

Global histories

a student
journal

Capitalist Realism, Disappointment, and the History of Sensibilities: A Case for Fiction as Historical Source

Dennis Koelling

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2021.352>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 6, No. 2 (January 2021), pp. 102-120.

ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2021 Dennis Koelling



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Publisher information:

'Global Histories: A Student Journal' is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. 'Global Histories' is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

**Capitalist Realism,
Disappointment, and the
History of Sensibilities:
A Case for Fiction as
Historical Source**

by

DENNIS KOELLING

ABSTRACT

Blending a reflection on the historiography of sensibilities in the study of the recent past with a discussion on the relationship between literary criticism and the field of history proper, this paper makes a case for a further engagement with fiction as a historical source by cultural historians. Briefly engaging with the evolution of Raymond Williams' concept of a "structure of feeling" and tracing it to Daniel Wickberg's call for a new history of sensibilities, the article then engages with the field of what Mark Fisher called "capitalist realism" as an object of study that can serve as an example on how to apply the study of fiction in recent history.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dennis Koelling is currently a PhD-Researcher at the Department of History and Civilization at the European University Institute. His dissertation focuses on the representations of the character of Homo Oeconomicus in popular culture in the twentieth and twenty-first century. He holds a Master of Arts in Global History from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Freie Universität Berlin, as well as a Bachelor of Arts in North American Studies from the John-F.-Kennedy-Institute at Freie Universität Berlin. His main research interests include the history of capitalism with a focus on neoliberal subjectivity, the recent history of popular culture(s), and the relationship between fiction and history proper.

‘Being realistic’ may once have meant coming to terms with of a reality experienced as solid and immovable. Capitalist realism, however, entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment.¹

Mark Fisher – *Capitalist Realism*

Compte tenu des caractéristiques de l’époque moderne, l’amour ne peut plus guère se manifester; mais l’idéal de l’Amour n’a pas diminué. Étant, comme tout idéal, fondamentalement situé hors du temps, il ne saurait ni diminuer ni disparaître. D’où une discordance idéal-réel particulièrement criante, source de souffrances particulièrement riche.²

Michel Houellebecq – *Rester Vivant*

groundwork for the controversial French author’s oeuvre, modern capitalism succeeds in creating a strong cognitive dissonance between *ideal* and *real*, between what *could be* and what *is*. Put differently, capitalism rests on the paradoxical (re-)invention of infinite forms of desire, limiting at the same time the potentiality of possible satisfaction. This dynamic, ultimately erasing the temporal dimension of historical past and privileging recentness in pursuit of ever-contingent futures, marks the center of the study of a cultural malaise, inherent to the sensibilities of life after the ‘end of history.’³ The incommensurability of this dynamic has led to a sensibility of constant disappointment in denial, a state that cultural theorist Mark Fisher has called “nihilistic hedonism” or “hedonic depression.”⁴

While so far widely under-researched by historians of emotions and cultural historians of the recent past, a number of authors from varying disciplines have taken

INTRODUCTION

Just like ‘modern love’ in Michel Houellebecq’s poetical manifesto *Rester Vivant*, laying the

- 1 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 54.
- 2 Michel Houellebecq, *Rester vivant* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), 13.

- 3 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York : Toronto : New York: The Free Press, 1992); For the temporal dimension of financial capitalism see for example Jens Beckert, *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Joseph Vogl, *Das Gespenst des Kapitals*, 3. (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2010); For the purpose of this paper, I have worked with the German original of Vogl’s text, for the English translation see Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).
- 4 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 1, 36.

up the destructive circulatory movements inherent in capitalist ontology. Mark Fisher has pointed out in his groundbreaking essay *Capitalist Realism* that capitalism has succeeded in creating an integrative ‘realist’ ontology and that its subjects are involved in a Lacanian struggle of dissonance between this realism and the underlying Real(s) of capitalist exploitation.⁵ In a similar direction, literature theorist and economist Joseph Vogl has theorized an ‘oikodicy,’ questioning how capitalism succeeds in portraying itself as the best possible of all worlds, while at the same time suffering from inherent contradictions and outraging levels of inequality.⁶ German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han has throughout his work engaged with the interrelationship between capitalist expectations and rising rates in mental illnesses in capitalist societies around the world.⁷ Critical theorist Wendy Brown has, furthermore, argued that the ontological dimension of capitalism has brought along an emptying of political space, “transmogrify[ing] every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of

the economic.”⁸ Lastly, economist Philip Mirowski has elaborated on the cognitive grip that neoliberal ideology has manifested in an ontological dimension, enabling its epistemological edifice to survive and thrive even throughout the 2008 global financial crisis.⁹

