



Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947

Chris Vials

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Realism for the Masses, is an exploration of how the concept of realism entered mass culture, and from there, how it tried to remake "America." The literary and artistic creations of American realism are generally associated with the late nineteenth century. But this book argues that the aesthetic actually saturated American culture in the 1930s and 1940s and that the left social movements of the period were in no small part responsible. The book examines the prose of Carlos Bulosan and H. T. Tsiang; the photo essays of Margaret Bourke-White in *Life* magazine; the bestsellers of Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Mitchell; the boxing narratives of Clifford Odets, Richard Wright, Nelson Algren; and the Hollywood boxing film, radio soap operas, and the domestic dramas of Lillian Hellman and Shirley Graham, and more.

These writers and artists infused realist aesthetics into American mass culture to an unprecedented degree and also built on a tradition of realism in order to inject influential definitions of "the people" into American popular entertainment. Central to this book is the relationship between these mass cultural realisms and emergent notions of pluralism. Significantly, Vials identifies three nascent pluralisms of the 1930s and 1940s: the New Deal pluralism of "We're the People" in *The Grapes of Wrath*; the racially inclusive pluralism of Vice President Henry Wallace's "The People's Century"; and the proto-Cold War pluralism of Henry Luce's "The American Century."

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