and the John Reed Club, see Hemingway, 2002, pp. 60–61, 65.
63 Taylor, 1987, pp. 82, 90–91.
64 Jewell, 1933.
65 Anon., 1933.
66 I draw primarily on Calabria, 1993, and Martin, 1994.
67 Martin, 1994, ch. 2.
68 Martin, 1994, pp. xvi, xvii.

69 Calabria, 1993, ch. 3; Martin, 1994, ch. 3.
70 Martin, 1994, chs 6 and 7.
71 Farrell, 1993.
72 Farrell, 1935, pp. 215–230.
73 I have not been able to discover whether the story was published in a magazine in 1934, as many of Farrell's stories were.
74 George Ruty and Zeke Youngblood promoted the Second Annual Boardwalk Marathon Dance Contest at Young's Million Dollar Pier in Atlantic City between May and October 1932: Calabria, 1993, pp. 20, 30, 43.
75 For Evergood and Beckmann, see Taylor, 1987, pp. 149, 150, 151.
76 Farrell, 1935, p. 225.
77 Calabria, 1993, pp. 73–74; Martin, 1994, pp. 73–81.
78 Farrell, 1935, p. 308.
79 J.T. Farrell, *Judgment Day* (1935), in Farrell, 1938, pp. 292, 283, 300.
80 Calabria, 1993, p. 142, notes the serialized and fragmented character of time in the walkathon contest.
81 McBride, 1935.
82 Burrows, 1935.
83 Godsoe, 1935.
84 Taylor, 1987, p. 82.
85 "Realism," in Williams, 1983, pp. 257–262.
86 Benson, 1934, p. 61.
87 Klein, 1935.
88 On Evergood in the later 1930s, see Hemingway, 2002, pp. 140–144.
89 Goldbeck, 1935, p. 27.
90 Jakobson, 1978, p. 40.
91 This is a distinction that parallels Max Horkheimer's opposition of "traditional" and "critical" theory. See Horkheimer, 2002.

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