Surveying the treatment of psychocapitalist dimensions in the realm of history proper, however, reveals scarce scholarly engagement. Notable exceptions here include the inquiries conducted by the DFG-research cluster “Nach dem Boom” led by German historians Anselm Doering-Manteuffel and Lutz Raphael. In their eponymous essay, Doering-Manteuffel and Raphael have introduced a way of reforming recent Western European histories of ideas to acknowledge the emergence of a neoliberal “structural fracture,” reshaping the way historians engage with the history of subjectivity after the end of Keynesianism and political consensus-culture.¹⁰ In the United States, intellectual historian Daniel T. Rodgers has worked on a comparable hypothesis in his book *Age of Fracture*, emphasizing the fluidification of identities and the

5 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

6 Vogl, *Das Gespenst des Kapitals*.

7 See for example Byung-Chul Han, *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*, 1st ed. (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2010); Building upon Michel Foucault’s concept of *biopolitics*, Han has coined the term of neoliberal *psychopolitics*, see Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitik: Neoliberalismus und die neuen Machttechniken*, 5th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: S. FISCHER, 2014).

8 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: MIT Press, 2015), 9–10.

9 Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London ; New York: Verso, 2013).

10 Lutz Raphael and Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, *Nach dem Boom: Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

fracturing of consensus as part of the neoliberal order.¹¹ Exploring a broader idea of liberal psychopolitics and the construction of a liberal realism, Amanda Anderson has made a related case for the history of modernity (centered mostly in the nineteenth and twentieth century) in her monograph *Bleak Liberalism*.¹² While Anderson's book provides an important insight into the mental mapping of liberal capitalist society, a comparable study for recent history is still missing.

Why then have historians of the recent past largely shied away from interacting with a form of psychological and emotional capitalism, that seems so prevalent in other academic disciplines?¹³ One apparent obstacle seems to be the limited availability of sources necessary to get to the cognitive structures of (neo-)liberal capitalism, underlying the psychopolitical dynamics of 'capitalist realism' and the emotion of disappointment they produce. My argument in this essay is that Anderson's approach of mapping the discontent with liberalism in the nineteenth and twentieth century, by engaging mostly with fictional literature, can and indeed should

be applied by recent historians, as it provides an invaluable archive to contextualize recent economic and social developments. The struggle between realism and the Real as proclaimed by Mark Fisher, manifests nowhere as explicit as in the literature of disappointment, in the genre cultural theorist Ben Jeffery has described as "depressive realism."¹⁴ Michel Houellebecq, who has structured his oeuvre around the idea of 'writing to stay alive (*rester vivant*)' in the 'life as supermarket and derision (*le monde comme supermarché et comme derision*)' serves as the most prominent example here.¹⁵ While Houellebecq has most clearly elaborated on the capitalist dynamic of unfulfillable desires by mapping his poetical theory on Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, numerous other authors have engaged with similar dynamics of desire and disappointment in recent literature. Comparable motifs can be found in the ultra-violent feminist gore of Virginie Despentes in France, the post-Soviet fantasies in writers such as Juli Zeh or Olga Tokarczuk, hyperreal consumer fiction by Bret Easton Ellis or David Foster Wallace in the US, and the Japanese strand of Freeter-literature represented by writers such as Kanehara Hitomi or Ryū Murakami.

11 Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010).

12 Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

13 For the term "Emotional Capitalism" see sociologist Eva Illouz's monograph on online dating: Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2006).

14 Ben Jeffery, *Anti-Matter: Michel Houellebecq and Depressive Realism* (Winchester, UK: John Hunt, 2011).

15 Michel Houellebecq, *Rester vivant et autres textes* (Paris: J'ai lu, 2015).

A serious engagement with fictional sources then can help cultural historians to construct a history of sensibilities of the neoliberal order, questioning the cognitive structure at work as described by theorists like Mark Fisher. Cultural historian Daniel Wickberg has long called for a readjustment of how to write the history of sensibilities after the emotional turn in his groundbreaking essay “What is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New.”¹⁶ It is no coincidence that his essay interacts with the concept of *structure of feeling*, devised by cultural and literary theorist Raymond Williams, largely built around fiction. Williams understood that fictional sources could be at the core of exploring the mental state of a given historical period. Wickberg, however, cautions the cultural historian to take Williams’ concept at face value as it still plays ‘formal’ or ‘intellectual’ thought against ‘lived’ experience. Wickberg’s theory of sensibilities, on the other hand, is constructed without “respect of invidious distinctions between practice and theory, low and high, informal and formal, art and philosophy; all embody sensibilities.”¹⁷ While Williams’ theory serves as a great entrance point for cultural historians to work with fictional

sources, it is within the framework of Wickberg’s History of Sensibilities as a holistic approach that fiction can flourish as an innovative source for the historian of neoliberalism concerned with the (de-)construction of a capitalist realism.

