



THE SLOW CANCELLATION OF THE FUTURE: CAPITALIST REALISM WITHIN THE COMBINED AND UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This essay is the English translation of Stefan Baghiu's introduction to the Romanian translation of Mark Fisher's 2009 *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*. It delves into how Fisher's book fits into his broader body of work, emphasizing the functional role of his concept of capitalist realism within the context of world systems theory and the paradigm of combined and uneven development. The preface is both a praise of the term and a critique of its major essentialism: the essentialism inherent in the perspective on capitalism, which serves as an overarching framework for every facet of global production, and the extrapolation of the peculiarities of Western capitalism to other areas precisely due to this essentialism. In this context, essentialism refers to the reduction of the diverse forms that capitalism generates in various parts of the world to a singular, uniform, and guiding form of capitalism, as if the Western modes of production are comparable with those in Eastern Europe, China, Latin America, Africa, and so forth. In *Capitalist Realism* (as well as in all his other works), Fisher articulates ideas through and about the Anglo-American culture, inherently serving as a chronicler of pop culture in these areas. The captivating force of his theory, however, stems primarily from the way it creates the illusion that what is currently unfolding in other regions is merely a delayed manifestation of capitalist realism moving from the center to the periphery.

Keywords: Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism, Combined and uneven.

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There has not been a more inappropriate time to discuss critical theory than the present moment, and not because it has retreated from public discourse. On the contrary, critical theory has become an integral part of contemporary social and cultural debates. There has never been such a widespread interest in topics such as gender inequality, racism, or various manifestations of classism. Today, there is an abundance of public figures ready to engage in discussions and take ethical stands against issues relating to "combined and unequal" development.¹ Most topics in critical theory have become *raw material* for *new media*, from YouTube

podcasts, Twitch, Facebook texts, and TikTok videos discussing subalternity to TV series which acknowledge and revolve around inequality. From almost all points of view, this seems to be the greatest victory of contemporaneity. Which critical theorist hasn't dreamt that someday the most influential voices in cyberspace would condemn racism? That social inequality would be openly denounced at the Oscars or the Academy Awards? That capitalism would finally take some blows from those shaping contemporary capital? One possible answer is Mark Fisher. While many view such attitudes as progress toward an era marked by mutual respect,

increased awareness of the perils of segregation, and a commitment to demystify financial agendas, Mark Fisher perceives them as mere forms through which capital compels us to further invest in its structures of production and anti-production.

Mark Fisher's observations in *Capitalist Realism* have resonated widely across the most diverse of circles. Facebook boasts groups such as "Mark Fisher Memes for Hauntological Teens," where any occurrence of a "Mark Fisher moment"² becomes viral almost instantly. His works have been reviewed and featured in publications such as *The New York Times* and *London Review of Books*, and they are cited in studies by notable figures of "highbrow" research such as, among others, Anthony Dunne, Ben Anderson, and McKenzie Wark, among others. His concept has even spurred the emergence of dedicated studies, pushing the discourse on this type of realism into new directions and even attempting to forge a new avenue of research in humanities. Perhaps one of the most enlightening and valuable contributions in this regard is *Reading Capitalist Realism*, edited by Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire LaBerge in 2014, which also includes "We can't afford to be realists," an excellent interview with Mark Fisher conducted by Jodi Dean. More recently, in 2022, Robert T. Tally Jr. published *For a Ruthless Critique of All That Exists: Literature in an Age of Capitalist Realism*,³ delving into topics such as "imagination fatigue" and the necessity for radical theoretical perspectives to overcome this phase, while advocating for a revival of "high theory."⁴ In short order – and unsurprisingly, at least at first glance –, 'capitalist realism' has itself been absorbed into neoliberalism's vast system of digital, cultural, and academic production. So, when engagement waned in the Facebook group "Mark Fisher Memes for Hauntological Teens," comments labeling Fisher's ideas as a "short-lived urbanist accessory" started surfacing. Yet a few concise clarifications are essential to understand this anti-capitalist theorist.

In his studies, Mark Fisher navigates his areas of interest with a blend of deep insight and rigorous academic formalism, all while steering clear of any traces of 'high theory.' Fisher's roots do not necessarily trace back to French Theory,⁵ i.e., to the shift of "serious" French theory into the realm of spectacle; rather, he emerges from the post-1990s to 2000s digital culture of blog commentary and theoretical analysis. He is not a theorist who grafts "high theory" onto pop culture topics, whether niche or mainstream. Rather, he is a writer who seamlessly interweaves anti-capitalist theory, drawing from figures such as Antonio Gramsci to Fredric Jameson, with contemporary artistic expressions and online forums. At first, I hesitated to describe his approach as a form of "vulgar post-Marxism," but I decided to use this term precisely because it aligns with how McKenzie Wark commendably describes "low theory" in her 2019

Capital is Dead – something "vulgar, common, and even a little rude"⁶ – which, in her case, draws on "the vulgar Marxism practiced by Haraway," which, in turn, inspired Karen Barad's "agential realism" and Paul B. Preciado's challenging of the "general intellect" proposed by autonomist Marxism:

