NARRATIVES OF CRISIS: REPRESENTING CAPITALIST REALISM

Penelope Petsini

To cite this article:

NARRATIVES OF CRISIS: REPRESENTING CAPITALIST REALISM

PART I: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Penelope Petsini
1. Panteion University
2. University of West Attica

"It is the old world that deserves the bile and the satire, this new one is merely its own self-effacement [...] Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world." [1]

Frederic Jameson

Two gentlemen dressed in suits are seated within a petite bourgeois living room permeated with the aroma of pine air freshener. The room's furniture rests upon elevated platforms, resembling art installations. One of the men is engrossed in a mystery novel while a television in the background broadcasts news of Konrad Adenauer's resignation as the Chancellor of the German Federal Republic, a recent announcement. Notably, they are not situated in a home environment; rather, they occupy the Möbelhaus Berges furniture store in Düsseldorf. Among the furnishings is a tea trolley displaying a vase of flowers and the literary works of Winston Churchill, alongside a wardrobe containing a felt suit that belongs to Joseph Beuys. These individuals are not alone; they are Konrad Lueg and Gerhard Richter, two of the four Düsseldorf-based artists — the other pair being Sigmar Polke and Manfred Kuttner — who have united as representatives of a new artistic movement in contrast to the dominant abstract art of the time. This moment unfolds on the 11th of October in 1963.

Under the guise of a public relations opportunity, the artists managed to persuade the store owner to provide them with space. An advertisement promoting the event invited attendees to witness "what is hailed in America as the greatest breakthrough in art since Cubism," a direct commentary on the swift rise of Pop Art. The event followed a predetermined sequence: Each visitor received a numbered token and was directed to a waiting room, awaiting their turn as indicated by a loudspeaker announcement. Upon entering, guests encountered papier-mâché depictions of J. F. Kennedy — who had visited Germany earlier that year — and the renowned gallery owner

Alfred Schmela. Decor included deer antlers (belonging to Richter's father-in-law), lifestyle magazines, and copies of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper. Music played through the loudspeakers, periodically summoning groups of attendees by number into the main exhibition area where Richter and Lueg showcased themselves. The evening concluded with an upset shop owner, incensed by several pieces of damaged furniture, threatening to involve the police. Witnesses also noted the prevalent consumption of beer during the event.

This performance was titled "Living with Pop: A Demonstration for Capitalist Real-

ism" and has since left a lasting impact, as it's considered a pivotal moment in the emergence of Capitalist Realism, a West German version of American Pop Art. While the term "capitalist realism" had been used earlier when the four artists exhibited their works in an abandoned butcher's shop, it was the "Living with Pop" performance that achieved legendary status. This artistic movement, characterized by its ironic yet programmatic name, combined an attraction to mass media and advertising with criticism of the consumer culture prevalent in post-war West German society during the "Economic Miracle." Within the back-

Figure 1: Guillaume Bression - Carlos Ayesta, from the series *Retrace our steps,* 2011-2016. Bression and Ayesta invited former residents from the Fukushima region to accompany them inside the no-go zone. The subjects were photographed engaging in normal activities against the backdrop of the historic nuclear accident.

Figure 2: Anna Skladmann, Jacob Shooting at Ballerinas, Moscow 2009, from the series *Little Adults.*. Skladmann depicts the emerging society of the "Nouveau Riche" in Russia, where children are groomed to become the "Elite."

Figure 3: Greg Girard, Neighborhood Demolition, Wulumuqi Lu, 2005, from the series *Phantom Shanghai*.

drop of the Cold War, Capitalist Realism emerged as a Western counterpart to Socialist Realism. Despite not initially aiming for overt political or social critique, it managed to spotlight middle-class values and the suppressive mechanisms of the post-war era. Echoing Capitalist Realism's influence, various critical movements emerged in the following years, shifting from abstract forms of expression to scrutinizing or satirizing consumer and celebrity culture.

