



From Mimesis to Narrative Modeling: The Evolution of Artistic Representation in Literature

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<https://doi.org/10.69760/egjlle.26010012>

Abstract. This article examines the historical transformation of the object of artistic representation in literature, arguing that literary representation should be understood not as simple reflection but as a form of aesthetic and cognitive construction. The study aims to define the object of artistic representation, trace its evolution across major literary paradigms, and identify the new forms of the artistic world emerging in twenty-first-century literature. Methodologically, the article combines comparative literary analysis, philosophical aesthetics, narratology, and cultural theory. The discussion begins with the classical concept of mimesis in Aristotle, where literature is associated with the representation of possibility rather than mechanical imitation. It then analyzes realism through the works of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, modernism through Franz Kafka, and postmodern narrative multiplicity through the prose of Olga Tokarczuk. Particular attention is given to the shift from external reality to inner experience, discursive plurality, memory, trauma, documentary hybridity, and digital mediality. The article concludes that the object of artistic representation is historically dynamic and that literature functions as an autonomous system of meaning production, a cultural laboratory, and an epistemological tool through which reality is modeled, interpreted, and reimaged.

Keywords: artistic representation, mimesis, artistic world, narrative modeling

Introduction

The problem of the object of artistic representation remains one of the central and enduring questions in literary theory and aesthetics. Since antiquity, literature has often been understood as a form of representation connected to reality, yet the exact nature of this relationship continues to provoke debate. At

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the heart of the discussion lies a fundamental tension: does literature merely reflect the external world, or does it actively construct a new artistic reality of its own? This question has become especially important in modern and contemporary criticism, where literary texts are increasingly viewed not as passive mirrors of life but as dynamic systems of meaning-production. As a result, the object of artistic representation can no longer be reduced to the simple reproduction of facts, events, or social environments; rather, it must be examined as an aesthetically and culturally mediated form of world-making.

A review of existing scholarship shows that many studies address artistic representation within separate literary periods or theoretical frameworks. Classical realism, modernism, postmodernism, and contemporary literature are often analyzed independently, with emphasis placed on their specific stylistic or ideological features. However, relatively few studies offer a continuous model that traces how the object of artistic representation evolves historically from mimesis to more complex forms of narrative and cultural modeling. This fragmentation in scholarship makes it difficult to understand the broader logic of literary development and the ways in which changing concepts of reality reshape the artistic world.

The aim of this article is to define the object of artistic representation and to examine its historical transformation across major literary and theoretical paradigms. The study seeks, first, to clarify the conceptual meaning of artistic representation in relation to philosophical and literary thought; second, to trace the evolution of this category from classical aesthetics through realism, modernism, and postmodernism; and third, to identify the new forms of artistic world-making that emerge in twenty-first-century literature, particularly in connection with memory, trauma, intermediality, and digital narrative structures.

Methodologically, the study is based on comparative literary analysis, which makes it possible to examine different literary epochs in relation to one another and to identify both continuity and rupture in the development of artistic representation. The article also draws on philosophical aesthetics in order to interpret the ontological status of the artistic world, as well as on narratology and cultural theory to analyze how literary texts construct meaning, organize temporal and spatial experience, and interact with broader cultural discourses. Such an interdisciplinary approach allows the object of artistic representation to be considered not only as a literary category but also as a cultural and epistemological one.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Artistic Representation

1.1. Mimesis Reconsidered

The concept of mimesis traditionally serves as the point of departure for discussions of artistic representation. In its most simplified interpretation, mimesis is understood as imitation, that is, the reproduction of reality in artistic form. However, such a definition does not fully reflect the complexity of the concept as it appears in classical philosophy, especially in Aristotle's *Poetics*. For Aristotle, the poet does not merely copy what exists in empirical reality; rather, poetry represents what could happen according to probability or necessity. In this sense, literature is oriented not toward isolated factual events but toward generalized structures of human action and experience. Artistic representation therefore emerges as a creative act of selecting, shaping, and organizing reality into a meaningful whole.



This Aristotelian view leads to an essential distinction between historical truth and poetic truth. The historian is concerned with what actually happened, whereas the poet is concerned with what is universally possible within the logic of human existence. Historical discourse records concrete facts; poetic discourse reveals patterns, meanings, and existential possibilities. Thus, from the very beginning, artistic representation cannot be understood as mere duplication. It is already interpretive, selective, and ontologically distinct from empirical reality. Mimesis, therefore, should be reconsidered not as mechanical imitation but as a form of aesthetic modeling.