In this essay, I make the case for a serious integration of fiction into the study of the recent past and point out the relationship between ‘depressive realism’ and ‘capitalist realism,’ which, as I will show, function as quasi-opposed iconographies. I begin by briefly elaborating on Mark Fisher’s important essay, sketching the outline for ‘capitalist realism’ and its cognitive implications in recent history. Following this, I show how the paradox of desire and non-fulfilment has been approached across various disciplines concerned with post-modern fiction and how this aspect has appeared in the study of what Ben Jeffery has called ‘depressive realism.’ Then I briefly discuss how literary studies have made an attempt to integrate the study of fiction with recent economic history, exemplified in my essay by the treatment of Japanese *Freeter*-literature and the discourse on precarity. Finally, I argue how literature should become an important cornerstone of building a history of sensibilities of the recent neoliberal order.

16 Daniel Wickberg, “What Is the History of Sensibilities? On Cultural Histories, Old and New,” *The American Historical Review* 112, no. 3 (2007): 661–84, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.112.3.661>.

17 Wickberg, 671–72.

CAPITALIST REALISM

Since its publication in 2009, Mark Fisher's essay *Capitalist Realism – Is There no Alternative?* has become a widely influential text read across academic disciplines and the blogosphere, pushing readers to critically engage with issues of popular culture and neoliberalism. Fisher's innovative merger of economic theory, Lacanian psychology, and cultural criticism provides a unique theoretical framework to study recent cultural history through an economic lens. Engaging with critical theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, Fisher explores how neoliberal capitalism has developed a pervasive worldview, which suppresses the possibility of change or even the conceptualization of any other system of thought. He begins his argumentation with the statement, attributed to both Žižek and Jameson, that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism."¹⁸ Partially leaving the dystopian/utopian-dichotomy of that statement behind, Fisher goes on to define his concept of 'capitalist realism' as "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."¹⁹ In other words, "[c]apitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable."²⁰

His general argument then first and foremost is of cognitive ergo psychological nature: "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."²¹ Later in his essay, he frames his claim in explicitly Lacanian terms, posing capitalist 'reality' against an underlying 'Real': "For Lacan, the Real is what any 'reality' must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality."²²

While Fisher structures a lot of his initial argument around fictional sources and cultural products, he largely neglects the possibility that these artifacts can play a substantive role in subverting capitalist realism:

18 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2; It's unclear where the phrase actually originates from. In 2003 Jameson attributes it to "someone," while Žižek indeed referred to Jameson when he used it in 1994. See Fredric Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* no. 21, May-June (2003): 65–79; Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1994).

19 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.

20 Fisher, 8.

21 Fisher, 16.

22 Fisher, 18 Fisher is paraphrasing arguments from both Žižek and Lacanian theorist Alenka Zupancic here.

“What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their precorporation: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.”²³ In fact, he sees it as an inherent feature of capitalist realism to integrate materials that might be considered “anti-capitalist” or have historically carried revolutionary potential. He claims this is “one effect of [capitalism’s] ‘system of equivalence’ which can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or *Das Kapital*, a monetary value.”²⁴ Seemingly subversive works of popular culture can then become a quasi-outsourced performance of anti-capitalism, allowing consumers to feel righteous and keep consuming in the same fashion as usual.²⁵

If Mark Fisher neglects the subversive potential of all popular culture (or more generally fiction), how can recent cultural historians still integrate his widely useful framework in the study of the recent past, and specifically the rise of neoliberalism? Again, the answer can be found in Fisher’s Lacanian framing of his theory: any possible critique of capitalist realism, must necessarily begin with the destabilizing of the

reality it produces. As Fisher put it, “on strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us.”²⁶ It is the task of critical historians, then, to historicize these Real(s) and connect them to the history of capitalism, be it in the form of climate change, workers’ exploitation, or patriarchal gender relations. Cultural historians can contribute by uncovering ways in which the representations of capitalist reality are challenged by representing the underlying Real(s). Fisher hints at one way cultural history can critique capitalist realism, by exposing the way the contemporary historical sensibility is related to the development of a neoliberal form of capitalism: “To reclaim a real political agency means first of all accepting our insertion *at the level of desire* in the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital.”²⁷ Here he points at the necessity to mapping out what Raymond Williams calls a ‘structure of feeling’ of capitalism, a task destined for cultural historians concerned with fiction and emotions.²⁸

26 Fisher, 18.

27 Fisher, 15.

28 For Raymond Williams’ definition of “Structure of Feeling” see Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Cardigan, UK: Parthian Books, 2011); Eva Illouz also elaborates on the concept and its use for a sociology of emotional capitalism; see Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, 50. In addition, Daniel Wickberg has argued for a history of sensibilities, basically evolving from Williams’ concept; see Wickberg, “What Is the History of Sensibilities?”