The term resurfaced briefly about two decades later in Michael Schudson's 1984 work "Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion,"[2] where it described advertising's capacity to assimilate existing capitalist values and present them to the public, portraying the sponsor as a patron of shared ideals. Schudson viewed advertising as a form of capitalist realism, an art that reshapes the world to align with the system's marketing needs. He argued that capitalist realist art, akin to other pervasive symbolic systems, often flattens rather than enriches experiences, fostering belief in capitalist institutions and values, especially when alternative expressions of values are relatively scarce in the cultural landscape. In essence, it's capitalism's self-affirmation, a way of saying "I love you" to itself.[3]

The term saw a resurgence over twenty-five years later, this time through the influential work of British theorist Mark Fisher.[4] In *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Fisher's concept of the term expands beyond art or advertising's quasi-propagandistic role: in order to shed light on the evolution from "postmodernism" to "capitalist realism", he emphasizes the entrenchment of capitalism's dominance and the transformation of cultural dynamics. Fisher describes Capitalist Realism as "a pervasive atmosphere" that not only shapes cultural production but also regulates work and education, functioning as "an invisible barrier that confines both thought and action".[5]

In line with Frederic Jameson's widely known assertion that postmodernism has functioned as the cultural framework of late capitalism[6], today's interpretation of Capitalist Realism could be likened to the cultural underpinning of TINA – the prophetic declaration by Margaret Thatcher that "There Is No Alternative." This statement became an emblematic motto for the contemporary capitalist system, encapsulating its essence in the most concise form imaginable. Dwelling in a perpetual "eternal present," our ability to envision a future distinct from the present seems to have waned. Within this context, Capitalist Realism encapsulates the prevalent notion that not only is capitalism the sole feasible political and economic structure, but it has also become nearly inconceivable to imagine a coherent alternative.

Fisher discusses three key reasons for favoring the term "capitalist realism" over "postmodernism." Firstly, the 1980s marked a shift from the era of postmodernism to a deeper sense of exhaustion and cultural sterility. The existence of political alternatives to capitalism was still acknowledged in the 1980s, but by

the present time, this exhaustion has become more pervasive. The collapse of "Really Existing Socialism" and events like the Miners' Strike in Britain contributed to the establishment of capitalist realism, where the ideology of no alternatives became entrenched. Secondly, postmodernism involved a relationship with modernism, where modernist motifs were absorbed into popular culture. However, capitalist realism no longer engages in this confrontation with modernism. Instead, modernism is periodically revived as a frozen aesthetic style rather than an ideal for living. Thirdly, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the passage of a generation have led to a situation where capitalism is so ingrained that the lack of alternatives is taken for granted. Capitalism has colonized both conscious and unconscious aspects of life. The struggle between subversion and incorporation has transformed into a situation of "precorporation," where desires and hopes are preemptively shaped by capitalist culture. The example of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana illustrates this deadlock. Cobain's wearied expression of despondency reflected a generation after history, trapped in a world where stylistic innovation seemed impossible. Cobain's realization that he was part of a predetermined spectacle mirrors Jameson's observation that postmodern culture exists in a world where imitation of dead styles dominates. However, the era of high existential angst embodied by Nirvana has given way to pastiche-rock, which reproduces forms of the past without the anxiety of innovation.

Capitalist Realism, therefore, serves as an ideological framework for perceiving capitalism's impact on politics, economics, and collective consciousness – encompassing both the spheres of economy and culture. Consequently, it possesses a critical capability to elucidate ideological constructs and cultural manifestations, detailing both the deepening strategies of global capitalism's accumulation and their modes of representation. This explanatory capacity, as recent scholars assert[7], accounts for the term's pertinence to social and cultural evolutions in recent years, leading to its resurgence in contemporary political and critical theory.

PART I: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Bringing together researchers, theorists and visual artists, this special issue aims to provide a platform for discussions and research, which consider various aspects of the visual and its implication to both ideological formations and cultural forms related albeit not limited to the notion of crisis. The special issue is, in a way, a continuation of previous, relatively recent projects which the guest editor has curated or organised, and most invited contributors have been involved in: The group exhibitions "Capitalist Realism: Future Perfect" and "Capitalist Realism: Past Continuous" (2018-19, held at MOMus-Thessaloniki Museum of Photography and MOMus-Center of Experimental Arts, respectively)[8], as well as the conference "Representing Capitalist Realism: Crisis, Politics and the Visual" (23-24/11/2018, MOMus-Thessaloniki Museum of Photography & Rosa Luxemburg Foundation). Starting from this point, the issue aims to offer a comparative charting of the crisis discourse by adopting an inclusive definition of the term derived from new scholarship and the concept of "capitalist realism" as introduced by Fisher.