"My own connection to these questions comes from spending much of the nineties immersed in media avant-gardes that tried to build critical practices out of a low-tech, punk approach to digital technologies. Where Adorno or Pasolini occupied residual cultural spaces that predated commodification, here was an instance of an emerging one that nobody had quite figured out how to subsume into a 'business model'. This gave rise organically to a kind of low theory that tried to produce concepts that could keep up with the mutations in information technology wending their way throughout the whole consumption, circulation, and production cycle."⁷

I believe Wark's description of her evolution aligns perfectly with Fisher's approach: "concepts that keep up with the mutations in information technology" in her context equate to "examples that keep up" in this case. Here, we are dealing with a kind of theory that, at first glance, exudes a specific type of 'coolness' through decentralization, deinstitutionalization, and programmatic unseriousness. This is evident not only in its less pretentious and autonomist expression of critical ideas but also in the media where it unfolds—blogs, consumer magazines, independent publishing, etc. Much like Wark, for Fisher, theory is not meant for institutions; instead, it should circulate like a virus, selecting its most capable hosts to propagate it unchanged. At least in the 2000s, this dissemination was more likely to occur through blogs or in niche magazines in the UK and US. Fisher is not a traditional scholar, not even in the contemporary sense enshrined by the neoliberal academic systems, but rather a hacker, using the term as proposed by McKenzie Wark, where hacking serves as a form of resistance against the commodification of information:

"The hacker class, producer of new abstractions, becomes more important to each successive ruling class, as each depends more and more on information as a resource. The hacker class arises out of the transformation of information into property, in the form of intellectual property, including patents, trademarks, copyright and the moral right of authors. The hacker class is the class with the capacity to create not only new kinds of object and subject in the world, not only new kinds of property form in which they may be represented, but new kinds of relation beyond the property form. The formation of the hacker class as a class comes at just this moment when freedom from necessity and from class domination appears on the horizon as a possibility....



Hackers must calculate their interests not as owners, but as producers, for this is what distinguishes them from the vectoralist class. Hackers do not merely own, and profit by owning information. They produce new information, and as producers need access to it free from the absolute domination of the commodity form. Hacking as a pure, free experimental activity must be free from any constraint that is not self imposed. Only out of its liberty will it produce the means of producing a surplus of liberty and liberty as a surplus.”⁸

Hence, the intellectual journey of Mark Fisher: academic nomad – he consistently emphasizes in lectures that he has never held a stable job, playfully labeling himself a product of capitalist realism and its preached “flexibility” as a positive ethic of personal entrepreneurship –, editor and curator for an independent publishing house – *Zero Books*, which he co-founded with Tariq Goddard –, and an independent cultural journalist covering cinema and music, from *dub*, *rave*, and *jungle* to *electro*, *pop*, and *rap*, primarily for *The Wire*, a magazine for which he conducted a cult interview with the enigmatic musician Burial and explored the specters “haunting” the music of artists such as Amy Winehouse or Kanye West, alongside more obscure post-punk and electronic bands.⁹

However, unlike figures such as McKenzie Wark, Fisher is not in any way a representative of the new left. He rarely delves into identity politics in his theoretical works, and he even had a controversial episode after publishing the article “Exiting the Vampire Castle” in 2013, when he criticized “call-out” culture (later known as “cancel culture”). Fisher’s essay was inspired by the “exhaustion” caused by his political and intellectual work in the summer of 2013 and the subsequent depression triggered by the often “miserable, dispiriting” environment of the “left-wing Twitter.” He specifically references the situation in which Owen Jones, “the person most responsible for raising class consciousness in the UK in the last few years,” as per his words, was accused of appropriating left-wing movements for personal gain. Fisher then goes on to describe the accusations of sexism leveled against Russell Brand, starting from observations relating to popular culture and ideology made during a show characterized by Fisher as

“defiantly pro-immigrant, pro-communist, anti-homophobic, saturated with working class intelligence and not afraid to show it, and queer in the way that popular culture used to be (i.e. nothing to do with the sour-faced identitarian piety foisted upon us by moralisers on the post-structuralist ‘left’). Malcolm X, Che, politics as a psychedelic dismantling of existing reality: this was communism as something cool, sexy and proletarian, instead of a finger-wagging sermon.”¹⁰

Indeed, for Fisher, the “vampire castle” he described

in 2013 serves as the embodiment of his own theory of capitalist realism and the fulfillment of neoliberal prophecies underlying the transformation of capitalism into a state of “the real with no escape.” According to him, discussions of class should have been central to any debate on inequality and privilege; however, “the mere mention of class is now automatically treated as a sign that someone is trying to downplay the importance of race and gender.” This leads to a set of ‘rules’ according to which, Fisher argues, neoliberal ‘vampirism’ operates and then he tries to identify areas of class privilege (academic, cultural, etc.) which capitalize on contemporary discussions of subalternity and inequality. The central question in his essay is “how do you hold immense wealth and power while also appearing as a victim, marginal, and oppositional?” Fisher’s stance on neoliberal identity politics may not have reached the level of Žižek’s recent “political correctness struggle,” but it shared a similar motive during those years: the left must exercise caution to avoid “doing capital’s work for it” when turning talk of privilege into public discourse. The rules of this “vampire castle” are derived from the capitalist realism it consistently discussed: 1. *individualize and privatize everything*; 2. *make thought and action appear very, very difficult*; 3. *propagate as much guilt as you can*; 4. *essentialize*; 5. *think like a liberal (because you are one)*.