1.2. Artistic World as Semiotic System

A more modern theoretical understanding of artistic representation emerges in semiotic approaches to literature, especially in the work of Yuri Lotman. According to Lotman, literature functions as a “secondary modeling system,” meaning that it does not simply reproduce the primary reality of language and culture but reorganizes it into a new signifying structure. The literary text creates its own internal world, governed by specific aesthetic, symbolic, and semantic relations. This understanding fundamentally shifts the discussion of artistic representation from imitation to construction.

From this perspective, the artistic world is not a passive reflection of life but an active meaning-generating system. Literary representation transforms raw experience into culturally mediated form. Characters, events, spaces, and temporal structures become elements of a semiotic whole in which meaning is produced through relationships, oppositions, metaphors, and narrative organization. The object of representation, therefore, is not reality “as such” but reality as interpreted, encoded, and restructured through literary form. Such a view expands the role of literature: it becomes not only an artistic practice but also a cognitive and cultural mechanism through which societies imagine and reinterpret themselves.

1.3. Ontology of the Artistic World

The question of the artistic world inevitably leads to an ontological problem: what kind of reality does literature create? The artistic world possesses a degree of autonomy that distinguishes it both from empirical reality and from purely abstract concepts. Although literature may draw upon historical events, social conditions, or psychological experience, the world it constructs is not identical to the factual world outside the text. It is an aesthetic reality shaped by authorial intention, genre conventions, symbolic organization, and readerly interpretation.

This distinction between empirical and aesthetic reality is crucial for understanding the object of artistic representation. Empirical reality consists of concrete, observable phenomena, whereas aesthetic reality is a mediated and structured form of experience organized according to artistic principles. The literary text does not simply present the world; it reconstitutes it through narrative perspective, value orientation, temporality, and symbolic form. As a result, the artistic world must be treated as an autonomous ontological domain, one that interacts with external reality but cannot be reduced to it.

The autonomy of literary reality does not imply isolation from life. On the contrary, the artistic world remains deeply connected to historical, cultural, and existential experience. Yet its power lies precisely in its ability to transform this experience into a new mode of being and understanding. Literature creates worlds that are neither wholly fictional nor merely documentary; they occupy an intermediate space where



reality is aesthetically reimagined. This understanding provides the conceptual framework for the present article: artistic representation is viewed not as a simple mirror of the world but as a complex form of modeling through which literature constructs its own meaningful reality.

2. Realism and the Philosophy of Historical Experience

2.1. Realism Beyond Reflection

Nineteenth-century realism is often described as a literary movement oriented toward the faithful representation of reality. However, such a definition becomes reductive if realism is understood merely as descriptive accuracy or surface correspondence with the external world. In theoretical terms, realism is far more than reflection: it is an interpretive mode through which literature reveals the essential structures of historical and social existence. Georg Lukács, one of the major theorists of realism, argued that genuine literary realism lies in the ability to depict “typical characters in typical circumstances,” thereby disclosing the totality of historical life through particular situations and destinies. In this sense, realism does not copy reality but penetrates its internal logic.

The category of totality is especially important here. Realist literature seeks to connect individual experience with broader historical processes, social contradictions, and ethical conflicts. The represented world is not a neutral empirical environment; it is an ideologically and philosophically charged structure in which the personal and the collective intersect. Therefore, the object of artistic representation in realism is not the isolated fact but historically mediated human existence. What realism offers is not a photograph of reality but an interpretive vision of the forces shaping life. This is why realism must be understood as a mode of cognition as much as a literary style.

2.2. Tolstoy: History as Existential Process

The works of Leo Tolstoy provide one of the clearest examples of realism as a philosophy of historical experience. In *War and Peace*, historical events are not presented as a mere sequence of documented facts or political actions. Rather, history becomes a multidimensional field in which individual consciousness, ethical choice, and collective destiny are intertwined. Tolstoy rejects the notion that history is made exclusively by great leaders or isolated acts of will. Instead, he shows history as a living process shaped by countless human interactions, perceptions, and moral responses.

This approach transforms the object of artistic representation. Time in Tolstoy is not simply chronological; it is existential. Characters pass through moments of crisis, self-discovery, disillusionment, and spiritual testing, and these experiences are inseparable from the historical world surrounding them. Causality, likewise, is not presented in a straightforward mechanical form but as a complex interplay of contingency, necessity, and human limitation. Tolstoy’s realism thus models history as an inner as well as outer process. The artistic world does not only represent the Napoleonic era; it reimagines history as a sphere of moral trial in which personal meaning and collective events become inseparable.



