

token, agency requires individuals to reverse their own behaviour, or at least to know they have choices. Gregg calls for universities to do their part by teaching students to approach social media and workplace demands critically. She could expand her intervention beyond higher education by identifying areas of solidarity with back-end workers who produce digital devices – some of the ‘loveless’ who experience work as exploitation (p. 171). Ultimately, such empathy can undergird the ‘labour politics of love’ – finding intimacy in the human social experience, outside of capital’s reach. Harnessing affect *for* the worker may be the only way in which to challenge the creeping presence of exceptional labour conditions.

### Notes on Contributor

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## THE PROMISE OF HOPELESS POLITICS

Michael Kaplan

**Cruel optimism**, by Lauren Berlant, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011, 342 pp., US\$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5111-5

*Cruel Optimism* is Lauren Berlant’s latest contribution to the influential critical project of rethinking politics through the category of affect. Broadly speaking, this project seeks to break out of what Fredric Jameson called ‘the prison-house of language’ by investigating the ways affect circulates and produces socio-political effects beneath or beyond signification and outside of any systematic

relation to cognition or intentionality. Here, 'culture' denotes a space of affective transmission, intensity and interaction that animates and conditions the making and unmaking of meanings, attachments, norms, practices, agencies and potentialities. While the Affective Turn resumes Raymond Williams's project of analyzing the 'structure of feeling' of its time, its relation to Marxian notions of ideology and hegemonic struggle is, at best, attenuated, since the focus on affect is supposed to reformulate or supplant such categories as subjectivity, identity, power, discourse, knowledge and so on. Nonetheless, much of this work is explicitly political, aiming directly at such targets as neoliberalism, biopolitics, nationalism, neo-colonialism, heteronormativity and white supremacy. In this, *Cruel Optimism* is no exception. What makes it exceptional is Berlant's dexterity in coaxing startling revelations from inspired collocations of heterogeneous critical idioms and cultural artefacts. Berlant is a virtuoso reader, so that while her theoretical explorations never add up to a system or toolkit, in her deft hands ostensibly familiar or derelict concepts and techniques endlessly dazzle and surprise.

It is both accurate and misleading to say that the book investigates the volatile role of affect in painful or self-defeating attachments to plainly unreliable promises of 'the good life'. Though it begins by asking 'Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies ... when the evidence of their instability, fragility and dear cost abounds?', the book is not finally about the double-bind of subjective attachment in relation to the ruses of power. Its real quarry is the dramatic structure of the everyday, a poetics of 'the historical sensorium' (p. 3) that focuses on the ways events and experiences emerge as such through the promiscuous agency of form.

Perhaps, the central theoretico-methodological claim the book advances is that the binding – enabling and disabling – force of affect is not given by its proprioceptive ontology but depends on, even as it shapes, the genres of experience within which it operates. Thus, while both meaning and subjectivity are decentered from the start, history is not reducible to the aleatory trajectories and impacts of affective intensities: 'If the present is ... a mediated affect, it is also...a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events...' (p. 4). For Berlant as for Jameson, it is these 'conventions' and *the promises and risks they engender* through their very form that account for the force of affect in the drama of everyday life.

This becomes clear when, in the eponymous first chapter, Berlant introduces her project by glossing Barbara Johnson's work on apostrophe. In a quasi-Lacanian meditation on the play of fantasy in the production of attachment, she stresses the decisive agency of addressivity not in filling the gap of intersubjectivity introduced by language but in generating this gap rhetorically (through grammatical form) as a precondition for the subject. What this subject desires, then, is neither the small nor the big Other but the

scene, circuit and promissory structure of form itself – its optimism. Yet this optimism is not necessarily optimistic, or utopian: to desire the logic of the promise is to rely on the deferral and disappointment inherent in it – its painful failure (rather than the enjoyment of missing its object) is intrinsic to its binding force.

This in turn means that failed promises can sustain opaque modes of reciprocity by engendering optimism just where it is thwarted, and in forms that don't *feel* optimistic. So in the book's second chapter, Berlant sets out to:

specify how the activity of affective attachment can be located formally in a historical, cultural, and political field in ways that clarify the process of knotty tethering to objects, scenes, and modes of life that generate so much overwhelming yet sustaining negation. (pp. 51–25)

Reading Gregg Bordowitz's film *Habit* with Susan Sontag's 'The Way We Live Now', Berlant engages the AIDS endemic as a telling form of the 'crisis of ordinariness' pervading the historical present. She traces the way *habitude* begins to function as a figure of selective repeatability that mediates attachment in extra-subjective form: if repetition is possible, it may sustain life along with it, perhaps evolving internal patterns that enable it to achieve form. From this vantage, habit is not an analytic category adduced to explain an archive, or to account for the persistence of, or resistance to, normativity. Instead, it is an emergent aesthetic event that can, but does not necessarily, give rise to genres of sociability accumulated through the very affective conditions that disrupt and foreclose normalization.

