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Reading Capitalist Realism

Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, editors

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The Struggle is Real: A Review of *Reading Capitalist Realism*

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In their introduction to *Reading Capitalist Realism*, editors Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge suggest that the concept of "neoliberalism" is insufficient for explaining our "market-dominated present": if neoliberalism designates an "economic and political paradigm," another concept is necessary to account for "the *realization* of market imperatives at an ideological level" (4, 6 emphasis original). The concept they have in mind is Mark Fisher's notion of capitalist realism, "the general ideological formation in which capitalism is the most real of our horizons..." or as Fisher puts it, the "widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that now it is impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it," (Fisher 2, in Shonkwiler 2). At the same time, Shonkwiler and La Berge seem to warn their readers against allowing this more expansive theorization to become a way of *effacing* the "economic and political":

One need not even necessarily accept David Harvey's capsule description of neoliberalism as a "programmatically" restoration of capitalist class hegemony, under the guise of the promise to the masses of increased individual freedoms, to concede a drastic shift in the past four decades toward greater concentrations of wealth in the hands of an elite few... (5)

In other words, even if you find Harvey's influential account of neoliberalism (or neoliberalism itself) reductive, you must acknowledge the deepening inequality he (and many others) have described.¹

Still, statements like these (and anxious constructions like “need not even necessarily”) don’t so much settle as underscore the question of whether it’s possible to come to terms with these effects while resisting the claim they’re the product of a “*political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites.”² One way to think about the essays in this collection is to consider how they perform the balancing act implicit in this question, the necessity of capturing the complex “role of representation and belief in producing that which becomes reality” — including the everyday reality of “commodity, money, and finance” — while also being attuned to the political function of contemporary ideology (6, 11). As Richard Dienst notes in his “Afterword,” most of the volume’s entries are “critical appraisals of realist texts” and thus primarily concerned with “the way realist motifs and methods are being reinvented in order to grapple with their putative object, the life-world of contemporary capitalism”; save for the conversation between Jodi Dean and Fisher (“We Can’t Afford to Be Realists”), these entries are only secondarily concerned with “the specific operations of neoliberalism as a capitalist system” (249-250). The salient issue here, of course, is not whether these literary-critical essays devote equal space to these concerns, but whether their theorization of “realism” articulates, in and of itself, the political struggle at the heart of both the “life-world” and the “system” of contemporary capitalism.

Drawing on the analyses that follow, Shonkwiler and La Berge begin the collection by suggesting that these new realist motifs and methods might constitute a new cultural dominant:

As postmodernism cedes its legacy and organizing forms to capitalist realism, a new desire for objectivity and mimetic certainty emerges with the new, self-reflexive knowledge that the certainties of realism are things to be bought and sold. Ultimately, capitalist realism might describe the logical conclusion of these processes: how realism undergoes the precise processes of capture and subsumption into the circuits of capital it claims to represent. (10)

As this passage suggests, the editors use “capitalist realism” to identify not just an ideological context (the supplement to neoliberalism, described above) but also a set of cultural practices (the sequel or alternative to postmodernism.) As this passage also suggests, it’s not always clear, when they use the term in this way, whether they are describing a self-conscious artistic shift or a critical theorization about such a shift (the equivalent to “postmodernism” or the equivalent to “the cultural logic of late capitalism”). In some of the examples they cite (like Andrew Hoberek’s “Adultery, Crisis, Contract”), this ambivalence about realism is staged by the literary texts themselves; in others (like J.D. Connor’s essay on tax credits and contemporary cinema) these “processes of capture and subsumption” are brought

out only by critical intervention. This difference and these ambiguities matter in terms of determining what type of claim is being made, but also in terms of situating the editors' own perspective in relation to what I think are problematic ideas about realism's "complicity" (9).