One cannot fast-forward through the contemporary discussions which changed left-wing perspectives from 2013 to 2015 without mentioning at least two major events that reshaped the debate within the Western left itself.¹¹ First, neoliberalism has so effectively appropriated these discussions that beyond the issue raised by Fisher – i.e., “the person who accuses” is “privileged” – a new one has emerged: the system constructing the public image of the accused is designed to significantly boost their symbolic capital. This was especially evident in the era when YouTube became the preferred podcasting platform, and major media distribution corporations found profitability in negative publicity. The most striking case in this regard is that of Dave Chappelle, where the uproar sparked by his Netflix Special, which features jokes about trans people, not only brought an “aura of glamour” and money, as per Eva Wiseman’s terms, but also raised an uncomfortable question: “is it time to cancel the culture of cancellation?”¹² Secondly, at least one significant text has since emerged, if not necessarily supporting Fisher’s 2013 “cause,” at least invoking a central argument in Fisher’s text: that neoliberalism can co-opt active left-wing political movements. This is the driving force behind the manifesto *Feminism of the 99%*, signed by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Battacharya, and Nancy Frazer in 2017 at Verso, which was translated into Romanian by writer Oana Uiorean in 2019. The manifesto “attempts to overcome the well-known and breathless antagonisms between ‘identity politics’ and

'class politics,' as Uiorean puts it,¹³ and its intention is clear from the very beginning: the feminism of the "1%" (i.e., that of monopoly capital) needs reassessment. In any case, for Fisher in 2013, the co-opting of the left into "capitalist work" or its integration into neoliberal structures were signs that it was worth developing the central idea of *Capitalist Realism*. As he concludes at the end of his text on "the vampire castle,"

"Capital subdued the organised working class by decomposing class consciousness, viciously subjugating trade unions while seducing 'hard working families' into identifying with their own narrowly defined interests instead of the interests of the wider class; but why would capital be concerned about a 'left' that replaces class politics with a moralising individualism, and that, far from building solidarity, spreads fear and insecurity?"

However, it must be emphasized from the outset that Mark Fisher's primary thesis has a flaw: the essentialism inherent in the perspective on capitalism, which serves as an overarching framework for every facet of global production, and the extrapolation of the peculiarities of Western capitalism to other areas precisely due to this essentialism. In this context, essentialism refers to the reduction of the diverse forms that capitalism generates in various parts of the world to a singular, uniform, and guiding form of capitalism, as if the Western modes of production are comparable with those in Eastern Europe, China, Latin America, Africa, and so forth. In *Capitalist Realism* (as well as in all his other works), Fisher articulates ideas through and about the Anglo-American culture, inherently serving as a chronicler of pop culture in these areas. The captivating force of his theory, however, stems primarily from the way it creates the illusion that what is currently unfolding in other regions is merely a delayed manifestation of capitalist realism moving from the center to the periphery. In other words, although there is a span of more than a decade between the original release of Fisher's volume and its translation into Romanian, *Capitalist Realism* reads as if it was written with the East in mind, precisely because this area is only now seeing its form of capitalist realism. However, if capitalism's modus operandi involves incorporating anti-capitalist discourses, how should we approach the areas of the capitalist world where anti-capitalism has yet to be commodified? What about conservative societies where the struggle against capitalism leans more towards a constant sabotage of progress?¹⁴ Furthermore, although Fisher posits that the fall of communist systems in the East resulted in a transformation of the world, primarily because capitalism lost the antagonistic structure against which it defined itself as the "good regime" of existence and production, *Capitalist Realism* does not delve into the regimes where communism was succeeded by "political

capitalism," leading to various forms of "transitions to nowhere," to use Boris Buden's famous phrase.¹⁵ Many references in *Capitalist Realism* are Anglocentric, from Alan J. Pakula's films such as the 1974 *The Parallax View*,¹⁶ invoking the "shadowy, centerless impersonality typical of a corporate conspiracy," to William Gibson's novels such as his 1984 *Neuromancer*, illustrating how "cyberspace capital works by making its users dependent."¹⁷ But perhaps the momentous opportunity of such a translation and discussion about capitalist realism in the semiperipheries lies precisely here: in the way we are only now beginning to truly understand what can happen when capital conquers all the structures of society.

So, what exactly is capitalist realism? Essentially, it is a viewpoint on modern-day neoliberalism seen as a "hegemonic ideology," in line with Antonio Gramsci's definition of an ideology that eliminates or co-opts competition. According to Fisher, our present time is entirely *shaped* by neoliberalism, and when we try to grapple with this reality, we are essentially challenging structures we have already internalized. This concept has been a recurrent theme in Fisher's works until his very last posts, evolving from a form of pop analysis to a sort of ideological frustration in the face of the challenge of envisioning alternatives to capitalism. Mark Fisher's intellectual work was "haunted" by two dominant ideas. First, the naturalization of neoliberalism in today's world should be the foundational premise when dissecting social phenomena and artistic environments. Secondly, the future is no longer something that can be created (or at least, societies today struggle to even "articulate the present"), a concept that, in his 2014 *Ghosts of My Life*, he defined as the "slow cancellation of the future."

