

## Realism Reevaluated

It is, the saying goes, easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Assigned to both Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, it served as a tentpole axiom in Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*. Published just over a decade ago, *Capitalist Realism* argued that realism is the preferred literary mode of capitalism. Realism, Fisher argues, had in fact become "capitalist realism," and capitalist realism is "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it."<sup>1</sup> Although Fisher's account of realism—many in this double issue will point out—does not foreclose the political possibilities of literary form, many scholars have taken his account to mean that realism is inherently conservative—little more than a sophisticated technology for capitalism to secure its continued existence and expansion. Such historicist accounts often point to the coincident rise of the realist form and the corresponding expansion of capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century or to the renewed interest in the realist form following the financial crisis of 2008 as evidence of the intimate relation between the two. Too often, however, such accounts privilege mimesis as realism's defining attribute, subsuming what is unique about the work of literature, its form, to the world.

On this view, the novel cannot help but reinforce the social world and that it represents. Each of the essays in this issue challenges the merely mimetic by investigating how realism, conceived as a particular mode, constructs the world anew. Realism, Anna Kornbluh has argued elsewhere, "fundamentally designs and erects socialites" and in doing so "imagines the grounds of collectivities" and political possibility.<sup>2</sup> This is not, strictly speaking, a refusal of mimesis as a principle of the form, but it is a refusal of the authority of mimesis to govern the meaning of the text. As Nicholas Brown points out in his contribution to this volume, in the historicist, descriptive account of literary form "the text owes its authority to facts outside the text, which the text is one way or another obliged to mirror, reflect, or represent." On this account, insofar as the work derives its authority from the world, it cannot help but ratify those relationships. This is, no doubt, part of what it means to argue that realism is the preferred form of capitalism. But the point, argued differently in each of the essays collected, is that mimesis cannot be the horizon of our interpretive engagement with realism—in part the "reality" presented in the text is a reality

ordered by the form of the novel. At least one possible outcome of this feature of literary texts is that in asserting its form it makes a claim on the world that is not merely mimetic. That is, if the relationship between the world and the text is one asserted by the form of the text, what we interpret when we interpret a novel is not (or not only) a set of social relationships but a set of formal ones. What follows from this differs for each of the contributors, but it is enough to say by way of introduction that it is not a kind of formal guarantee for capitalist social relations.

This issue begins with Thomas Laughlin's essay on George Eliot and her "epic syntax," arguing that the logic of "expanded reproduction," that characterized capitalist development in the mid to late-nineteenth century "finds its figurative mirror" in "the production of sentences" rather than in the "direct representation of...labor *per se*." Eliot's sentences mark a move in realism, he argues, toward "epic syntax" that, at moments, glimpses the particularities of capitalist social relations. Building from Auerbach through Jameson, Laughlin argues that what is particular about Eliot's literary form — and perhaps realist fiction more broadly — is not only mimetic (though it is that too) but formal, realized in the dialectic between the mimetic and the syntactical.

From here, the issue expands, as capitalism will, from the seat of colonial power to its periphery in readings of Kang Kyōng-ae's *From Wonso Pond* (1934), about workers in colonial Korea and Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* (1946), about dispossessed miners in pre-Apartheid South Africa. As Jacob Sloan argues in his essay, although "both novels have been criticized for clinging to the supposedly naïve projects of literary mimesis and socialist commitment," such criticisms naïvely suggest that because of the realist's forms mimetic commitments, it is less politically sophisticated because less formally so than its modernist counterpart. "The proletarian novel's attempt at mimesis" is often considered its "its cardinal sin." Such a view, however, requires bracketing the complex ways the proletariat novel formalizes, in Gyorgy Lukacs's formulation, the "nonsynchronous nature of reality under capitalism." It is not, in other words, mimesis, or even its refusal that makes the text more or less politically desirable, but the extent to which the text is able to bring the world it reflects under a form that mirrors not only the real, but actually existing social relations.

Zooming back into a particular periphery, the issue turns its focus to Latin America and to the resurgence of the realist historical novel. Ericka Beckman here argues that this resurgence is coupled to "transitions to capitalism" in the region. "To no small degree," She writes, "the resurgence of the historical novel in mid-twentieth-century Latin America...attempts to narrate the massive though always uneven, incorporation of predominantly agrarian societies into commodity relations." Though many have argued that realism "flattens the cultural and historical particularities of Andean society," Beckman argues that Peruvian José María Arguedas' realist form articulates "how indigenous people and belief systems" are "subject to historical transformation" brought on by capitalism. Attending to the ambitions of the realist mode, this essay

attends to the different ways realism registers uneven development at different moments within the history of capitalism.