In the first essay of Part One, **Christos Mais** discusses the concept of capitalist realism, its impact on our ability to imagine alternatives, and the need for a utopian realism as a counter. Mais presents examples from history and literature to argue that capitalist realism has constrained our capacity to envision change. He then emphasizes the necessity for optimism and the revival of utopian thinking in order to challenge the dominance of capitalist realism and strive for a future that transcends the current dystopic reality. The essay concludes by advocating for a communist realism as an alternative to the prevailing capitalist narrative.

Whilst Mais contends that capitalist realism has stifled our ability to conceive alternative futures, underscoring the imperative for a utopian realism, **Julian Stallabrass'** visual essay of Brexit poignantly exemplifies the disorienting impact of capitalist realism on landscapes, identities, and historical ideals, amplifying the urgency for imaginative, utopian responses to counter prevailing narratives of crisis. Stallabrass engages in a nuanced exploration of the entwined narratives of Brexit and the transformation of Epping Forest, offering a photographic account

Figure 4: Greg Girard, Children on Rooftop, 1989, from the series *Kowloon Walled City.* The Kowloon Walled City was a distinctive phenomenon in Hong Kong: 35,000 people inhabiting over 300 interconnected high-rise buildings, constructed without the involvement of a single architect, densely packed into a city block near the end of the runway at Kai Tak International Airport.

that traverses the intricate socio-political landscape. The Forest, once emblematic of an enchanted natural order, becomes a focal point for examining the disorienting effects of enclosures, environmental degradation, and the broader crises of capitalism. Stallabrass intertwines the forest's historical significance, from its royal hunting origins to the contested commoning struggles, with the contemporary fissures exposed by the Brexit vote. Emblematic of an unsettled national identity, the Forest is presented as a complex space where historical ideals clash with the stark realities of suburbanization and ecological decline. Stallabrass's work transcends mere documentation, embodying the intertwining narratives of national identity, environmental decay, and the disintegration of traditional structures, reflecting the broader discourse of capitalist realism and narratives of crisis within contemporary society.

Johnny Miller's next photographic project documents some the world's most egregious disparities by employing aerial photography. From the vantage point above, cities like Cape Town, Rio de Janeiro, and Mumbai are portrayed as intricately divided landscapes, revealing systematic exclusion inherent in their urban structures. The aerial perspective, reminiscent of satellite imagery, is presented with the vivid colors and stylistic approach typical of a travel portfolio. This visual exploration highlights the unique footprint of each city, inviting viewers to comprehend urban spaces in a distinct manner. Miller's project, which focuses on the extreme dividing lines of inequality, not only offers a striking visual narrative but also serves as a catalyst for discussions on urban planning and equity. By presenting the topic of inequality through the lens of aerial photography, it becomes a potent tool for instigating dialogues on the ongoing crisis of urban inequity, pushing society to confront and address these systemic issues.

John Stathatos' essay, in turn, explores the concept of the "Capitalist Sublime" in visual representation, drawing from art history, philosophy, and contemporary examples. The Sublime here is defined through historical sources like Longinus and Edmund Burke, emphasizing notions of power and awe; the Capitalist Sublime aims to evoke these responses by depicting attributes of capitalism, such as power and consumption, without irony or questioning. The essay explores a range of examples of the Capitalist Sublime imagery, ranging from high-status artworks to commercial advertising, to discuss how objects gain awe-inspiring value through artistic selection or branding. Stathatos analyzes artists like Jeff Koons and photographer Edward Burtynsky, examining their depiction of the sublime within capitalist contexts. He also explores the military and political dimensions of power, notably the "Shock and Awe" doctrine in the Iraq War, while delving into how consumer goods, particularly luxury brands, utilize the sublime in advertising to convey notions of superiority. He concludes by suggesting that capitalism's pursuit of the sublime may result in a subpar imitation rather than an authentic experience.

Stefen Chow and **Huiyi Lin**'s "The Poverty Line" project represents an inquiry into the multifaceted dimensions of global poverty and inequality. Initiated in 2010, the project methodically examines the lived experience of poverty by articulating daily food choices within the confines of a country's poverty line. Over the course of a decade, the artists traversed 36 countries, capturing the intersectionality of economic conditions and culinary choices, thereby challenging preconceptions surrounding poverty and inequality. "The Poverty Line" project underscores the interconnectedness of global systems and the imperative for nuanced, cross-disciplinary engagement to address contemporary crises and foster meaningful social change.