Yet this narrative has been crafted in the West and, I might add, embraced in various ways within post-communist regimes. According to Fisher, the 1980s marked a turning point when neoliberalism adopted an increasingly aggressive stance, epitomized by slogans like "there is no alternative." The 2000s saw the economic crisis being "resolved" by "forgiving" banks and wiping away their debts, clear indicators of an unquestionable triumph for capitalist realism. Drawing inspiration from Alain Badiou, for whom "a brutal state of affairs, profoundly inegalitarian - where all existence is evaluated in terms of money alone - is presented to us as ideal," Fisher observes that the global capitalist system is not necessarily aiming to cast itself in a positive light but rather in an acceptable one, essentially justifying its existence as the *sole* acceptable version of reality. Fisher compares the "realism" in which neoliberal capitalism is "the best of all possible worlds" with "the deflationary perspective of a depressive who believes that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion." Although it intersects with Fredric Jameson's portrayal of late capitalism, capitalist realism underscores an



intensification of the sentiments that were already pervasive in the cultural and political analyses of the 1980s.

In Fisher's perspective, while there were, "at least theoretically," tangible alternatives to capitalism in the 1980s, today they seem to have disappeared, both on the political and artistic fronts. We are witnessing the realization of two cynical political prophecies: Fukuyama's notion that the "end of history" came with 1989, and Margaret Thatcher's repetitive mantra that there is no alternative to capitalism. Capitalist realism, according to Fisher, elucidates the process whereby the cultural and social system of the past three decades has unequivocally ingrained the idea that anything occurring within the capitalist system "requires" capitalism. Need more solidarity in a community? Why not gather local or international sponsors to contribute to the systemic integration of your solidarity? Want to alleviate poverty? Why not enlist a mega-corporation to integrate your cause into a charitable circuit? *Capitalist Realism*, following Žižek's observations that "anti-capitalism is widely disseminated in capitalism," endeavors to identify agents of capitalist realism even within the anti-capitalist circles: who cultivates the illusion that things are progressing positively? Who shapes the narrative that this "deeply unequal system" is the sole or, at least, the most decent possibility? Furthermore, who represents today's resistance to capitalism but is unable to grapple with capitalist realism? Fisher identifies two factions that are left to withstand the exponential advance of neoliberalism: one spawned by "immobilizers" and the other by "liberal communists"¹⁸ – both equally problematic and/or ineffective. The "immobilizers" are anti-capitalist factions resistant to change, seeking to preserve a "Fordist/disciplinary" model (with Fisher emphasizing that "resistance to the 'new' is not a cause that the left can or should rally around"). The "liberal communists" are, in essence, capital monopolists critiquing the lack of social flexibility in production (advocating for flexibility) and viewing the problems of capitalism as rectifiable through acts of charity accompanying permanent progress (as illustrated by Bill Gates or George Soros, according to Fisher). Thus, Fisher's overarching theory posits that there is scarcely any effective counteraction to this reality. Being "realistic" in his 2009 book simply implies capitulation to neoliberalism, as any form of resistance is susceptible to co-optation by the structures of capitalism.

The concept of "capitalist realism," as mentioned by Mark Fisher, originated as a sarcastic response to "socialist realism" in the 1960s and 1980s.¹⁹ However, while the "realism" in socialist realism primarily pertains to the singular portrayal of reality in Stalinism, the "realism" in capitalist realism mainly refers to a "realistic consideration" of the inability to escape capitalism. Therefore, it is crucial, when critiquing this

situation, to highlight the gap between what is real and constructed reality. According to Alenka Zupancic, "[t]he reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; one could even claim that it constitutes the highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact (or biological, economic [...] necessity (and that we tend to perceive as non-ideological))."²⁰ Capitalist realism no longer suppresses realities but absorbs them through the mechanisms of "advertising and marketing." This is evident in the context of the climate emergency, where a reality – the planet losing its ability to sustain life – becomes part of ideological production within capitalism. Even though "capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability" due to its relentless pursuit of infinite production in a finite world, the paradox of capitalist realism is its ability to create a legitimizing narrative. It claims to be the only system capable of generating prosperity and the sole system capable of addressing the climate crisis, despite being inherently incompatible with "any notion of sustainability." Fisher draws on the works of Alain Badiou, who notes that "[t]o justify their conservatism, the partisans of the established order cannot really call it ideal or wonderful. So instead, they have decided to say that all the rest is horrible."²¹ However, the scope of this production matrix encompasses not only natural disasters but also human disasters. Building on the ideas of Michel Foucault and later Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who argue that "madness [is] not a natural, but a political, category," Fisher explores how neoliberalism is "responsible" for altering individuals' mental states. Following Oliver James, who demonstrates a correlation between the rise of neoliberalism and increased rates of depression and anxiety in the English, American, and Australian societies, Fisher asks himself, "how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill?"²² Consequently, capitalist realism primarily manifests as "depressive hedonism" induced by "market Stalinism." In summary, despite its constant promises to eradicate bureaucracy (a hallmark of excessively rational modernity), capitalist realism actually amplifies it, moving it from an arena of long-term economic and social planning to one characterized by the motion of entrepreneurial individualism. For Fisher, the soft bureaucracy in call centers serves as the fundamental metaphor for capitalist realism, with this "market Stalinism" (bureaucracy responsible for programming and inhibiting desires) already serving in works like Kafka's *The Castle* as a metaphor for a regime that presents itself as non-totalitarian precisely because it assumes the ultimate authority to reconcile freedom of choice with the political imposition of operational systems:

