

“Realistic”

One very distinctive visual style is sometimes treated as if it did not exist, because the work of art so directly represents the subject that they seem to be the same thing. This style is called “realistic” or, its near twin, “photographic.” These terms are so widely used and misused that they should be avoided whenever possible. Of the two, “photographic” is the less informative because photographs can look like anything. There is no style inherent in the products of a camera. If a certain kind of photograph has been assumed by the writer, then which kind it is must be explained. Since the analogy requires its own explanation, the term “photographic style” creates more problems than it solves.

If “realistic” is used to mean a strong likeness to the appearance of things as we see them in the world, then the reader needs to know the particular ways in which the particular work resembles which aspects of the world. Social conventions play a part, since different people and different cultures define the world differently. For all of these reasons, the most useful definition of this style – like that of any other – depends upon noting very specific visual features which are defined very specifically.

Certainly it is tempting to call paintings by Northern Renaissance artists such as Jan van Eyck “realistic.” The pictures present an extraordinary amount of visual information about the surfaces of physical things. Texture, color, reflections, all appear in detail so fine that many of the individual brush strokes are invisible. In addition, the pictures convey a sense of three-dimensional light-filled space. A moment’s thought, however, is all it takes to realize that what we call “realistic” is actually an illusion created by colored paint applied to a flat surface. Exactly how this illusion has been created is what needs to be explained. Using the term “realistic” does not help in this task.