This perspective is clarified somewhat in La Berge's own contribution to the volume, "Capitalist Realism and Serial Form: The Fifth Season of *The Wire*." There she contends that the self-referential turn in *The Wire*'s final season, in which "realism is transformed from a mode to an object" (116) through an exploration of the Baltimore newspaper industry, also dramatizes the tension between "money's dual role as a medium of exchange and as a store of value":

In the first four seasons, the tension is managed through tracing money as it is exchanged, representing otherwise obscure connections as they come into contact.... In the fifth season, however, there is a structural reversal between money being exchanged, in order to enable representation, and representation being *sold* as though it were simply another commodity, a store of value that may now circulate as freely as any other. It is the narrative maintenance and exfoliation of this contradiction — between money as medium and as store of value — as a narrative problem that renders *The Wire* what I am calling a kind of *capitalist realism*. (120-121, emphasis original)

The chief "representation being *sold*" in the final season is a melodramatic serial-killer storyline fabricated (in part) to sell newspapers, a sharp departure from the "serial realism" of the show's first four seasons. La Berge argues that this juxtaposition serves to tell us something about serial realism as well, however, namely that it is just as much a "commodity," with generic expectations defined by the marketplace, as melodrama.³ The serial-killer storyline thereby exposes "the structural limits" of serial realism and thus "reconstructs the series by rendering visible its own conditions of production, circulation, and reception" (132-133).

This analysis reads brilliantly, making an exciting, highly compelling case for why *The Wire*'s final season is not a "disappointment," as it was widely received, but the culmination of the show's aesthetic vision (118). And yet, even if we are convinced by La Berge's critical account of *The Wire*, I'm not sure we should embrace what follows from it: the suggestion that by dramatizing a world in which even "perception/representation is ultimately for sale," the show prompts us to relate to that world and to representation itself in an importantly different way (134). Specifically, La Berge suggests that *The Wire* and "new forms, new genres, and new epistemologies" like it — those which insist that, as the introduction puts it, "objectivity and mimetic certainty... are things to be bought and sold" — articulate a perspective that is "more utopian and critical than the regressive fantasy that lurks throughout every season

of *The Wire*: namely, the fantasy of a better capitalism, of a return to the Keynesian days of yore” (10, 134). This link implies there is something intrinsically “regressive” about “objectivity and mimetic certainty” itself, as if resistance to capitalism is a fundamentally epistemological struggle, a battle over the status of reality as a formal category rather than over particular, material versions of this reality, like the utopian claims of neoliberalism or the real abstractions of the value form. The very process of resisting these ideological formations requires speaking and acting in the name of objectivity and mimetic certainty (at least some version of it), even when what’s at stake is showing that the social “real” is ideological and thus subject to change. In this sense, it’s hard to see why a text offering a “deconstruction of a realist aesthetic” is intrinsically less regressive or “conservative” than a text that seeks to paint a “mimetic” picture of contemporary capitalism (a text such as, in this account, *The Wire*’s first four seasons) (130, 15). If anything, the opposite appears to be true, as this new form of “realism” — and the criticism that celebrates it — seems to depend on a logic that disavows the very substance of the political.

This logic is troubling because, as Caren Irr notes in her contribution to the volume, the tendency to evacuate “the site of ‘politics’” reflects a “distinctive contemporary sensibility” (182). Irr is specifically referring to William T. Vollmann’s nonfiction text *Poor People* and the tendency to reframe poverty as a “choice” or “an eternal and endemic feature of human existence” rather than “a social problem to be ameliorated or a structural issue to be corrected” (182-183). We can understand this disavowal of the “structural or material explanations of poverty” as the analogue to the disavowal of ideological disagreement that has tended to play out mainly (though certainly not exclusively) in the realm of criticism and aesthetics (182). Here, indeed, these two types of disavowals go hand-in-hand. As Irr shows, “Vollmann’s pronounced allergy to any ideology of structure” is bound up in a commitment to “an absolute standard of human equality” that prevents him from writing anything definitive about anyone else’s experiences, a “radical egalitarianism” that stops him from passing totalizing judgments on poverty or capitalism or, it seems, much of anything (189, 182, 186). In this sense, Vollmann’s project is the “dialectical antithesis” to the political analysis of Jacques Rancière, David Harvey, and others, who “describe a world organized around collective, structural antagonisms, embedded in geography, ecology, and economy as well as face-to-face violence and ethical double binds” (187, 189).