"Call center angst is one more illustration of the way that Kafka is poorly understood as exclusively a writer

on totalitarianism; a decentralized, market Stalinist bureaucracy is far more Kafkaesque than one in which there is a central authority. Read, for instance, the bleak farce of K's encounter with the telephone system in the Castle, and it is hard not to see it as uncannily prophetic of the call center experience."²³

Therefore, in contemporary societies, education and culture are increasingly being used as tools through which the reality of consumption dictates the cultural experience of reality. In the realm of capitalist realism, artistic production establishes a type of "spasmodic interpassivity," whereby devices or technologies consume on our behalf. Within the preferred politico-economic framework within which capitalism unfolds – liberal democracy – there is a consistent critique of the bureaucratization of life, yet bureaucracy is seamlessly integrated into structures that are increasingly individualized and aggressive. Capital, encompassing all mechanism of production, reinforces systems of anti-production. This involves generating new "shortcomings" to create the illusion of an urgent need for consumption, even after addressing existing needs. As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, Mark Fisher delves into what Gramsci termed an "organic ideology" – a hegemonic ideology that assimilates elements from subordinate positions, incorporating them into a hegemonic superstructure through alliances and class dominations. In simpler terms, once an ideology attains a hegemonic position, it *naturalizes* itself precisely by patiently accumulating antagonistic positions.²⁴ While Fisher seldom references Gramsci when he describes his theory, he consistently starts from Fredric Jameson, whose texts heavily rely on Gramsci. For Jameson, for instance,

"a mode of production is not a 'total system' in that forbidding sense; it includes a variety of counterforces and new tendencies within itself, of 'residual' as well as 'emergent' forces, which it must attempt to manage or control (Gramsci's conception of hegemony). Were those heterogeneous forces not endowed with an effectivity of their own, the hegemonic project would be unnecessary. Thus, differences are presupposed by the model, something that would be sharply distinguished from another feature which complicates this one, namely, that capitalism also produces differences or differentiation as a function of its own internal logic."²⁵

In a similar vein, Fisher argues that "[a]n ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact." When considering how capital operates today, i.e., by eradicating the very notion of envisioning a world beyond capitalism, it is crucial to clarify from the very beginning that we are not

referring to what Marx termed as "primitive forms of accumulation." Instead, we are dealing with sophisticated methods of colonizing reality and transforming it into commodities without resorting to any violence. The central concept in understanding capitalist realism is passivity. Moreover, in line with Robert Pfaller, Mark Fisher introduces the term "interpassivity," whereby capital assimilates anti-capitalist forms and commodifies them for our consumption. In the realm of capitalist realism, art "performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity."²⁶

Fisher's concept of "realism" does not apply to a specific artistic movement; instead, it represents a way of perceiving reality which can also shape perspectives on artistic production. Specifically, it encourages a realistic outlook on capitalism that no longer entertains alternatives. Although many of Fisher's achievements as a critical theorist stem from contributing artistic and cultural (as well as historical and social) models whereby the signs of different epochs can *read* (the "anticapitalism" in Margaret Atwood's novels, the "spectralism" in Kubrick's and Christopher Nolan's movies, Burial's music "haunted" by the past, or the exploitation of "super-affluent hedonism" in Drake's and Kanye West's music), for him, much of the artistic production of these periods fails to envision alternative futures. The main cause of this incapacity does not carry an aesthetic implication; rather, it arises from the way any movement, no matter how critical of capitalism, inevitably (if not initially) embraces its morphology. Our cultural production, Fisher argues along the lines of Marx, is increasingly consumed by a love for capital.²⁷ The scenarios it is coerced to adopt are all closed, echoing Jameson's notion that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism, which is also the departure point for *Capitalist Realism*. In Fisher's own words, "[o]ver the past thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a 'business ontology' in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business."²⁸

While the relationship between postmodernism and modernism had an element of competition and reterritorialization, Fisher insists that this was due to the clash between two distinct models of social organization and artistic production: Fordism and post-Fordism. However, with the transition to capitalist realism, our political imagination "no longer stages this kind of confrontation with modernism. On the contrary, it [capitalist realism] takes the vanquishing of modernism for granted: modernism is now something that can periodically return, but only as a frozen aesthetic style, never as an ideal for living." After colonizing the external territory in its entirety, capitalism finds nothing left to incorporate into its structures. This leads to what Fisher terms the "precorporation" of realities. Expanding on



Jameson's idea that the structures of late capitalism have even colonized the world of dreams – making capitalism the sole condition for creation and life, with nothing outside of it – Fisher notes that even 'alternative' or 'independent' zones have become "dominant styles" within capitalist production.

