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Reading Capitalist Realism edited by Alison Shonkwiler and
Leigh Claire La Berge (review)

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weaknesses. It contributes a much-needed aesthetic dimension to studies of whiteness while adding a valuable racial dimension to studies of naturalism. Most importantly, however, by asking us to pay attention to racial Others, it acknowledges the visible absence and thunderous silence of African Americans and Native Americans in discussions of naturalism, naturalization, and citizenship.

—Alpana Sharma, *Wright State University*

Reading Capitalist Realism, edited by Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014. 260 pp. + index. Paper \$47.50; E-book, \$47.50.

During the 1960s, terms such as *nouveau réalisme* and *pop art* were employed to describe, both seriously and satirically, cultural works that borrowed content and techniques from advertising and mass media. In 1963, Gerhard Richter first used the term *capitalist realism* for the title of a Düsseldorf exposition: “Demonstration for Capitalist Realism.” As a refugee from East Germany and a socialist realist who had painted government murals, such as “Lebensfreude” (“Zest for Life,” 1956) and “Workers Uprising” (1959), Richter was responding to his past and to modernism, suggesting that capitalism had its own forms of propaganda, forms that drew inspiration from mass culture. Like Andy Warhol, Richter utilized a multi-step process to produce his new art. Beginning with an ordinary photograph that he projected on a canvas, he applied paint, often softening lines to generate a blurred effect. In creating works from quotidian images, Richter was embracing a realism and a randomness that self-consciously questioned both socialist aesthetics and abstract expressionism.

Over the last fifty years, the term *capitalist realism* has seldom appeared in critical discourse, replaced by the ubiquitous but somewhat nebulous label *postmodernism*. But in 2009, Mark Fisher resuscitated Richter’s phrase when he published a monograph titled *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* And in *Reading Capitalist Realism*, editors Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, along with Mark Fisher and other contributors, further define and complicate the term, suggesting that the phrase applies to works that extend postmodernism, that exhibit a neoliberal pathology, or that problematically employ realism to historicize late-stage capitalism. Their volume repeatedly asks a basic epistemologi-

cal question: can art or literature produced by a capitalist system do more than buttress that economic structure? In answering this question, the authors reprise issues raised by members of the Frankfurt School. In other words, the essays employ critical and neo-Marxist theory to analyze literature, media, and society, questioning the extent to which cultural artifacts can historicize the human condition. In their introduction, the editors optimistically suggest that a self-reflexive realism is possible, but in a theoretical dialogue that follows, Mark Fisher and Jodi Dean claim that capitalist realism is a mere symptom of finance capitalism. Other contributors to the volume are more sanguine, contending that spaces and techniques exist by which individuals may represent and question social issues, possibly even intimate a utopian path forward. As a whole, the volume advances the term *capitalist realism* as an efficacious label, proposing that the phrase could apply to cultural works produced since the 1970s and could name a social realism that relies on postmodern techniques.

Divided into three sections with three essays in each, the collection is eclectic. Part one is titled “Novelistic Realisms,” and the focus is on recent fictional works that problematize traditional realism. In the first essay, Andrew Hoberek analyzes adultery as a metaphor for economic relationships: adultery stands metonymically for the breakdown of contracts and social agreements, even the failure of realism to represent the system that produces it. This figurative analysis of infidelity is traced through Jess Walter’s *The Financial Lives of Poets* (2009) and Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs* (2009). In a similar fashion, Alissa Karl explores the human body as metonymically representing our economic condition: a healthy body stands for a strong, neoliberal market, and a violated, disabled body symbolizes inequitable labor conditions and the gaping economic divide. To support her claims, Karl closely reads several novels, including James Kelman’s *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994). In the final literary essay, Phillip Wegner argues that our rapidly changing world requires novels that cross and erase traditional boundaries—these fictional works place us in a transnational and post-imperial world where traditional realism fails. Analyzing Russell Banks’s *Rule of the Bone* (1995), Wegner finds a blending of fiction and history, which creates a geopolitical milieu of transnational mobility where identity must be negotiated.

Titled “Genres of Mediation,” the second section explores mass culture and nonfiction narratives, beginning with an analysis of *The Wire* (2002–08), a TV series acclaimed as a paragon of urban realism. Here, Leigh Claire La Berge argues that the first four seasons of the show employ a traditional realism but that the fifth includes postmodern and allegorical elements

that call into question the ways in which this crime drama represents Baltimore's institutions. In the second essay, J. D. Connor scrutinizes the film industry and the extent to which tax credits and financing determine the what, where, and when of production, contending that films have become no more than dummy corporations pushed around by financial forces. Finally, an insightful essay by Caren Irr analyzes William Vollmann's prose documentary *Poor People* (2007). Irr first traces the history of nonfiction narratives that represent the poor, touching on Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Live* (1890) and James Agee and Walker Evan's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). She assumes that capitalist realism can raise social concerns if writers such as Vollmann reveal their own relationship towards their subjects. Vollmann's documentary does this through an openness that allows a series of phenomenological reflections, and these suggest his own biases. Vollmann avoids politics, approaching "the poor" empathetically, a process that reveals his ultimate failure to adequately represent or help. But in this failure, Irr finds an attitude of fraternity, equality, communalism, and solidarity that might bring about change.

The last section, "After and Against Representation," includes three disparate essays that share little, except their emphasis on critical theory. Michael Clune's essay "Beyond Realism" posits science fiction as a genre with a utopian or dystopian impulse that can avoid bureaucracy, thus allowing the reader to imagine alternative futures. Interestingly, he argues that neo-liberals have done a far better job presenting a utopian future than has the left. This essay might have better historicized its own claims by considering the long tradition of speculative fiction by realists: Howells's *A Traveler from Alturia* (1894), Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915). The second essay, titled "Capitalism and Reification," traces the historical transformation of a contested term: reification. Assuming that reification is necessary for representing relationships, Timothy Bewes argues that this movement from the abstract to the concrete can either prevent or allow reflection, concluding that fictional reification can encourage historicization. In the final essay "Communist Realism," Joshua Clover praises modernism of the 1920s, critiques socialist realism, and suggests the possibility of a non-capitalist realism, though this brief essay offers little evidence for it.

The volume ends with an afterword by Richard Dienst, which would have served as an excellent preface, as it cogently explicates capitalist realism. Tracing the term's history, Dienst suggests that nineteenth-century realism was the first way that writers represented the dialectic between culture and capital, that modernism, during the rise of monopolies, was

the second method, and that postmodernism corresponds with late-stage, global capitalism. He then posits capitalist realism as a strong variant of postmodernism because it responds to neoliberalism. According to Dienst, authors after the Great Recession (2007–08) have employed capitalist realism to expose cracks in the system—these works historicize our economic situation, and this historical attitude allows a realistic hermeneutic that springs from protest; we are able to tap into social energies and to imagine a different future. Dienst's essay and this volume as a whole repeatedly raise profound epistemological questions about realism, but at times the critical theory becomes the barrier that prevents one from appreciating the social function of literature and the hermeneutics of criticism. In redefining the term *capitalist realism*, the editors revive a nineteenth-century debate between advocates of traditional realism, who imagined themselves truthfully representing correctable social problems, and proponents of naturalism, who represented humans as buffeted by forces beyond their understanding or control. This debate suggests a problematic dichotomy that assumes a cultural homogeneity, a sameness of all works produced in capitalist societies. In the past and now, the best realists transcend this dichotomy, finding techniques for empathetically depicting human beings as involved in the world.

—Roark Mulligan, *Christopher Newport University*