The nuanced approach advocated by Chow and Lin is echoed in **Freya Najade**'s Strawberries in Winter portfolio which underscores the rapid pace of transformation driven by capitalist realist ideals. The series likely portrays large-scale, industrialized agricultural operations that prioritize efficiency and standardized appearance over local and sustainable practices. This visual documentation of the changing agricultural landscape serves as a critique of the capitalist realist mindset that prioritizes profit and consumption at the expense of environmental and societal well-being. From the intricate daily food choices of those living at the poverty line, as explored in Chow and Lin's project, to the visual critique of industrialized agriculture in "Strawberries in Winter," food serves as a powerful medium for understanding and addressing complex societal challenges.

Evangelia Ntarara's "Minimal Landscape", turns to the contemporary urban and

natural environment, particularly focusing on the impact of artificial lighting and light pollution. The essay discusses a collection of photographic works - from diverse genres like astrophotography, artistic documentary, and satellite photography - that highlight the intrusion of modern lighting into the dark background of space and how this phenomenon has transformed spatial experiences. In other words, it explores how technology, urbanization, and capitalist production have shaped the environment and emphasizes the consequences of light pollution on human health, ecosystems, and biodiversity. The article concludes by highlighting the need for an ecological approach to photography that documents and raises awareness about the environmental challenges posed by excessive artificial lighting and its impact on the natural world.

The visual essay "Portraits from Above, Hong Kong's Rooftop Informal Communities" is also about urban environment. It offers a tangible portrayal of a world teetering between hope and despair, enriching our understanding of the complexities within the urban landscape. **Rufina Wu** and **Stefan Canham** examine the phenomenon of unauthorized rooftop dwellings in Hong Kong's central districts. Focused on the makeshift homes created by migrants seeking affordable housing, the project reveals a unique social and architectural history often overlooked at street level. Through a comprehensive approach involving photographs, architectural drawings, and interviews, Wu and Canham unveil a world shaped by personal necessity, characterized by its temporary yet enduring nature. The work, as **Hercules Papaioannou** argues in the text introducing the work, captures the juxtaposition of these informal settlements against the backdrop of sleek skyscrapers, exposing invisible slums within the heart of Hong Kong. Providing a nuanced analytical perspective on the sociocultural pressures of the modern metropolis, the series highlights the resilience of communities existing under the shadow of the law.

In the next essay, **Nina Kotamanidou** explores the portrayal of selfhood in contemporary visual arts within the expanded realm of art as discourse. Centering on Mark Fisher's contention that modern academic discussions often overlook class, resulting in a classless conception of self, her study examines current trends in self-realism. Through analysis of works like Richard Billingham's "Ray's a Laugh" and reality TV shows focused on poverty, the research investigates how self-representation intersects with class representation. The essay employs Billingham's controversial artworks as a lens to explore broader selfhood depictions and their connections to class dynamics, suggesting that these mediated realities often lack class considerations, contributing to a commodified understanding of selfhood. The discussion navigates the complexities of realism in an age where visual narratives intertwine with various forms of representation. Nevertheless, it acknowledges the challenges of representing self and class within a commodified visual landscape while advocating for an exploration of diverse perspectives and desires that defy the confines of late capitalism's limitations. One might add here that, as per Fisher's observations, reality TV grapples with the perpetual challenge of blurring the line between fact and fiction, prompting questions about participants' authenticity and the reliability of audience votes. The catchphrase "You decide" from shows like Big Brother epitomizes a shift in power dynamics, aligning with Baudrillard's concept of control through feedback. In this modern iteration, the audience assumes a position of influence, surpassing Orwellian notions, and extending into various domains, including education and government, where cybernetic feedback systems wield considerable impact.

Finally, **Andrea Stultiens**' contribution, positioned as both an artistic portfolio and an academic visual essay, intricately navigates a speculative dialogue with the late Ugandan chief and intellectual, Ham Mukasa (ca. 1870-1956), to bring to life the complexities of a vague colonial legacy. The intention is to challenge and intricately examine our connection to archival materials, unraveling the intricate web of privilege and precarity that surrounds their compilation and existence. This project seeks to blur the lines between art and academia, employing a speculative conversation with Mukasa as a means to activate historical materials and prompt a reevaluation of our perceptions and understanding of colonial legacies.

The issue concludes with a book review of Verso's 2021 collective volume *Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction*, edited by Kevin Coleman and Daniel James.

Figure 5: Richard Misrach, Hazardous Waste Containment Site, Dow Chemical Corporation,
Plaquemine, Louisiana, 1998, from the series *Petrochemical America* [courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San
Francisco, Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles].