This has mainly occurred through to the deeply atomizing discourse of the neoliberal individualism, which has become the foundation of all political and social discourse over the past three decades. The increasingly pronounced evolution of capitalism into a post-Fordist one after the 1970s brought forth the concept of "flexibility," meaning precariousness and instability, bundled under the fashionable guise of "independence." In other words, the relatively tangible stability of modernity has been progressively invalidated with the rise of neoliberalism, giving rise to a paradigm of entrepreneurial existence whereby realist models contributed to an individual "business" ontology. Today's global work values, such as "flexibility," "independence," or the "nomadic" nature of labor (frequently hailed and promoted as perks of freelancing and the corporate culture) had to be justified ontologically and legitimized to reach this point. Thus, nowadays, being a "nomad" or "flexible" is no longer tantamount to being forced to relocate or to being "precarious." This is because the transition from one economic model to another required a discursive legitimation—an endorsement consistently stating that social stability and existential uniformity are outdated models, undesirable artifacts of an old world. Hence the praise for the mobility that capitalist realism requires: even though capitalism has nothing left to assimilate into its structures since everything originates within it, migration within the capitalist system has become the primary means of expressing its individualistic ideology. To be immobile somehow means being confined to the past, to a time when flexibility was not part of the matrix of illusions defining the dynamism of life. Mark Fisher, in many of the recorded lectures available on YouTube, often underscores that he himself is a sort of self-entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of his own career and existence, where stability not only fails to materialize but also seems undesirable in the current production model. This undesirability is especially evident because, as Fisher explains in Chapter 7 of *Capitalist Realism*, amid the tumultuous changes to which capitalism subjects its own discourses so as to address the ever-eclectic reality it generates, the logic of the administrative discourses becomes itself (self)contradictory: "Capitalist realism [...] entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment."²⁹ And not only migration but also the consumption of "novelty" adheres to these rules. Although contemporary society can no longer produce the "new," it consistently revives specters from the past, which it promotes as "novelties" or "new styles." For Fisher, the hallmark of

this form of realism is to discard reasonings from an immediate past which were used to justify a reality and propose an entirely different – and often contradictory – reality shortly after. This renders the entire ideological production (and implicitly, artistic production) responsible today for two main discourses: justifying unprecedented mobility and producing a "new" that satisfies the illusion that this movement has a purpose. In the same chapter, Fisher observes that the advocacy for "flexibility" and "novelty" in the contemporary world is created "[i]n conditions where realities and identities are upgraded like software" and that, as a result, "it's no wonder that memory disturbances have become the focal point of cultural anxiety." The cultural anxiety we experience, according to the critique of capitalist realism, arises from the inability to produce the new, which is the only thing actually necessary to justify "flexibility." In *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher's solutions to this crisis of contemporaneity all revolve – ironically, isn't it? – around a return to the past, to apparently old-left principles, transposed into rave culture and post-Fordism: a return to the union model from the Fordist era; the politicization of mental illness and holding the economic system accountable for exacerbating the individual crises we now consider "natural"; building a new collective political subject.

To truly grasp – and perhaps, even more significantly, to apply – Mark Fisher in a culture that seldom questions its own contemporary artistic phenomena and their connection with the material world in which they originate, a few preliminary concessions are in order. Above all, contrary to the demands of the "realism" criticized by Fisher, there needs to be a relinquishment of the notion of a coherent temporal evolution, with some definite conclusion, in recent cultural development. As Fisher seems to argue in both *Capitalist Realism* (2009) and *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), there is nothing genuinely new in culture; this, however, is not his primary concern. He is not necessarily worried about the culture's incapacity to produce the "new," a fact that rather cynically amuses him and provides a space to interpret the forms of "retromania"³⁰ that society produces today, especially the way in which culture has lost its ability to "articulate the present."

One of the pivotal issues for Mark Fisher in the cultural analysis he proposes is how the future will unfold. This is evident not only from the way in which the theory in *Capitalist Realism* revolves around the idea that imagining the future has become an exceedingly difficult task, nearly impossible outside of capitalism, but also from the persistent obsession with the "lost future" in *Ghosts of My Life: Writing on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (2014),³¹ whose initial part is titled "Lost Futures" and begins with the essay "The Slow Cancellation of the Future," which draws on Franco "Bifo" Berardi's phrase from *After the Future*. According to Berardi, the linear

illusion of time evolving as technical development in modernity reached its peak around World War II and influenced the way his generation (born in the 1940s and 50s) grew up. Developing intellectually at the “high point of this mythological temporalization,” as Berardi puts it, his generation of intellectuals cannot view reality outside of this progress-oriented, ascensional modernity. Fisher, who acknowledges that he has the same limits in imagining time other than through the modernist ascensional paradigm, considers this the major dilemma of the present moment: how cultural production has ceased to be “new” for several decades now, and thus, how temporal evolution ceases to be seen as organic or ascensional. The widespread impossibility of “producing” a “new” future, Fisher says, following Simon Reynolds, translates into “retromania,” i.e., the 21st-century culture’s obsession with its immediate past. It is not so much that “nothing has happened” in the last three decades in the artistic and cultural space, but rather that “culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present,” assuming there is still any “present” that can be grasped and articulated.³² To cope with this inability to understand the present moment, culture reiterates ghosts of the past, a past that returns and “haunts” the present-day through spectral appearances. Fisher’s central concept, “hauntology,” which was rendered “spectrality” into Romanian, could have been just as effectively adapted as “bântologie,” a play on words combining “bântuire” (haunting) and “ontologie” (ontology) – if only it didn’t sound so bad –, to better reflect the origin of the concept, which Jacques Derrida borrowed in his 1993 *Specters of Marx*³³ directly from the famous opening of Marx’s *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.³⁴ Fisher examines the phenomenon of electronic music around 2005 when, as he states in another article titled “What is Hauntology?”, music of this genre ceased to sound futuristic, and everything produced in the 2000s could easily have been produced in the 1990s.³⁵