23 Fisher, 9.

24 Fisher, 4.

25 Cf. Fisher’s discussion of ecological critique in the Disney movie *Wall-E*. See Fisher, 12.

A second challenge to capitalist realism comes from appeals to its (in)coherence as a system of thought and more important belief. As Fisher argues, “[c]apitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism’s ostensible ‘realism’ turns out to be nothing of the sort.”²⁹ Here, Fisher’s argument is very close to that of literary theorist and economist Joseph Vogl, who coined the question of a post-modern ‘oikodicy.’ In his monograph *Das Gespenst des Kapitals*, Vogl has elaborately transferred Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s ‘theodicy’ to the realm of capitalist realism:

Given that the capitalist economy has become our fate, given too our propensity to look to profit and economic growth to satisfy some remnant of the old hope for an earthly Providence, modern financial theory also cannot avoid confronting the baffling question of how, if at all, apparent irregularities and anomalies can exist in a system supposedly based on reason. In Leibniz’s terms: Which events appear to be compatible (and hence ‘compossible’) with which other events? Are relations between these events law-governed and if so, by which laws? And how can the existing

economic world be ‘the best of all possible worlds’?³⁰

Vogl’s analogy to the theodicy makes clear that one challenge to capitalist realism can come from the uncovering of its inherent contradictoriness and the destabilization of capitalism as a system of belief.

In the remainder of this essay, I describe how competing forms of realism(s) have been claimed by various scholars engaged with popular literature, challenging the ontological hegemony of neoliberal capitalist worldmaking as proposed by Fisher. I briefly discuss the works of controversial French author Michel Houellebecq, embodying what Ben Jeffery has termed ‘depressive realism,’ toppling the neoliberal belief-system by claiming visibility for the Real(s) of mental health and social isolation obscured by the capitalist narrative.

DEPRESSIVE REALISM

One of the Real(s) of underlying capitalist realism that Mark Fisher identifies in his essay is the rising rates of psychological illnesses and their depoliticization in capitalist societies. He argues — echoing Foucault’s theory of modernity — that under capitalism, mental health is

²⁹ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 16.

³⁰ Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital*, trans. Joachim Redner and Robert Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 44.

being individualized, making every person to blame for their condition and foreclosing any systematic approach to the problem at hand. Fisher sees this as symptomatic for the inherent inconsistency of the system:

Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast *privatization of stress* that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The ‘mental health plague’ in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and the cost of it appearing to work is very high.³¹

Following Fisher’s approach, cultural historians aimed at destabilizing the narrative of capitalist realism should then occupy themselves with researching the representations of this underlying common structure of feeling, uncovering how and where depression, mental health, and other related phenomena are narrated in contemporary history. One innovative concept from cultural criticism that aims in this direction,

31 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 19.

was introduced by Ben Jeffery in his study on the French bestselling (yet highly controversial) writer Michel Houellebecq. In his essay *Anti-Matter*, Jeffery claims that the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the emergence of a ‘depressive realism,’ channeling the mental *disenchantment* or *Entzauberung* (to borrow a term from Max Weber) with neoliberal capitalism. His text is concerned primarily with the pessimism of Houellebecq’s literature of the ‘world as supermarket.’ This pessimism he connects directly with a loss of belief in the value of a ruling system of thought: “What all varieties of pessimism have in common is the principle that the truth is undesirable – that unhappiness coincides with the loss of illusions, and that, conversely, happiness is a type of fantasy or ignorance.”³²

While he treats Houellebecq’s writing first and foremost as philosophical pamphlets, he does acknowledge that this unsilencing of an underlying depressive current in contemporary society produces a large part of the appeal that Houellebecq’s novels have for readers across the world. For Jeffery, “it’s hard, finally, to evade the conclusion that one big reason for Houellebecq’s success is that enough people really do identify with these books; that they put into words things that people think and want to hear, but are either unable to articulate or unwilling to admit to. It’s not a

32 Jeffery, *Anti-Matter*, 1.

pleasant thought.”³³ It should be noted that Jeffery’s essay appeared eight years before Houellebecq’s latest novel *Sérotonine* (2019), which most explicitly describes the struggle with depression, following an administrative employee addicted to anti-depressant medication.