2.3. Dostoevsky: Polyphony and Consciousness

If Tolstoy expands realism toward a philosophy of history, Fyodor Dostoevsky transforms it into a drama of consciousness. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, Dostoevsky's novels are fundamentally polyphonic: they do not subordinate all voices to a single authorial perspective but allow characters to exist as autonomous centers of meaning. Each consciousness in Dostoevsky's fiction possesses its own ideological and existential weight, and the novel becomes a dialogic space in which conflicting truths confront one another without being fully resolved.

This polyphonic structure signals an important shift in the object of artistic representation. The focus moves away from the external social world as such and toward the inner conflict of ideas, values, and worldviews. Society remains present, but it is refracted through ideological struggle and psychological intensity. In Dostoevsky's artistic world, reality is not simply social circumstance; it is the encounter of competing consciousnesses, each trying to define truth, morality, and freedom. The represented world becomes a field of intellectual and spiritual confrontation.

Thus, realism in Dostoevsky exceeds external observation and enters the sphere of ontological and ethical inquiry. The novel does not imitate social life in a narrow sense; it stages the collision of human selves and philosophical positions. This confirms that realism is better understood as interpretation rather than imitation. It reveals not only what exists but also the conflicting meanings through which existence is experienced and contested.

The realist tradition, therefore, must be seen as a major stage in the transformation of artistic representation. It preserves the link between literature and reality, yet it already demonstrates that literature does not merely reflect the world but organizes it into an intelligible and value-laden artistic totality.

3. Modernism and the Crisis of Representation

3.1. Collapse of Objective Reality

The transition from realism to modernism marks one of the most decisive turning points in the history of artistic representation. The realist belief in a coherent, knowable world gradually gives way to a profound sense of fragmentation, instability, and epistemological uncertainty. The twentieth century, shaped by war, urban alienation, technological acceleration, and philosophical doubt, undermined the assumption that reality could be represented as an ordered and objective whole. Modernist literature reflects this crisis not by offering stable images of the world but by foregrounding rupture, ambiguity, and disorientation.

In modernism, the object of artistic representation shifts from socially structured external reality to the unstable experience of consciousness itself. The world is no longer transparent; it appears fractured, elusive, and often resistant to interpretation. Narrative loses its confidence in linear development and unified perspective. Instead, it begins to represent reality as discontinuous and



mediated through subjective perception. The modernist artistic world is therefore shaped by uncertainty: objects, events, and identities lose their fixed meanings, and the literary text becomes a site where instability is not resolved but exposed.

3.2. Kafka: Absurdity and Alienation

The prose of Franz Kafka is emblematic of this modernist crisis of representation. In Kafka's works, reality appears governed by obscure forces, irrational structures, and inaccessible systems of authority. Ordinary settings become uncanny, legal and bureaucratic mechanisms turn incomprehensible, and characters find themselves trapped in worlds whose logic they cannot fully grasp. This is not realism in the classical sense, even though Kafka's texts often begin with recognizable situations. Rather, they produce an artistic reality in which estrangement and absurdity reveal the hidden violence and opacity of modern existence.

Kafka's world is not a simple fantasy detached from reality; it is an allegorical intensification of alienation. Its distorted logic expresses a deeper truth about human vulnerability in the face of impersonal institutions and existential uncertainty. The represented reality is therefore symbolic rather than mimetic in a narrow sense. External events matter less than the experience of anxiety, guilt, powerlessness, and incomprehension. In this way, Kafka redefines the object of artistic representation: literature no longer aims to present reality as stable and intelligible but to reveal its fracture, ambiguity, and existential threat.

3.3. Narrative Transformation

The crisis of representation in modernism also manifests itself in the transformation of narrative form. Techniques such as stream of consciousness, interior monologue, and fragmented chronology emerge as responses to the inability of conventional narration to capture the complexity of modern experience. Writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf turn away from external event-centered storytelling and instead explore the fluidity of thought, memory, perception, and duration. Time becomes subjective, layered, and nonlinear.

Paul Ricoeur's reflections on narrative and temporality are especially relevant here. Narrative, in his view, is not merely a container for events; it is a structure through which human beings organize the experience of time. If narrative form changes, then the represented reality changes as well. In modernist literature, fractured narration reflects fractured existence. The text no longer guarantees coherence but dramatizes the difficulty of constructing meaning in a disordered world.

As a result, the object of artistic representation moves decisively from the external world to inner experience. Modernism does not abandon reality; it relocates reality within consciousness, temporality, and existential perception. The artistic world becomes less a representation of objective order than a mode of exploring the instability of human experience itself.

