

**LAUREN BERLANT (2011) *CRUEL OPTIMISM*.
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What does it mean to 'have a life'? Many of us perhaps set the scale of achievements at work and in our personal lives to measure the accumulation of assets and relationships that mean something to us. Having not just a life but a 'good life', then, would be the attainment of such things in a society of reciprocal recognition and care where there is time not only for the working day, familial duties and social obligations, but also to enjoy those things that mean something to us through play, curiosity, and rest. These activities of flourishing would be bodily practices made in the reproduction of life free from anxiety or from threats of the loss of security, or too much sense of a future.

The problem, as Lauren Berlant sees it, not only in this latest book *Cruel Optimism* but throughout her work to date, is that 'for many now [...] the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace' (5). The everyday 'ordinary' of people's existence, the scene where one must 'live' that 'life', has become 'an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on' (8). *Cruel Optimism* is Berlant's first book since her 'national sentimentality' trilogy, a project that charted the 'emergence of the U.S. political sphere as an affective space of attachment and identification' (1997: x). Whereas much of that trilogy focused on readings of 17th-19th century texts, *Cruel Optimism* takes off from where the trilogy ended, with the U.S. Reagan administration and the replacement of civic modes of behaviour with private intimate acts as a measure of citizenship. *Cruel Optimism* goes further in exploring the 'intimate publics' of contemporary life-building, to ask 'what happens to fantasies of the good life when the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-

building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to “have a life” that adjustment seems an accomplishment?’ (3).

Berlant first published on ‘cruel optimism’ in 2006 in the journal *differences* and outlined there the mechanisms of a subject’s optimistic attachment to an object of desire, or rather ‘a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us’ (2006: 20). Berlant argues that this way of attending to the desired object as forged through promise allows us to recognize that our attachments are inherently optimistic, although the caveat is they may not always ‘feel optimistic’ (2006: 20). This concept of attachment is central to the argument of the book, and Berlant leans lightly on psychoanalytic thought, in particular Adam Phillips, Eve Sedgwick and Melanie Klein, to argue that it is the strength of this affect—optimism—to this ‘cluster of promises’ that forms the ‘good life’ that keeps us bound to the fantasy, even as it crumbles in the ‘overwhelming ordinary *disorganised* by capitalism’ (8, original emphasis). But why this particular fantasy of the ‘good life’? What is so powerful about it? And why are other ways of living so rarely available to us if we want to ‘count’? That is the political charge that drives *Cruel Optimism* and which pushes Berlant to track the attachments we have to fantasies of the ‘good life,’ and why it is so hard to detach ‘from what is already not working’ (263). Readings of John Ashbery, a short story by Charles Johnson and Geoff Ryman’s historical novel *Was* that appeared in the journal article are joined by interrogations of ‘the production of the present’ (4) in the films of Laurent Cantet and Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, as well as in Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* and William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition*, and a range of shorter films from the U.S. and a reading of Western obesity as a condition of cruel attachment through Mary Gaitskill’s novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*.

It is this difficulty in detaching ‘from what is already not working’ that makes optimism for a better life cruel. Optimism is not always cruel—and for a book that so explicitly and depressingly tracks the pressures to make a (normative/any) life under ‘that porous domain of hyperexploitive entrepreneurial atomism that has been variously dubbed globalisation, liberal sovereignty, late capitalism, post-Fordism, or neoliberalism’ (167), the emotional tenor of this book is ultimately optimistic. That is, its hope is that it incite others to analyse the crises of the present moment; and for those analytic and creative responses to lead to ‘new idioms of the political, and of belonging itself, which requires debating what the baselines of

survival should be in the near future, which is, now, the future we are making' (262). But as Berlant admits, the majority of the book 'is not so buoyant' (22). That's because cruel optimism is a powerful

relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. (24)