Just like Mark Fisher, Ben Jeffery sees the roots of the depressive struggle of Houellebecq’s characters mostly in their embeddedness in a world of individual responsibility and privatized pressure. It is a toxic form of individualism, the pressure to act as ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ that drive those characters to the brink of madness.³⁴ Jeffery alleges that, “[d]epression is the pathological frontier of individualism – the point at which the whole world is eaten up by the self.”³⁵ He then contrasts this over-individualistic point of view with the vastness of globalization, inherent to capitalism as a polar opposite:

A well-known irony of globalization is that the incredible expanse of activity and interconnection it reveals to us inspires nothing, on a personal level, so much as feelings of isolation, impotence and insignificance. But then again, in another way, it also makes everyday problems feel

like the only real problems there are, being the only issues we experience directly or exercise any real degree of control over. You end up with the weird feeling that your own private concerns are both the most important things and not important at all – an echo of the clinical depressive paradox.³⁶

Accordingly, it is the inconsistent pressure of total individualism and vast overconnectedness existing in global financial capitalism that drive the depressive ontology of the characters under discussion here.

It is important to note that when talking about representations of concepts from the perspective of cultural historians, Jeffery’s essay misses a number of important aspects of Michel Houellebecq’s oeuvre. Most importantly, he completely ignores Houellebecq’s religious dimension and the way his interaction with texts by religious thinkers such as Blaise Pascal or Joris-Karl Huysmans directly engages the question of a contemporary ‘oikodicy.’ An important corrective to this blindspot is provided by Louis Betty’s monograph *Without God. Michel Houellebecq and Materialist Horror*, who reads Houellebecq basically as a religious writer.³⁷ Jeffery

33 Jeffery, 11.

34 Cf. Ulrich Bröckling, *Das unternehmerische Selbst: Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007).

35 Jeffery, *Anti-Matter*, 54.

36 Jeffery, 56.

37 Louis Betty, *Without God: Michel Houellebecq and Materialist Horror* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

also largely forgoes interacting with the actual depictions of clinical depression, found in many characters across all of Houellebecq's novels. Lastly, he neglects to elaborate on the fact that Houellebecq openly stylized himself as a successor of nineteenth century realism, by interacting to a large degree with motifs and texts from writers such as Balzac, Zola, Mann, and Dostoyevsky.³⁸

While Jeffery might be adding little to the literary scholarship on Michel Houellebecq, his essay can nevertheless provide an important starting point for the contemporary cultural historian. Reading depressive realism as an iconoclastic challenge to capitalist realism, the essay acknowledges that there are representations in post-modern literature which go beyond the constant ironizing derided by many critics and actually aim at constructing a different form of 'realism' primarily occupied with exposing the depressive structures capitalist ontology fosters. The challenge for historians then is to connect the dots and trace the concepts discussed by Jeffery

beyond the work of a single author, and at the same time examine if a structure of feeling exists in a wider corpus of texts. Jeffery already hints at further subjects of investigation, when he claims that "[f]rom the 1950s onwards a family of American authors – including William Burroughs, Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon, among others were united [...] by the use of cynicism, irony and irreverence as tools to expose the distance they perceived between the myths of the American Dream and the realities of consumer capitalism."³⁹ Ultimately, this dissonance between *ideal* and *real* is also what drives the depression of Houellebecq's novels, exhibiting "the gap between real life and life-as-advertised, and how the sense of disappointment it generates has perversely become a bit of a cultural norm."⁴⁰ To show how pervasive this feeling of disappointment has become in the recent history of capitalist realism, I turn now to a group of writers on the opposite side of the globe, interacting with the lost promises of a post-boom Japan and the culture of precarity it generated.

38 Houellebecq's intertextual relationship to Zola has been researched fairly well, see for example Rita Schober and Winfried Engler, *Auf dem Prüfstand: Zola - Houellebecq - Klempner* (Berlin: Frey, Walter, 2003); Houellebecq's fascination with Thomas Mann and Fyodor Dostoyevsky plays a large role in Denis Demonpion's unauthorized biography, see Denis Demonpion, *Houellebecq non autorisé: Enquête sur un phénomène* (Paris: Libella Maren Sell, 2005).