4. Postmodernism and Narrative Multiplicity



4.1. Reality as Discourse

If modernism questions the stability of reality, postmodernism goes further by challenging the very idea of a single, unified truth. In postmodern thought, reality is increasingly understood as mediated by language, ideology, discourse, and cultural codes. What appears to be “the real” is no longer assumed to exist as an immediately accessible object outside representation; rather, it is seen as something constructed through narratives, signs, and interpretive frameworks. Literature, therefore, does not merely depict reality but participates in its discursive production.

This perspective profoundly alters the object of artistic representation. Instead of representing a stable external world or a coherent inner consciousness, postmodern literature foregrounds plurality, instability, and textuality. Truth becomes multiple, contingent, and self-questioning. The literary text often refuses closure, disrupts hierarchy, and undermines the authority of grand narratives. Consequently, artistic representation becomes inseparable from the critical examination of how realities are produced, circulated, and legitimized.

4.2. Tokarczuk and Fragmented Worlds

The prose of Olga Tokarczuk offers a productive example of postmodern and contemporary narrative multiplicity. Her works frequently organize the artistic world through fragments, routes, constellations, and interconnected micro-narratives rather than through a single linear plot. Space becomes mobile, history becomes dispersed, and identity is shaped through movement, memory, and cultural layering. Such narrative structures reflect a world no longer grasped through totalizing systems but through partial perspectives and relational patterns.

In Tokarczuk’s fiction, the object of artistic representation is not a fixed reality but a network of experiences, stories, and symbolic crossings. Her narrative worlds function like maps rather than mirrors: they do not reproduce reality in a direct way but chart its complexity through mobility, juxtaposition, and multiplicity. This form of artistic construction reveals that literature can represent the world precisely by refusing to simplify it. Fragmentation here is not merely formal experimentation; it is a way of modeling contemporary experience.

4.3. Self-Reflexive Narration

An essential characteristic of postmodern literature is self-reflexivity. The text not only narrates events but also draws attention to its own status as a constructed artifact. Linda Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction is especially useful in this regard. Such texts engage history, memory, and identity while simultaneously exposing the textual mechanisms through which these are narrated. They reconstruct the past and question its narrativization at the same time.

Hayden White’s theory of historical narrative reinforces this point by showing that history itself is shaped through literary forms such as emplotment, tropes, and rhetorical structures. If historical discourse is already narrative, then the boundary between literature and history becomes less



absolute than traditional theory assumed. Both are modes of constructing meaning rather than transparent windows onto reality.

In postmodernism, therefore, literature begins to represent its own procedures of representation. The object of artistic representation includes not only the world but also the mechanisms through which the world is textualized. This marks a major development in literary history: the artistic world becomes self-aware, critical, and reflexive. Literature represents not simply reality, but its own participation in the making of reality.

5. Contemporary Literature: New Forms of Artistic Reality

5.1. Literature of Memory and Trauma

In twenty-first-century literature, the object of artistic representation expands even further, particularly through the growing importance of memory and trauma. Literary texts increasingly engage with personal testimony, collective remembrance, post-conflict experience, and the afterlives of historical violence. In this context, Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory is highly relevant. Cultural memory does not merely preserve the past; it actively shapes collective identity by selecting, organizing, and transmitting shared narratives.

Literature functions here as a mediator between individual experience and historical consciousness. The represented world includes not only what happened but also how it is remembered, silenced, inherited, or reimagined. Trauma literature, in particular, often resists linear representation, since traumatic experience itself tends to disrupt chronological order, coherent narration, and stable identity. Thus, the artistic world becomes a space where absence, rupture, and memory work are central forms of representation.

5.2. Documentary and Hybrid Forms

Another important development in contemporary literature is the rise of documentary and hybrid forms. Fiction increasingly incorporates archival materials, witness accounts, historical documents, photographs, letters, and autobiographical fragments. These hybrid modes blur the traditional boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, literary imagination and factual reference. The literary text no longer depends solely on invented worlds; it often constructs its artistic reality through the montage of heterogeneous materials.

This development does not mean that literature becomes less artistic. On the contrary, the integration of documentary forms creates new aesthetic possibilities. Archive, testimony, and fiction interact to produce more complex modes of truth. The object of artistic representation thus includes not only events and characters but also traces, records, and mediated evidences of reality. Literature becomes a space where fact and imagination are not opposites but mutually productive elements of representation.