Irr proposes that *Poor People* should be understood as an example of a writer “wrestling with the challenge of representing a swiftly changing practice on the periphery of aesthetic perception,” a process that “can lead artists to generate usefully indirect or ‘degraded’ figures” for the total system (178). When Irr describes the book as an example of “capitalist realism,” she is suggesting, therefore, that the term can function as periodizing concept like the kind offered by Jameson in his “Cognitive Mapping” essay, which she summarizes as: “an opportunity to name a new set of similarly partial, incomplete, or ‘degraded’ figures for a new phase of capitalist

accumulation” (178). Specifically, Vollmann takes a “metamodern” approach in which he “renews the strategies learned from his predecessors” — prose documentarians like James Agee — “in order to test them against the conditions he observes” (180). Although Vollmann is unable to get a handle on either the poor or the rich — in a way that reflects the solipsistic tendencies of the prose documentary genre but, just as importantly, Vollmann’s own “potentially monomaniacal ethics” — this text and these ethics nevertheless still articulate a social “ideal, however compromised” (179, 189-190). Vollmann calls this ideal a “culture of communalism” and Irr, following Richard Dienst, calls it “solidarity” (189-190).

As this conclusion suggests, in Irr’s account thinking about contemporary literary realism goes hand-in-hand with thinking about the dialectical interplay between political struggle and historical change. In “Things as They Were or Are: On Russell Banks’s Global Realisms,” Philip Wegner provides an even more explicit example of this view, using “realism” in the “sense that the great philosopher of Utopia, Ernst Bloch, defines it, a representation or imitation of a reality that is shot through with the potentiality of the new” (104). Russell Banks achieves this level of realism, Wegner argues, because, in historical novels like *Cloudsplitter* and *The Darling*, he dramatizes the Badiouian “event,” the occurrence that, from the perspective of the status quo, “is impossible and unimaginable, and yet for all that... is nevertheless true” (103). Just as importantly, Banks articulates Badiou’s “fundamental insight” (105) that:

“the essence of the event is to be undecidable with regard to its belonging to the situation,” and hence requires a “decision with respect to its belonging to the situation,” a decision... that is at the basis of any intervention in the world. For Badiou, this decision and the actions that follow from it transform the individual into an authentic subject. Moreover, such a subject remains in effect only as long as the fidelity to the potential of the event continues. (104)

In *The Darling*, the event of 9/11 causes the main character, an American political radical in the 1960s and later a supporter of Charles Taylor’s uprising in Liberia, to abandon this fidelity and to embrace the idea that she *never* had “any real subjective being” (108). Wegner links this disavowal to the death of 1990s-era global activism and “a baleful new sense of capitalist realism and its own set of improbabilities and impossibilities” (108). Banks himself is attempting to counter this loss of fidelity to “the potential for radical change in the world,” Wegner argues, and is thus performing “the labor of the critical realist novelist” (108).

The volumes’s concluding section, “After and Against Representation,” features a series of theoretical essays that also reflect on literature’s capacity to imagine alternatives to capitalist realism, although here again we see a tension between approaches framing this resistance in political terms (Michael W. Clune) and

those which focus on the ideological processes constitutive of capital itself, from the value form (Joshua Clover) to Lukácsian reification (Timothy Bewes, with a useful intervention into current debates on this concept). Clune's essay is the most provocative of these texts, in some ways, but also the most frustrating. Like Wegner, he celebrates contemporary literature that articulates the potential for radical change, though while Wegner locates this radical potential in historical fiction expressing our political agency, Clune finds it in science fiction that imagines specific "alternatives to what exists" (195). Clune intends his intervention here to be methodological rather than interpretive, however: he argues that if literary critics want to tap into fiction's unique capacity to explore the imaginary and thus achieve "a meaningful relation both to other disciplines and to urgent political questions," they must reject the tendency to treat "the fictional as mimetic of the actual" (196, 195). This includes criticism that treats science fiction as a mode of defamiliarization, an approach which, he argues, turns sci-fi into "a species of the mimesis of our world" (199). Rejecting such "mimetic" criticism would entail, moreover, rejecting the habit of distinguishing between "bad fictions that pretend to imitate capitalist reality but actually distort it" and "good fictions that accurately describe reality" (200).