One of the most well-known quotes in contemporary pop theory originates from an article in *The Economist* by writer William Gibson, who asserts that “[t]he future is already here – it’s just not evenly distributed.”³⁶ Given Fisher’s frequent references to Gibson, it’s not entirely inappropriate for a culture on the periphery to pose questions about the theories in *Capitalist Realism*. What do we do with the phenomena that “haunt” our

alternative present? How about the rearrangement of techno music in *ro-minimal*, lending a kind of “new” vibe to the club music of the 1980s and 90s? What about the recurrence of *gangsta rap* forms in “new” *trap* structures, often with a *grunge* feel? Analyzing the prevalent discourses in *trap*, *manele*, or *pop* today reveals a libertarian and aggressively neoliberal tone, giving the impression that capitalist realism has not only prevailed in the most alternative of zones but has already expired there, leaving behind the post-apocalyptic remnants of consumer society.³⁷ With today’s musical mainstream conveying messages like “make money” or “flaunt it” or “do it yourself,” what else can critical theory do but, once again, proclaim the bankruptcy of any critical alternative against neoliberal individualism? Furthermore, when delving into somewhat underground zones like *trap* (or those that were, at least for a significant period, outside the mainstream, although ultimately all were “absorbed” by capital and the image bank production system), how are we supposed to address the way in which almost all emancipation movements (feminism, anti-racism, internationalism, anti-classism, etc.) are increasingly becoming playgrounds and instruments of global neoliberalism and mainstream artistic production? What should we do about this aspirational culture that consistently promotes the consumption of ever-appealing individualistic narratives? Fisher’s response in *Capitalist Realism* is as nihilistic as it gets: absolutely nothing. Nevertheless, in what was meant to be Mark Fisher’s final book, *Acid Communism*, partially featured in the 2018 *k-punk* anthology, there is another plausible answer: “Instead of seeking to overcome capital, we should focus on what capital must always obstruct: the collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy. We on the left have had it wrong for a while: [...] The overcoming of capital has to be fundamentally based on the simple insight that, far from being about ‘wealth creation’, capital necessarily and always blocks the production of common wealth.”

Capitalist Realism, like all of Fisher’s works, is an open invitation to explore and analyze precisely what possibilities exist to return to these lost collective spaces, against all the natural forms through which capital blocks or co-opts them.

Translated by Anca Simina Martin

Notes

1. I refer here to the paradigm of “combined and uneven,” along the lines laid down in WReC’s *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).
2. That is, a moment when an effort to diminish or eradicate neoliberal tendencies is assimilated by contemporary capitalism. For instance, consider Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s bold statement “tax the rich” on the white dress she wore at the Met Gala.