*Habit* chronicles a struggle towards form in which the possibility of living coincides with its impossibility. Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* and William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, on the other hand, serve as cases of the 'crisis in the historical sensorium of the present' that impels their female protagonists to cultivate affective sensibilities capable of orienting life amid the epistemic disarray of neoliberalism. As a precognitive, visceral yet organized and organizing intelligence, intuition models another quasi-agentive capacity for nudging an incoherent world towards intelligibility. Introducing evidence of this capacity raises the methodological and political stakes by challenging both the historicism and neo-structuralism pervading so much cultural analysis. Precisely because it is both wrenching and protracted, the collapse of the post-war social contract affords Berlant powerful insight into the affective and aesthetic constitution of social reciprocity and subjectivity. It also nourishes her own objectless optimism that the forced hyperactivity of unaccountable and often self-thwarting affective perseverance can yield idioms of sociability not bound to the defunct conventions of intimate publicity presupposed by the welfare state, much less the cynical fantasies of neoliberal utopianism.

In Chapter 3, Berlant turns to the so-called obesity endemic. There she argues that some forms of agency emerge as genres orthogonal to the public moral dramas animating both biopolitics and activist and academic responses to it. Thus in attachments to eating she detects a cruel optimism of 'slow death', one that exhibits 'lateral' or interpassive agency whose aim is 'to detach from a condition of exhausted practical sovereignty or actually to diminish being meaningful' (p. 100). In the context of obesity, Berlant points out, familiar cultural studies narratives of identity and power struggles falter; after all, even collective control of the means of production could easily increase obesity, disqualifying both capitalist biopower and resistance to it as adequate causal explanations. Here Berlant identifies an incipient mode of agency that eludes implicitly voluntaristic categories such as conformity, symptom, resistance and struggle. Lateral agency is neither compliance nor noncompliance, since what it interrupts is the sovereign self, 'the obligation to be reliable', providing 'small vacations from the will itself' (p. 116).

Berlant fleshes out her account of lateral agency in Chapter 4 by reading Mary Gaitskill's *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* to argue that eating allows the protagonists to relieve the burdens of *both* normativity *and* self-preservation: neither self-punishing nor defiantly assertive, its 'pleasures ... interfere with the negating rhythms of self-continuity' (p. 133). At stake here, then, is not the burden of abiding, evading or resisting norms, nor even of obligatory self-management, but that of subjectivity itself. Indeed, if eating produces Gaitskill's Dorothy as socially intolerable, this self-exclusion in turn functions as a pretext to seek pleasure in eating, to substitute the desire for food for the desire for sociability. In this way, she produces herself *by means of social norms* as a person for whom eating is, in effect, mandatory. The norm becomes her ally, even absolving her of the shame of desiring the norm. Alienation – in one's body or in normativity – becomes armature, a means of conveyance and abeyance in the world rather than a painful gap of sociality (never) to be bridged. The impersonality of conventional form provides relief; the broken promise of authenticity, coherence and intimacy itself become the form – both cruel and sustaining – that optimism achieves. If 'bad' bodies enact a social morbidity, they may also embody optimistic attachment by sustaining a genre of interpassivity that permits life to go on, becoming symptoms to enjoy *only if they remain obstacles* to the enjoyment that produces them as symptoms.

Accordingly, in Chapters 5 and 6, the very problematic of normativity is restaged in the context of attachments to economic citizenship, understood in performative terms 'as an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about ... social belonging that can be entered into in a number of ways, in affective transactions that take place alongside the more instrumental ones' (p. 167). Elaborating on Jameson's stress on the performative structure of genre as promise, Berlant brilliantly demonstrates why formal analysis is

essential for recouping theory's investment in affect: the (genre of the) promise itself is what imparts reality to history and experience.

She begins with readings of two films by the Dardenne brothers, *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*, to show that 'the institutions of intimacy that constitute the everyday environments of the social are not only viscerally distinct but actually ... intricately and dynamically related to all sorts of institutional, economic, historical, and symbolic dynamics' (p. 168). Here the problem is not that the promise of belonging will not be kept, nor that it is a lure into relations of exploitation; it is that it will not be made at all, and that even oppressive forms of social recognition will be denied or withheld. What happens when the genres through which sociality is sustained – in whatever hegemonic and exploitative form – disintegrate? In the films, 'the register of love is what there is to work with, when you are managing belonging to worlds that have no obligation to you' (p. 175). Even defunct genres retain some capacity to activate promises by means of their sheer form.

