**Researcher:** Michelle Rabe  
**Faculty Mentor:** Dr. Rachel Greenwald Smith  
**RIE Senior Research Project Proposal**  
**Anticipated Graduation:** May 2016

**Project Title:**  
The Invisible Authorial Hand: Venture Capital Realism

With American fiction’s recent retreat to a form of literary realism, contemporary novelists have been charged with the task of creating a world that accurately captures the current sociopolitical climate without reiterating the inequalities that the sociopolitical structures present. According to some of the most prominent critical scholars on realism, however, many contemporary American novelists have failed to achieve this task. For instance, Mark Fisher, Robert Rebein, Alison Shonkwiler, Michael Clune, and Leigh Claire La BERGE all support a similar contention about contemporary realism; that is, regardless of the author’s intention in depicting reality, they inevitably perpetuate an image of capitalism as reality. Although each scholar has a nuanced logic for condemning works of contemporary realism as capitalist realism, they all deem contemporary novelists, such as Jonathan Franzen and Bret Eaton Ellis, as succumbing to a capitalistic mode of production. Even though the authors can claim to be undermining, critiquing, or denouncing capitalism and the inequalities it constructs in society, critics tend to cast these authors as ultimately forwarding the same capitalist reality of society in their fictional works. I, however, will explore this analysis of contemporary “capitalist realism” in terms of the works’ utilization of metafiction and self-reflexivity to make a claim about what these works are accomplishing on a different level.

Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La BERGE’s volume dedicated to this concept, entitled *Reading Capitalist Realism*, offers an insightful grasp on how works of contemporary American fiction align with the category and what power this category harbors in aesthetic and political realms. Works of capitalist realism “demand” interaction with economic concerns, such as “commodity, money, and finance,” and processes, such as “production and consumption” (Shonkwiler and La BERGE 11). And, to be successful works of capitalist realism, they must “articulate the violence,” “lived economic, social, and affective instabilities,” and type of
perceived “common sense” of a neoliberal project in which “freedom is conceived almost entirely in market terms” (3, 8). For these aforementioned works, with their heavy emphasis on industries that dominate the market-based economy and their characters who seek unreliable, individual paths of freedom from these oppressive institutions, it is not a debate whether they constitute as works of successful capitalist realism. Instead, the question becomes whether, in their campaigns to satirize and criticize the rampant capitalism that surrounds their real and fictional worlds, Franzen and Egan “fatally compromise” their realist projects and “produc[e] the very subjects and objects that the[ir] mode claims to document” (2). Regarding these texts as fictional appropriations of the fickle, deregulated capitalist market trajectory and the accompanying neoliberal impulses to navigate the socioeconomic sphere autonomously reveals both texts to be in collusion with the idea of capitalism as reality. However, considering the subversive self-reflexive and metafictional moments in both novels recasts them as strategically complicit in the pervasive capitalist realism agenda; in reality, their brand of realism signifies something of much greater value in interpersonal exchange.

For my Research Intensive English senior thesis, I will investigate the supposed “realities” that contemporary American fictional works construct to make an overarching social statement about the current sociopolitical environment. Instead of considering culture to be the explanation for certain contemporary trends or perspectives in the “real” world, my research will approach culture as an active agent with which we constantly interact. By analyzing Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*, Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Bret Eaton Ellis’s *American Psycho*, and Alejandro González Iñárritu’s film, *Birdman*, in the framework of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, I will highlight a specific narrative technique that unifies them. In particular, I will argue that these works exhibit a shared metafictionalizing impulse to create outrageous worlds that ultimately approach raw emotions and essential conditions of human existence in these particular contextual boundaries.
Bibliography