NOTES

[1] Frederic Jameson, «Future City» in *New Left Review* 21, May-June 2003.
[2] Michael Schudson, "Advertising as Capitalist Realism," in *Advertising, Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society*, (New York: Basic Boob, 1984).
[3] Ibid, p. 232.
[4] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* (Winchester; Washington: Zero, 2009).
[5] ibid, p.16.
[6] Jameson argues that the reach of multinational capital has expanded to infiltrate non-capitalist realms such as Nature and the Unconscious, eroding spaces that once allowed for critical resistance. This global condition, characterized as a disheartening phase, embodies the core of postmodernism, according to Jameson. Conversely, the concept of capitalist realism suggests a worsening scenario, emphasizing that, as financialization and commodification progressed, capitalism has strengthened its control over established territories, limiting the possibilities for alternative outcomes. See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991).
[7] Alison Shonkwiler, Leigh Claire La Berge (eds.), *Reading Capitalist Realism* (University of Iowa Press, 2014).
[8] Penelope Petsini (ed.), *Capitalist Realism: Future Perfect | Past Continuous* (University of Macedonia Press, 2018). Artists presented in the exhibitions include: Manolis Baboussis, Stefan Chow & Lin Huiyi, Greg Girard, Mishka Henner, Jacqueline Hassink, Nick Hannes, Paula Luttringer, Susan Meiselas, Richard Misrach, Freya Najade, Johnny Miller, Trevor Paglen, Mark Peterson, Paris Petridis, Jannis Psychopedis, Rosângela Rennó, Andrea Stultiens, Anna Skladmann, Ang Song Nian, Carlos Spottorno, Julian Stallabrass, Paolo Woods & Gabriele Galimberti, Rufina Wu & Stefan Canham, Marvin Tang, Woong Soak Teng, Nikolas Ventourakis, Robert Zhao.

REFERENCES

Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* (Winchester; Washington: Zero, 2009).
Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991).
Frederic Jameson, «Future City» *in New Left Review 21*, May-June 2003.
Penelope Petsini (ed.), *Capitalist Realism: Future Perfect | Past Continuous* (University of Macedonia Press, 2018).
Michael Schudson, "Advertising as Capitalist Realism," in *Advertising*, *Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society,*
    (New York: Basic Boob, 1984).
Alison Shonkwiler, Leigh Claire La Berge (eds.), *Reading Capitalist Realism* (University of Iowa Press, 2014).

PENELOPE PETSINI Born in Bucharest, 1973. Studied Photography in Athens and UK (University of London, Goldsmiths College –MA in Image and Communication; University of Derby –PhD) sponsored by the State Scholarship Foundation (I.K.Y.). She is a Doctor of Philosophy in Arts and Humanities, specialized in photography. Her research interests, both in terms of theory and practice, focus on photography and its relation to personal and collective memory, history and politics. She has exhibited and published extensively both in Greece and internationally. She curated a series of photography and visual art exhibitions, the most recent being "Another Life: Human Flows | Unknown Odysseys" (Thessaloniki Museum of Photography, 5-11/2016) and "Sites of Memory" (Benaki Museum, Athens, 6-7/2016). She also curated Photobiennale 2018, that is two international group exhibitions at the Museum of Photography and the Center of Contemporary Art/ MOMus "Capitalist Realism: Future Perfect | Past Continuous" (28/9/2018 - 29/3/2019, Thessaloniki), and the eponymous book (University of Macedonia Press, 2018). Recent publications also include *Sites of Memory: Photography, Collective Memory and History* (Athens: Hellenic Center of Photography & NEON Foundation, 2016); the collective readers *Censorship in Greece* (Athens: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2016) and *Companion of Censorship in Greece: Weak Democracy, Dictatorship, Metapolitefsi* (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2018) co-edited with Dimitris Christopoulos; as well as *Photography and collective identities: Greek Photography Studies I* (Athens: Koukkida 2021)and *Photography and the anthropological turn: Greek Photography Studies II* (Athens: Koukkida 2023) co-edited with John Stathatos. She has had affiliated appointments as lecturer of photography theory and contemporary art since 2004. Since 2018, she is lecturing in the MA course "Censorship: Interdisciplinary approaches" in the Department of Political Science and History, Panteion University, Athens. She is currently teaching at the Department of Photography and Audiovisual Arts, University of West Attica.