39 Jeffery, *Anti-Matter*, 47.

40 Jeffery, 28.

DISAPPOINTMENT AND PRECARIETY IN JAPANESE FREETER LITERATURE

Far from being a phenomenon strictly related to the transatlantic realm, the Western European post-war economic recovery, and the capitalist revival of the American Dream, the disenchantment with capitalist realist expectations also took a prominent place in Japanese popular culture from the 1990s onwards. The second half of the twentieth century in Japan has been characterized by an unprecedented degree of economic growth, leading to a wide expansion of the Japanese middle-class and the introduction of a ‘western’-style consumer culture, centered around prosperity and individualism.⁴¹ Not unlike the description of post-war Western Europe until the 1970s as a society ‘*Nach dem Boom*’ mentioned above, Japanese society was in large parts signified by a culture of ‘boom’ and social consensus. However, many authors have argued that this culture largely fell apart with the “reorganization of the industrial structure and the evolution of the information society, amidst the deepening of the recession that resulted from the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s[.]”⁴²

41 Mark Driscoll, “Debt and Denunciation in Post-Bubble Japan,” *Cultural Critique* 65 (December 1, 2007): 164–87, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2007.0004>.

42 Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt and Roman Rosenbaum, eds., *Visions of Precarity in Japanese Popular Culture and Literature*,

One of the results of the bursting of this economic bubble was a turn in cultural representations towards a new sensibility focusing on the “feeling of entrapment experienced by Japan’s youth” and the “extremely emotional” narration of a “gap-widening society” in popular culture, and especially the post-modern Japanese novel.⁴³

Numerous popular authors—at the forefront Ryū Murakami, Kanehara Hitomi, and Haruki Murakami—have interacted in recent works with the resulting phenomena of a flexibilization of the workforce, the precarity of means of living, and feelings of social isolation and withdrawal in the newly emerging competitive neoliberal mindset. Most prominent among ‘Western’ readers are the concepts of *Freeter*-authors, describing the precarity of especially the female workforce in Japan, and of *hikikomori*, teenagers and young adults who choose to withdraw from social interaction altogether.⁴⁴ For cultural historians, the field of Japanese post-modern literature presents an ideal entrance point to the study of capitalist

Routledge Contemporary Japan Series (London ; New York: Routledge, 2015), xv.

43 Iwata-Weickgenannt and Rosenbaum, xii.

44 Iwata-Weickgenannt and Rosenbaum, 4–5; See also Lisette Gebhardt, *Nach Einbruch der Dunkelheit: Zeitgenössische japanische Literatur im Zeichen des Prekären*, 1st ed. (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2010); William Kremer and Claudia Hammond, “Why Are so Many Japanese Men Refusing to Leave Their Rooms?,” *BBC News*, July 5, 2013, sec. Magazine, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-23182523>.

realism, and the underlying Real(s) of disappointment resulting from unstable living conditions, a culture of hyperindividualism, and the constant dialectic between the creation of desires and the impossibility of their fulfilment.

While the field of *Freeter*-literature has been widely researched by literary studies scholars and critical theorist — the edited volume *Visions of Precarity in Japanese Popular Culture and Literature* by Kristina Iwata-Weickgennant and Roman Rosenbaum presents a comprehensive overview — for reasons of scope, I concentrate on one particular case in this paper. In an extensive analysis of two novels of author and pop-cultural icon Kanehara Hitomi, literary scholar David Holloway has examined the representations of both economic precarity and performative gender in recent Japanese fiction.

Mirroring Jeffery’s ‘depressive realism,’ Holloway explains that “Kanehara has used fiction to engage with issues of crisis, self-harm, and the inequity in contemporary gender roles.”⁴⁵ Importantly, Holloway detects a “discourse of disappointment, a teleology lamenting the necessity for and persistence of, a *gendered* means of sustaining; in other words, a kind of passive-aggressive acceptance of the status quo and women’s place

within it.”⁴⁶ Disappointment as a sensibility of post-modern Japanese literature is here read with a double meaning: first, as a reaction to the distance between economic *ideal* and *real*, and second, as reflecting the reactionary regression of gender roles under the neoliberal order.

Holloway claims that traditional gender roles are reintroduced into contemporary Japanese society as a reaction to the country’s falling birthrates, while at the same time an economic culture of self-expression and flexibility puts further pressure on women. He asserts that

[t]oday, in light of Japan’s falling birthrate, childbearing and motherhood are once again important political slogans reminding women of the proper shape of femininity, citizenship, and morality. Terms such as ‘parasite single’ have been used by the political right to pathologize those who choose not to marry, for example. At the same time, however, ‘state policies since the 1980s have also encourage the trend toward self-realization [...] and diverse lifestyles [...]’ Women’s fiction and women’s magazines, too, regularly disavow the old orthodoxies in the name of freedom of expression and individuality.⁴⁷

45 David Holloway, “Gender, Body, and Disappointment in Kanehara Hitomi’s Fiction,” *Japanese Language and Literature* 50, no. 1 (2016): 75.