Next Berlant turns to Laurent Cantet's films *Human Resources* and *Time Out*, which dramatize the impasse of transition characterizing the neoliberal everyday. The question they pose is, 'Where is your place?' – a question Žižek would ascribe to the decline of symbolic efficiency, except that here there is no revenge of the superego. Rather, the predicament of precarity resembles Jakobsonian aphasia: the present is a situation, or 'a genre of living that one knows one's in but that one has to find out about. ... a sense genre of animated suspension' (p. 195). The fraying of narrative genres produces a 'situation tragedy' in which performances advance no plot, prescribe no roles, provide no anchors in events and imply no temporal trajectories. The impasse intensifies affects that can no longer attach to structures of reciprocity and externalize a habitable, collective world.

Among the effects of precarity is that intimate affections, gestures and attachments suddenly appear as starkly political while remaining resolutely personal. In this collision, the usual defences have become useless, but neither is there a way forward. Aphasia results: 'The quivering lower lip denotes someone overwhelmed by a wordless response without a way of saving face ... stuck in the impasse of the present without routines left to prop up even a lip, let alone a person' (p. 210). The genre conventions that previously staged the drama of deferred gratification have been supplanted by the rhythms of maintenance and its 'scavenged enjoyment in the present beyond which there is nothing' (p. 222). The bitter irony of this story turns on the ways that neoliberal deliverance from the burdens of responsibility amounts to an expulsion from sociability as such, and thus death in the midst of ongoing life. The surface signs and practices of social convention are the only remnants out of which a kind of zombie reciprocity is to be fashioned.

In her final chapter, Berlant examines three art projects as diverse efforts to conjure potential genres for the political that break with the zombie conventions

of the eviscerated public sphere without abandoning publicness as such. After all, 'an intimate attachment to the political can amount to a relation of cruel optimism' (p. 227). Since mass democracy requires a normative split between identification with the imagined community, its values and the continuity of representative institutions on the one hand, and a stance of critical distance towards practical political outcomes on the other hand, it is particularly prone to engender cruel political optimism. This is what happens when our assorted:

modes of orientation and having a feeling about it confirm our attachment to the system and thereby confirm the system and the legitimacy of the affects that make one feel bound to it, even if the manifest content of the binding has the negative force of cynicism or the dark attenuation of political depression. (p. 227)

Sequenced in order of their aesthetic inventiveness and political radicalism, Berlant considers Cynthia Mandansky's *The PSA Project*, the closed-circuit television (CCTV) art of the Surveillance Camera Players (SCP), and Ultra-red's 'Organizing the Silence'. Mandansky's anti-war messages employ familiar avant-garde strategies to contest the hegemonic meanings of the national and democratic symbolic, which are presumed functional but distorted by policy. Introducing language into the mute gaze of the security state, SCP enacts a genre of citizenship foreclosed by 'the power elite's rendition of the body politic as something inconvenient at best and criminal at worst – as though a threat to its own democratic existence' (p. 238). Rather than reassert the public's normative role as the authorizing principle of democracy, this approach aims to 'change the terms and rhythms of reciprocity that constitute the scene of politics' (p. 242). Still more radically, 'Organizing the Silence' transforms a hollow promise of opinion formation into a 'new noise for a body politic, new visceral political sounds' (p. 248). This strategy turns on inventing a new genre that bypasses the disappointment of democratic promises by remediating political feeling that normally registers only as noise to be ignored, generating an ambient immediacy that repoliticizes the affective present by attuning bodies to the sensations neoliberalism has induced in them. Voicing her own ambivalent optimism, Berlant closes by discerning as the other side of neoliberal sentimentality a 'depressive' politics that refuses hope or expectation while striving 'to reinvent, from the scene of survival, new idioms of the political' (p. 262).

No doubt readers will share both Berlant's sense of exasperation and her quest to recover some measure of political hope – even in the guise of its antithesis. But such solidarity should not distract from the transformative power of her critical performance, which should both edify cultural studies scholars and inspire them to learn from her example. Embracing Jameson's motto that 'history is what hurts', Berlant convincingly reinvigorates the foundational Cultural Studies project that stresses 'affect not as the sign of ahistoricism, but

as the very material of historical embeddedness' (p. 66). In *Cruel Optimism*, she does as much as anyone since Raymond Williams to render both palpable and revelatory the theoretical, experiential and political intimacy between the affective pulsions and formal contours of the historical present.

### **Notes on Contributor**

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