5.3. Digital and Networked Narrative



The digital era has introduced further transformations in the structure of the artistic world. Hypertextuality, interactivity, nonlinearity, and intermediality have reshaped the ways in which narratives are created and experienced. Literary and para-literary forms now circulate across media platforms, combining text, image, sound, and digital interfaces. The artistic world increasingly takes on a networked rather than closed structure.

Such developments affect the object of artistic representation in significant ways. Reality can now be modeled through dispersed nodes, multiple entry points, and participatory reading practices. Narrative becomes less centralized and more open-ended. The represented world is no longer contained entirely within a single linear text; it may unfold across platforms, links, archives, and media environments. This expansion reflects a broader cultural shift in how experience itself is organized in the digital age.

5.4. The New Object of Representation

Taken together, these developments show that the object of artistic representation in contemporary literature includes far more than social reality in the traditional realist sense. It now encompasses memory, identity, discourse, mediality, and the layered structures through which experience is interpreted. Literature represents not only what exists or what is remembered, but also how these forms of reality are mediated and constructed.

The artistic world of the twenty-first century is therefore dynamic, relational, and epistemologically complex. It engages with fragmented identities, competing narratives, technological mediation, and cultural trauma. Rather than functioning as a mirror of the world, literature becomes a platform of cultural cognition—a space in which societies test meanings, negotiate memories, and imagine alternative configurations of reality.

6. Synthesis: An Evolution Model of Artistic Representation

The historical development of literature makes it possible to identify a broader pattern in the transformation of artistic representation. What begins in classical aesthetics as mimesis gradually evolves into increasingly complex forms of modeling, interpretation, and epistemological construction. The object of artistic representation is therefore neither fixed nor uniform. It changes in accordance with shifting conceptions of truth, subjectivity, history, and cultural mediation.

This evolution may be summarized in several major stages. In antiquity, mimesis establishes representation as the depiction of possibility rather than mechanical copying. In realism, artistic representation becomes historical typification: literature reveals the totality of social existence through individual destinies. In modernism, representation turns toward subjectivity, fragmentation, and the instability of consciousness. In postmodernism, it becomes multiplicity: reality is understood as discursively constructed and narratively unstable. In contemporary literature, representation increasingly takes the form of cognitive construction, incorporating memory, trauma, documentary fragments, and digital mediality into the artistic world.



From this perspective, literature can be understood as an epistemological tool. It does not merely reproduce the world but explores ways of knowing and interpreting it. At the same time, literature functions as a cultural laboratory in which values, identities, historical narratives, and forms of experience are tested and reconfigured. Finally, it may be viewed as a system of meaning production, one that creates autonomous artistic worlds while remaining deeply engaged with lived and mediated reality.

Such a model allows us to move beyond the simplistic opposition between literature and reality. Literature neither passively reflects the world nor arbitrarily invents it. Rather, it constructs meaningful worlds through which reality becomes thinkable, narratable, and open to interpretation.

Conclusion

The analysis carried out in this article demonstrates that the object of artistic representation is a historically dynamic and theoretically complex category. It cannot be reduced to the straightforward imitation of external reality. From Aristotle's understanding of mimesis as the representation of possibility to contemporary forms of literary world-making shaped by memory, trauma, and digital mediality, literature has consistently shown its capacity not merely to reflect reality but to transform and reconstruct it.

The study has also shown that the artistic world possesses a significant degree of autonomy. Although literature remains connected to empirical, historical, and cultural reality, it organizes this material according to aesthetic, symbolic, and narrative principles that create a distinct mode of being. Realism reveals history through typification and ethical experience; modernism shifts attention toward consciousness and fragmentation; postmodernism exposes the multiplicity and constructedness of reality; and contemporary literature expands representation into the domains of cultural memory, documentary hybridity, and networked narration.

These transformations confirm that modern literature is profoundly reflexive. It no longer represents only objects, events, or social worlds, but also the very processes through which meaning is produced. In this sense, literature functions as a laboratory of human experience. It allows readers to encounter not only representations of the world but also alternative ways of understanding history, selfhood, and culture.

Further research may continue this line of inquiry by examining the relationship between literature and artificial intelligence, the changing nature of digital narrativity, and the role of transmedia storytelling in the redefinition of artistic representation. Such directions would extend the present argument by showing that the artistic world remains an evolving and open field of cultural experimentation.

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Received: 01.15.2026

Revised: 01.22.2026

Accepted: 03.15.2026

Published: 03.21.2026



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Euro-Global Journal of Linguistics and Language Education
Vilnius, Lithuania