46 Holloway, 75–76.

47 Holloway, 75–76.

His essay analyzes Kanehara's debut novel *Hebi ni piasu* (2003, trans. Snakes and Earrings, 2005) and *Haidora* (2007, Hydra; untranslated), both of which deal with female characters trying to escape oppressive gender roles by engaging in various practices of body modification and flight to the fringes of society. In both cases, however, the protagonists find themselves in a depressive cycle of precarity, loss of social interaction, and violence. In the end, Lui, the protagonist of *Hebi ni piasu*, even retreats to marry the tattoo artist who has practically raped her in the first part of the book, in search of sense and stability. Holloway explains,

[t]he prominence of disappointment in these texts agitates our understanding of contemporary feminist and sexual politics. Judith Butler has taught us that causing trouble affords an opportunity to trouble convention. But, at least for Kanehara's protagonists, trouble might also remind us of the troubling state of contemporary life for women caught in a confusing moment in which new freedoms clash with the persistence of old expectations.⁴⁸

Holloway brilliantly manages to untangle the gender relations of Kanehara's novels and map them

onto the development of a neoliberal realism, at the core of Japan's contemporary cultural malaise. Cultural scholar Marc Driscoll goes a bit further in his reading of Kanehara, linking it directly to a culture of precarity so prominent in recent Japanese history. In his article "Debt and Denunciation in Post-Bubble Japan," he engages with cultural representations of un- and underemployed Japanese youth, linking this phenomenon directly to the bursting of the economic bubble in the 1990s. However, he ultimately fails to acknowledge Kanehara's fiction as a sort-of competitive realism to capitalist reality, deriding her debut novel as a covert "neoliberal utopia" finally reaffirming nationalist values.⁴⁹ While only providing a brief insight into the possibilities of using fiction as a source to further contextualize cultural history, the studies on Kanehara show how fictional narratives interact with economic structures, providing a base for a much broader study of the sensibilities of neoliberal capitalism.

48 Holloway, 93. Emphasis added.

49 Mark Driscoll, "Debt and Denunciation in Post-Bubble Japan," *Cultural Critique* 65 (December 1, 2007): 164–87.

CONCLUSION – TOWARDS A HISTORY OF SENSIBILITIES OF NEOLIBERALISM

The examples of the treatment of Japanese *Freeter*-literature and the ‘depressive realism’ in the works of Michel Houellebecq saliently show off the gap that should be addressed by recent cultural and intellectual historians in writing the history of capitalist realism and challenging the dominant narrative imposed by it. To write a true history of sensibilities, as advocated by Daniel Wickberg in his influential essay on the future of the history of emotions, historians need not shy away from engaging in a far broader, more structural way with fictional sources and the representations they carry. Wickberg advocates moving beyond extracting just a structure of feeling from fictional sources, towards a broader understanding of “the primacy of [...] various modes of perception and feeling, the terms and forms in which objects were conceived, experienced, and represented in the past.”⁵⁰ Fiction can provide an extensive archive for historians to engage with the way different realisms are narrated, and can thereby truly help cultural historians to shift the focus from “the content of thought, [to] the forms in which that content is perceived, given, and expressed.”⁵¹

My largely historiographical engagement with various scholars from cultural and literature studies throughout this essay has shown the importance of adopting a truly interdisciplinary stance for approaching these various modes of perception and the methodological shift from content to form by way of fiction. In these concluding paragraphs, I look more closely at how the methods proposed by Wickberg can be concretely applied by cultural historians and give a few examples of areas of study that would benefit from such an approach. In practical terms then, historians of neoliberalism (and, more broadly speaking, capitalism) wishing to further engage with fictional sources could do so by critically interacting with three different stages of ‘capitalist realism’, on which I elaborate further below: first, its creation; second, the repressed Real(s) underlying its existence; and third, its challenge through other forms of realism.

Neoliberal ideology and the capitalist realism it propagates consist of discourses that were created intentionally in a historical process, as opaque as this process might seem when looking at it with more than half a century of hindsight. The first field to benefit widely from an engagement with fictional sources then is that concerned with neoliberalism’s birthplace. Controversially debated by intellectual and cultural historians alike, the birth of neoliberalism now is often located in the founding of

50 Wickberg, “What Is the History of Sensibilities?,” 662.

51 Wickberg, 664.

the ‘neoliberal thought collective,’ institutionalized in such organizations as the Colloque Walter Lippmann and later the Mont Pelerin Society.⁵² While these histories brilliantly lay out neoliberalism’s long ascendancy through institutional structures towards being the hegemonic politico-economic model of the post-boom era, they say relatively little about the simultaneous construction of a neoliberal culture, a capitalist realism structured around hardcore individualism and the spread of market liberalism as an aspirational ideal for everyone and everything. Here, a critical study of fiction can provide fruitful insight into how this cultural hegemony was constructed. Historians of culture can look into how fictional narratives transport this new culture of competition in the market and how characters embody a form of neoliberal individualism.