Clune's justifications for moving away from "mimetic" criticism are unsatisfying, in my view, but the deeper (and perhaps more obvious) problem is that his "anti-mimetic" criticism requires "the fictional" to be at once completely distinct from yet also completely relevant to "the actual."⁴ In this essay, he examines *Neuromancer's* depiction of Ninsei, a futuristic black market that — because it is apparently free of all government and corporate interference — "is not mimetic of actually existing capitalism"; as a "frankly imaginary capitalism," Gibson's representation is therefore not subject to the question of whether it presents an "accurate" or "distorted" view of reality (201). To support this claim, Clune goes so far, in fact, as to bracket off the way that Ninsei actually is "mimetic of actually existing capitalism": as he himself notes, "a market without corporations is a fiction even within the space of the novel" because it turns out that this market has been under corporate supervision all along (209). But, at the same time that Clune insists on the distinction between Ninsei and actually existing capitalism, he also insists that Ninsei can be a "resource" for thinking about what capitalism *could* be (203). "We need a strong image of free, unexploitative, ungoverned, collective action," he argues, and this image is provided by Gibson's fictional market: there "we... see not an aggregate of individual interests but a robust, fascinating picture of what the 'general will' might look and feel like" (210, 206). The fact that this picture takes the form of a free market makes it particularly relevant to our present moment, Clune suggests, and to support this claim he goes so far, in fact, as to include part of "the actual" — the contemporary political enthusiasm for free markets — in this exploration of "the gap between literature and the actual" (200).

And yet, as Clune acknowledges, to make this image a guide for action, we would be forced to ask a number of questions about whether such a "left free market" is

even possible, or whether, for example, there are “unacceptable modes of exploitation intrinsic to exchange as such” (210). But this would mean asking, once again, the question of whether *Neuromancer* produces an accurate or ideologically distorted view of capitalism, not in its present moment but in its essence, the question of whether — to use this essay’s terms — the book is a “good fiction” or a “bad fiction.” This is precisely the question, of course, that we are not allowed to ask. Clune’s methodological claim thus forbids us from asking exactly the political questions that his interpretive claim demands, as if the real point of this intervention, indeed, is to make his own political argument — that what the “anti-government left” needs now is a truly “free” market (210) — seem impervious to ideological critique as well.⁵

Still, one doesn’t have to accept Clune’s arguments to acknowledge the concern that prompts them (as, in this collection, only his essay does): the “struggle to legitimate humanistic knowledge in the contemporary intellectual and institutional climate” (195). Here this “intellectual and institutional climate” is defined in terms of literary criticism’s perceived lack of relevance to other disciplines and to “anti-capitalist struggle,” but it might also be defined as capitalist realism itself, the “grim identification of the rule of markets with necessity, practicality, and hard-nosed common sense” (196, 195). This “institutional climate” is reflected, to pick just one controversial recent example, in the justification given by a member of the UNC system’s Board of Governors when explaining their decision to discontinue 46 degree programs in 2015: “We’re capitalists, and we have to look at what the demand is, and we have to respond to the demand.”⁶ To the degree that this climate has also contributed to higher education’s increasing reliance on contingent labor, it seems fair to say that the *main* impact of “capitalist realism” on academic criticism has simply been to make it difficult for most younger literary scholars to do this kind of work, at least in an economically sustainable way. My guess is that for many of the academic readers of *Reading Capitalist Realism*, the struggle to defend “the value of the humanities” has meant (or will soon mean) the struggle to earn a living wage and job stability, the challenge of securing adequate compensation for work done in the classroom, let alone for academic writing and research (196).