What happens when that moment is yet to come? In Mathias Nilges' article, temporality takes center stage as he investigates the realist form from within a crisis of futurity, in a "timeless present that seems to absorb the future into it as a result of our inability to imagine substantive alternatives to the status quo." If it has become a matter of fact that it is easier to imagine the description of our planet than it is to imagine alternative to capitalism, is it possible for realism to "accomplish [anything] other than reiterating the same diagnosis and confirming the crisis of futurity?" As Nilges describes it, capitalist realism is not necessarily the "exhaustive foreclosing" of possibility many have understood it to be. Rather than view the form as "yet another index" of a futureless present, the new realist forms of the past decade might better be described as opportunities to critique such a view. Arguing for what he calls a "prospective realism" Nilges argues the form does not merely represent reality, but "establishes a critical relation to it" by "making legible those paths forward that exist in the present as latent."

This speculative note continues with Anna Kornbluh's reading of Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*. Reading the "aesthetic and ideological complexity of Robinson's novel alongside Fisher's definition of capitalist realism as "the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion." If Robinson's novel has much of the mimetic trappings of realism, she argues, its "decidedly non-realist" mode of narration does not. Building on this dialectic Kornbluh asks whether or not capitalist realism is "mood, or mode?" The answer, it turns out, is both. But, she argues, "the difference between the two might actually be pivotal for critical judgments of...political promise in the present." The mismatched narrative and "atmosphere" — the "refusal of dystopian depression" — argues Kornbluh, offers, if not a path forward, a first step toward a future that is not foreclosed by the extractive logic of capitalism.

Nicholas Brown's contribution serves as a kind of coda to these essays, further drawing out and radicalizing the dialectical tension between representational and formal demands of realism. Engaging the work of prominent Brazilian literary critics Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwarz, Brown articulates what he views as overlapping but not coincident modes within literary realism: The descriptive and the narrative. In the descriptive (mimetic) mode most commonly associated with realism, Brown argues, the text "is obligated to mirror, reflect, or represent" the world and in this mode "the authority belongs to the object," or world, rather than to the text, which presents both an aesthetic and ideological problem for the text. In this mode the text virtually cannot help but ratify the logic of capitalism. Only when the descriptive is successfully subsumed into the text's narrative logic does the text gain its authority: "The authority of the text resides not in representational elements but in the form," he writes. And whatever political claims the novel makes about the

world, then, are not “strictly speaking representational.” This has implications not only for the novel, conceived as a work of art, but for interpretation and, perhaps more forcefully, about the kinds of claims we make about the world.

The question between the limits and political possibilities of the realist form raised in these essays gets taken up in through a more explicit engagement with *Capitalist Realism* in a roundtable edited by Matthew Flisfeder. Essays by Jodi Dean, Leigh Claire Le Berge, Benjamin Noys, Kai Heron, and Dan Hassler-Forest grapple with Fisher’s characterization of the “feelings of crisis and despair,” that define the capitalist realist aesthetic and the utopia that might exist “beyond the limits of the present.” Crucially, these essays extend beyond the literary to engage Fisher’s writing on other media as well, articulating the wide-ranging scope of his criticism and suggesting the ways Fisher was attuned to the “the radical utopian elements of some of our most ideological texts... capitalist popular culture.”

Finally, the issue continues its explorations of form with two reviews. The first, by Robert Cashin Ryan reviews Josh Robinson’s *Adorno’s Poetics of Form*. Robinson deftly meets Adorno on his own terms in this case book, writes Ryan, lucidly drawing together various threads of Adorno’s thought that culminates in a sustained engagement with the dialectical tension between literary and commodity forms. Jessica Hurley reviews Myka Tucker-Abramson’s *Novel Shocks*. Hurley begins her review by pointing out that whatever else scholars disagree about when it comes to neoliberalism, the timeframe is relatively settled — neoliberalism took its economic form in the early 1970s. One of the great interventions in Tucker-Abramson’s *Novel Shocks*, Hurley suggests, is that it “radically resituates the emergence of the proto-neoliberal subject much earlier in the twentieth century. Through incisive readings of the ways mid-century novels register urban renewal, Tucker-Abramson is able to show how “the contradictions of Keynesian economics...produce a proto-neoliberal economic reality” as early as the 1940s.

Taken to together these articles, roundtable, and reviews constitute a significant engagement with the history and future of realism, probing the most common assumptions made about literary realism. In raising these questions, the issue not only raises fundamental questions about what literary realism is, but about the way we read now — about the importance of attending to form as something other than merely mimetic.

- Davis Smith-Brecheisen, for the *Mediations* Editors

**Notes**

1. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (UK: Zero Books, 2009)
2. Anna Kornbluh, "Realist Blueprint." *The Henry James Review*, 36.3 (Fall 2015) 200.