An interesting object of study for historians of early neoliberal culture can be found in the novels of Russian-American philosopher Ayn Rand. Rand, publishing various rather unknown science fiction novels and plays in the 1930s and 1940s, reached widespread fame with her novel *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), preaching

individual entrepreneurialism as the highest possible value and making her up until today the patron saint of the American right.⁵³ In her correspondence, Rand was very vocal about not wanting to be considered an economist, but rather choosing the method of narration as a way to reach the hearts and minds of the common people and instill them with a faith in a truly capitalist culture. Critically assessing Rand’s fiction, historians can trace how she uses narration and certain characterologies—especially in her quest to write “the ideal man”—to propagate a new capitalist realism, often constructed directly in opposition to the Soviet socialist realism she fled from in her youth.⁵⁴ A more extended study could then read these narratological examinations in the wider context of 1940s and 1950s anti-totalitarian discourses and popular literature, to interrogate the existence of a certain anti-totalitarian, pro-capitalist structure of feeling.

For more recent historians of neoliberalism, an engagement with the fictional representations of the repressed Real(s) of capitalist realism seems most fruitful. For this, a reading of fictional sources informed by the concept of ‘visibility’ as theorized in visual culture studies serves as a useful approach. Visual

52 See for example Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*; Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

53 See for example Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford, UK ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

54 Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*, ed. Leonard Peikoff, Centennial Edition (New York: Signet, 1996), vii.

culture scholar Erin Y. Huang has demonstrated the usefulness of this approach in her monograph *Urban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility* by showing the emergence of ‘urban horror’—a feeling of discomfort exceeding comprehension, analogue to Engels’ ‘industrial horror’—as a sociopolitical affect in the works of Sinospheric filmmakers between the 1990s and the present.⁵⁵ While Huang’s work is largely theoretical and aimed more at film studies readers, historians can gain from this focus on visibility by asking how fictional sources attempt to make visible what neoliberal ideology tries to render invisible. More concretely, historians can look at fiction and explain how phenomena of workplace culture, gender roles, and psychocapitalist aspects such as the invisibility of depression are taking the center stage in fictional narratives.

Ultimately, a focus on visibility does not only benefit the relationship between the hegemonic realism and the underlying Real(s), but also can interrogate the multiplicity of the *ideal*, the construction of a differing *could-be* as the site of resistance to neoliberal capitalist realism. As Nicholas Mirzoeff has shown in his influential book *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, modernity presents an continued contest between visuality

and countervisuality, and claiming the right to look in this context becomes a potentially revolutionary act.⁵⁶ Starting from this premise, historians interested in the resistance to neoliberal hegemony can interrogate fiction as a field of the emergence of ‘countervisualities’, of different forms of realisms that are in competition with the dominant capitalist realism. Ben Jeffery’s ‘depressive realism’ described below is an attempt at such a competing realism. Certain forms of an ‘eco-futurism,’ described as early as in Frank Herbert’s *Dune-Saga* in the 1960s and more recently in Olga Tokarczuk’s post-anthropocentric novels, might provide fertile ground for study here. The task for cultural historians then is to contextualize these speculative fictions in the intellectual contexts of their authors and their time, while at the same time interrogating the form of their object of studies to uncover how narrative and characterology is used to construct realisms differing to that of neoliberal capitalism.

In this essay, I have provided an overview of the current research in various disciplines of the pervasive belief-system that has been formed as an ontological aspect of the neoliberal order. Furthermore, I have shown how competing realisms have aimed to destabilize this ‘reality’ in various forms of fictional sources. It is up to cultural historians of neoliberalism

55 Erin Y. Huang, *Urban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility*, Sinotheory (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

56 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

to critically analyze these structures of consciousness and to provide the necessary nuances. Their task is to show that indeed an alternative to neoliberal capitalism can and has been imagined, and moreover that the underlying Real(s) of exploitation, depression, and more general incoherence, deserves to be studied by scholars across disciplines. Only history as a discipline, however, allows academics to approach these processes from the dispassionate perspective of an outside observer, mapping streams of consciousness and structures of feeling that should be at the center of any true history of sensibilities. In other words, historians of culture could and should gain solid insights from engaging with fictional sources across disciplinary borders, to detect possible structures of thought and nuance the often-particular studies conducted by cultural theorists and literary scholars as presented in this essay do.