More and more contingent faculty members have started to organize to improve their working conditions, however, and I want to conclude by suggesting that the key to how literary critics should respond to capitalist realism, in their role as critics, might lie in how they’ve been responding to capitalist realism in their role as academic labor. Adjuncts and lecturers have surely not suffered from neoliberal governance in the same way as the “service workers and post-industrial throwaways” mentioned by Wegner or the mobilized, fragmented “laboring bodies” described by Alissa G. Karl (in her essay here); nevertheless, by embracing their status as labor, academic workers insist on the reality of the same forces that shape material conditions for other workers and (much poorer) poor people, namely those “collective, structural antagonisms” described by Irr — the same forces that are mystified, of course, when

self-described “capitalists” attribute their decisions to free-floating abstractions like “demand” (95, 76, 189). If, as La Berge notes, part of realism’s function has traditionally been to explore “what is most economically necessary and simultaneously what is most disavowed within capitalism,” then it seems to follow that contemporary literary realism (and those who track its forms) would be concerned with the presence that is most *absent* from neoliberal “realism”: not ever-deepening poverty or even the violence done to laboring bodies, but the specific agents, decisions, and struggles (at once ideological and material) that have made these things possible, as well as the specific agents, decisions, and struggles that might make very *different* things possible (125).

Notes

1. This comment can be read more specifically as an appeal to critics influenced by the Foucauldian analysis of neoliberal governmentality, an approach that has generated a number of useful concepts for thinking about neoliberalism but which is also famously hostile to class-based accounts of political power.
2. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005) 19, emphasis original.
3. Specifically, if the viewers of melodrama want “serial (white, psychological) violence,” the viewers of *The Wire* want “interpersonal (black, economic) violence” (129); in other words, they “do not want a serial killer, but an economic killer” (131). But, if “the serial killer disavows economy in the construction of his personal melodrama... *The Wire* uses the representation of economy to ground its realism and disavow personal melodrama. Psychology disavows economy; economy disavows interiority” (131). Earlier in the essay, drawing on a well-sourced “genealogy of capitalism and realism” (136), La Berge defines realism in terms of its general representational goal, namely the depiction of money and “Capital itself” (125); since it’s not clear, in light of this definition, why *all* “realist” texts would be required to feature these *specific* narrative features — that is, the racializing logic and disavowal of “interiority” I’ve just described — I think we can assume that when La Berge refers to the “structural limits of the realist mode” (132), she is referring specifically to those with *The Wire*’s particular “conditions of production, circulation, and reception” (133). Whether one accepts this link or this description of the show is, of course, a separate issue.
4. Clune makes his case for why we should reject “mimetic” criticism by suggesting that this approach is bound up, in practice, with the desire to legitimate literary knowledge and (because of this desire) the use of “social or psychological or economic theories whose primary institutional home is the English department” (196). Using Fisher’s “Jameson/Deleuze/Lacan”-influenced account of addiction in *Capitalist Realism* as an example, Clune argues that these approaches read as under-theorized to those trained in other disciplines and that, even worse, seem to rely on fictional examples for their only “evidence.” It seems that the logical conclusion to this argument would be that if critics want their work to matter to other disciplines and to the Left, they should stop using “fiction” as “evidence,” especially for theories that (in Clune’s account) only English departments take seriously. And yet Clune goes even further, suggesting that we should reject “mimetic” criticism altogether. He doesn’t really explain why, for example, a “mimetic” critic couldn’t simply draw on those other disciplines instead, except to suggest that such a critic “might reasonably feel that such a demand places an undue burden” on them (199).
5. In this sense, Clune’s methodological intervention in this essay performs the same function as his

invocation of Marx in the conclusion of *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000*. There he argues that the utopian “economic fictions” he celebrates throughout the book cannot be described as “ideological” because, while they are mystifying from the perspective of the “labor theory of value,” that “does not show us what is ideological in these works, but what is dead in Marx” (158). (Michael Clune, *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945-2000* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010]). For a contentious exchange concerning Clune’s take on the “labor theory of value,” see Michael Clune, Jasper Bernes, and Joshua Clover, “Response to ‘What Was Neoliberalism?’: A Debate Between Joshua Clover / Jasper Bernes and Michael W. Clune,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*. 4 March 2013, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/response-to-what-was-neoliberalism-a-debate-between-joshua-clover-jasper-bernes-and-michael-w-clune>.

6. Sam Schaefer, “Board of Governors discontinues 46 degree programs across UNC system,” *The Daily Tar Heel* (23 May 2015).