That is, the attachment is itself too much to bear losing, where the 'the loss of the promising object/scene itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything' (24). This is most clearly articulated in Berlant's chapters five ('Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal') and six ('After the Good Life, An Impasse') where she directs her tracking of cruel optimism in the Belgian films *La Promesse* (1996) and *Rosetta* (1999), written and directed by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, and Laurent Cantet's assessments of French labour in the 1990s, *Resources humaines* (1999) and *L'emploi du temps* (2001). In *Rosetta*, for example, the protagonist scrambles not for a 'good life' but for any life so as not to lose the ability to hope that life might be better—not to 'disappear down the cracks' (158). Rosetta's fantasy is not 'at a grandiose scale' (157) of, say, a permanent position in a factory, or dreams of un-fraught maternal love, but whose success in gaining a temporary, precarious role in the grey economy 'evokes a scene of an entirely imaginable normalcy whose simplicity enables her to rest without anxiety and, for the first and only time in the film, to have a good night' (157). What Berlant articulates as unfolding here is this 'adjustment' to capitalism seen as an achievement: 'The ongoing prospect of low-waged and uninteresting labour is for Rosetta nearly utopian: it makes possible imagining living the proper life that capitalism offers as a route to the good life. That the route is a rut matters not' (157).

These 'affects of aspirational normativity [...] in the project of life-building on the bottom of contemporary class society' (157)

provide Berlant with examples of wanting wrongly, or rather, the ways in which individuals are educated to want the good life, and have come to rely on habituated repetitions to get it: the rhythms rewarded in middle-class scenes of living and that catch people in 'cruel optimism's double-bind' (263). That these rhythms never in fact belonged to that particular family, household or nondominant group, but are found only in the normative fantasies to which their faces are turned, is for Berlant exemplary of the 'poetics of misrecognition' (159) that is distinct from misunderstanding, and, in its cruel form, lays bare 'the intensity of the need to feel normal' (180). This need is 'created by economic conditions of non-reciprocity that are mimetically reproduced in households that try to maintain the affective forms of middle-class exchange while having an entirely different context of anxiety and economy to manage' (180). But even within such a reading, the 'poetics of recognition' offers Berlant, and us, the insight that we are 'teachable' (159) and that if one fantasy can be attached to, then so can others. It is this note of optimism that Berlant ends the book upon, arguing that 'the energy that generates this sustaining commitment to the work of undoing a world while making one *requires* fantasy to motor programmes of action, to distort the present on behalf of what the present can become' (263).

Berlant is an astute articulator of the forms at use in the work of speculative theory such as affective structures. In particular she makes explicit the importance of thinking through genre in exposing fantasies of the normative life. Berlant argues we will only 'learn to process *x* happening as an emerging event' (5) and understand how 'conventional genres of event potentially foreclose the possibility of the event taking shape otherwise, as genres *y* and *z*' (5) if we commit to this close attention. As Berlant writes, 'The pain of paying attention pays me back in the form of eloquence' (122). As with all of Berlant's work, that eloquence is hard-fought for by both writer and reader. *Cruel Optimism* is not an easy read in form or content— at times depressing, moving, distressing, emphatic — nor should it be. After all, '[t]his kind of attention to the becoming-event of something involves questions about ideology, normativity, affective adjustment, improvisation, and the conversion of singular to general or exemplary experience' (5).

Her main genre for tracking the sense of the present is the 'impasse'. An impasse might be a situation one wants to leave but cannot, not only because of the content of the situation but because of the attachment to the fantasy to which that situation might lead: the

promise of a better life. For Berlant, 'speaking of cruel optimism, it may be that, for many now, living in an impasse would be an aspiration' (5). The book uses the impasse for attending to attachment in relation to politics and the political. The impasses of the present moment often take place in the former (within the antagonistic scene of politics) whereas strategies for negotiating the impasse that are not merely a repetition of the normative case, and which can then break out of cruel optimism, usually take place within the latter, the political. For Berlant, '*the political* [is] that which magnetises a desire for intimacy, sociality, affective solidarity, and happiness' (252) and manoeuvres the subject into a Kleinian depressive position, where she is able to acknowledge 'the broken circuit of reciprocity between herself and her world but who, refusing to see that cleavage as an end as such, takes it as an opportunity to repair both herself and the world' (259).