- Alternatively, it refers to any scenario where, even though reality does not inherently require it, an event commodifies some circumstances – a recent example in this regard is Ukraine’s presidential couple posing for *Vogue* inside a bunker.
3. See Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire Laberge, eds., *Reading Capitalist Realism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014).
 - Robert T. Tally Jr., *For a Ruthless Critique of All that Exists* (UK: John Hunt Publishing, 2022).
 4. See especially Robert Scott’s review of Robert T. Tally Jr.’s volume, in which Scott explains, however, that the volume is a plea for a return to “high theory.” See Robert Scott, “Postcritique; or, The Cultural Logic of Capitalist Realism,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 14, 2022, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/postcritique-or-the-cultural-logic-of-capitalist-realism/>.
 5. See François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
 6. McKenzie Wark, *Capital is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (London: Verso, 2019), 33.
 7. Wark, *Capital is Dead*, 130–31.
 8. See McKenzie Wark, “Informația vrea să fie liberă (dar se află pretutindeni în lanțuri)”, translated by Daniel Clinci, *Post(h)um. Jurnal de studii (post)umaniste*, www.posthum.ro. Originally published as McKenzie Wark, “Gam3r 7th30ry”, *Cultural Politics* 2, no. 2 (2006): 213–224. Currently online as “A HACKER MANIFESTO [version 4.0]” at http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributorso/warktext.html. See also McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2004).
 9. “Burial: Unedited Transcript”, interview by Mark Fisher, *The Wire*, December 2012, https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/interviews/burial_unedited-transcript. Most of his texts on music & cinema can be found in Mark Fisher, *k-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher from 2004–2016*, edited by Darren Ambrose, introduction by Simon Reynolds (London: Repeater, 2018).
 10. Mark Fisher, “Exiting the Vampire Castle,” *Open Democracy UK*, November 24, 2013. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/>.
 11. Indeed, eight or nine years may not seem like much, but in the meantime, the “battle” has almost completely changed its structure. Just think about how Russell Brand’s discourse has evolved from what Fisher described in 2013 to his YouTube channel today, largely incorporating figures such as Jordan Peterson and Joe Rogan.
 12. Eva Wiseman, “Is it time we cancelled cancel culture?,” *The Guardian*, December 5, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/dec/05/is-it-time-we-cancelled-cancel-culture>.
 13. See Nancy Fraser, Cinzia Arruzza, and Tithi Bhattacharya, *Feminism for the 99%* (London: Verso, 2019). Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Frazer, *Feminismul celor 99%. Un manifest*, translated by Oana Uiorean (Bucharest: fractAlia, 2019).
 14. Here, Mark Fisher engages in an extremely relevant discussion about the coexistence of “neoconservative” and “neoliberal” structures, explaining, following Wendy Brown, how “neoliberalism and neoconservatism worked together to undermine the public sphere and democracy, producing a governed citizen who looks to find solutions in products, not political processes” (see Chapter 7, “. . . if you can watch the overlap of one reality with another’: capitalist realism as dreamwork and memory disorder”).
 15. See Boris Buden, *Transition to Nowhere: Art in History after 1989* (Berlin: Archive Books, Berlin, 2020). For a discussion on the political regimes in Eastern Europe after 1989, see Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs. Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009).
 16. See Chapter 8, “There’s no central exchange.”
 17. See Chapter 4, “Reflexive impotence, immobilization and liberal communism.”
 18. See Chapter 4, “Reflexive impotence, immobilization and liberal communism.”
 19. “‘Capitalist realism’ is not an original coinage. It was used as far back as the 1960s by a group of German Pop artists and by Michael Schudson in his 1984 book *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*, both of whom were making parodic references to socialist realism. What is new about my use of the term is the more expansive – even exorbitant – meaning that I ascribe to it. Capitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.” See Chapter 3, “Capitalism and the Real.”
 20. Quotation from Alenka Zupancic’s *The Shortest Shadow*, see Chapter 3, “Capitalism and the Real”.
 21. See Chapter 1, “It’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”
 22. See Chapter 3, “Capitalism and the Real”.
 23. See Chapter 8, “There’s no central exchange”.
 24. The issue is addressed by Gramsci in “Notes on the Southern Question” – see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings (1921–1926)*, translated and edited by Quintin Hoare (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978). For a summary of the concepts of “ideology,” “hegemony,” and “organic intellectuals,” see Valeriano Ramos, Jr., “The Concepts of Ideology, Hegemony, and Organic Intellectuals in Gramsci’s Marxism,” *Theoretical Review*, no. 27, 1982 and Joseph A. Woolcock, “Politics, Ideology, and Hegemony in Gramsci’s Theory,” *Social and Economic Studies* 34, no. 3 (1985): 199–210. To understand the evolution of the theories regarding “hegemony,” see the prison notebooks in Quintin Hoare, ed., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio*

- Gramsci*, translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, New York, 1971).
25. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 405.
 26. See Chapter 2, “What if you held a protest and everyone came?”
 27. I translate here a verse from Goethe’s *Faust* (Part I, Act 5, “Auerbach’s Cellar”), “Als hätte sie Lieb’ im Leibe,” which Karl Marx uses in *Grundrisse* to describe the ways in which labor is “absorbed”.
 28. See Chapter 3, “Capitalism and the Real”.
 29. See Chapter 7, “. . .if you can watch the overlap of one reality with another’: capitalist realism as dreamwork and memory disorder”.
 30. For a broader discussion on this central term in Fisher’s works, see also Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Faber and Faber Inc., 2011).
 31. Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writing on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Winchester UK-Washington USA: Zero Books, 2014).
 32. Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 14.
 33. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l’état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1993).
 34. In English, “A spectre is haunting Europe.” See, for instance, Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*. (London UK-Chicago USA: Pluto Press, 1996).
 35. Mark Fisher, “What is Hauntology?,” *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16–24.
 36. William Gibson, “The future is already here – it’s just not evenly distributed,” *The Economist*, December 4, 2003.
 37. Perhaps the only use of Fisher’s concept in the critical analysis of recent Romanian culture belongs to Mihai Iovănel, who, in *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990–2020* [The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990–2020] adopts the term to describe post-communist prose that uncritically embraces the new realities of the transition, attacking the communist period from all sides. See Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990–2020* (Polirom: Iași, 2021). For a critical discussion of this label, see Ștefan Baghiu, “Critica ideologică în epoca limbajului administrativ de stânga: o istorie New Left a literaturii române contemporane” [Ideological Critique in the Era of the Left Administrative Jargon: A New Left History of Contemporary Romanian Literature], *Transilvania*, no. 7–8 (2021): 89. Beyond the popular talks of Cătălin Moise, who made Fisher’s *capitalist realism* most popular in Romania through a Youtube presentation “Capitalism – sau ce?” [Capitalism – Or what?] – <https://youtu.be/Nt6BOOrHeLA?si=tPag8tOyqAkBSWAA>. See also recent takes on Romanian capitalist realism in Bogdan Vătavu, “Making Sense of Bookster: A Commercial Rental Library and Public Libraries in Romanian Capitalist Realism,” *Transilvania* no. 9 (2023): 46–56. Florin Dumitrescu, “Dincolo de teigheaua lui Matache Măcelaru’: Tradiție-brandurile alimentare ca artefacte realist-capitaliste,” *Transilvania*, no. 9 (2023): 57–63.

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