The cleavage between self and world is not marked by trauma but rather, in the overwhelming present moment, better recognised in the state of 'crisis ordinariness' because of its non-dramatic potentials (see for example the chapter on obesity, 'Slow Death'); because 'a concept like "crisis ordinariness" better keeps open the problem of the form heightened threat can take as it is managed in the context of living' (101). For Berlant, 'crisis ordinariness' is a more functional concept because, as she sees it, 'long-term problems of embodiment within capitalism, in the zoning of the everyday and the work of getting through it, are less successfully addressed in the temporalities of crisis and require other frames for understanding the contexts of doing, being, and thriving' (105).

This is a useful crystallisation of thought in the development of affect theory and continues the work done by others such as Kathleen Stewart in *Ordinary Affects*, and Anne Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*, for attending to the attritional rather than climactic nature of 'the wearing out of the subject' (28) under the 'exhausting pragmatics of the everyday' (262). In her introduction, Berlant puts forward a strong argument for the way affect 'saturates the corporeal, intimate, and political performances of adjustment' (16) and, through careful and responsible critical attention, 'releases to view a poetics, a theory-in-practice of how a world works' (16). As Berlant says, one of the book's central claims is that 'the present is perceived, first, affectively' (4) and that for the present moment to make sense to us we must attend to its saturation and modes of use.

One of the most rewarding aspects of Berlant's work and of *Cruel Optimism* in particular is the sheer transformative force within the field of the political that the analysis of chosen texts offers. Berlant feels the need to defend herself on this point, arguing that: 'The key here is not to see what happens to aesthetically mediated *characters* as equivalent to what happens to *people* but to see that in the affective scenarios of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life' (9). This may seem like an *a priori* assumption for some, but for scholars who worry (about the economic imperative in the future of research, perhaps) that the humanities have little to offer as 'ballast against wearing out' (116), Berlant's skill in textual analysis as a means to activate the political offers a rewarding respite from the anxiety of everyday ordinariness within the academy. After all, *Cruel Optimism* would include in its scenes of 'incoherent narratives of what's going on and what seems possible and blocked in personal/collective life' (4) would also apply to academic investigation. Berlant is required reading that should somehow help 'activist theorists and artists back to the question of what kind of form a gesture is, what kind of imminent expressivity it holds, and what kind of affective pedagogy might be effected by it' (261) in the work of 'having a life' make sense. I like to think that this is in the way the environmental writer Wendell Berry says he wants to live a life that 'makes sense', a being in the world that Aubrey Street Krug and Kristin Van Tassel embellish as 'the possibility of consistency and coherency' (2012: 9) of living and thinking combined. It is not really a criticism of Berlant or *Cruel Optimism* to have wanted a chapter on texts that deal with the overwhelming environmental 'crisis ordinariness' of capitalist consumption in an age of climate change; that perhaps is for another critic. But if Berlant were to, what a critique it would be.

That we can understand fantasies of the 'good life' through attachments to optimism, but remain aware of how optimism can sometimes be—and more often, is—cruel, allows us to step back from the normative roles that benefit the structures of power and political and capital economy. It is here that Berlant assesses living through impasse as doing 'work on suspending the rules and norms of the world' (49) so we can see those rules more clearly, and question them. That is, they 'show us how to pay attention to the built and affective infrastructure of the ordinary, and how to encounter what happens when infrastructural stress produces a dramatic tableau' (49). This is Berlant's challenge to us in the contemporary moment, as the global financial crisis of 2008 bleeds into the 'crisis ordinariness' of an adjusted set of expectations for

'having a life', the result of which is already congealing 'decades of class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political, and social brittleness [to] create manifest crisis situations in ordinary existence for more kinds of people' (11).

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