

Cruel optimism, by Lauren Berlant, Durham, NC, and London, Duke University Press, 2011, 352 pp., £63.65, \$89.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5097-2 / £16.99, \$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-5111-5

Cruel Optimism is many things; it is an exploration of affect and attachment, agony and antagonism, fantasy and banality. At its heart, Lauren Berlant's latest book is about questioning why people stay attached to scenes of life that are unsurvivable. She proposes new ways of thinking through everyday life in liberal capitalist societies, and suggests tactics for sitting with and moving beyond the impasse of the historical present.

This book builds on Berlant's earlier work on 'national sentimentality,' which considers how citizenship and public spheres are constituted. There, publics are understood as 'affective insofar as they don't just respond to material interests but magnetize optimism about living and being connected to strangers in a kind of nebulous communitas' (2008, xi). This interplay – of being-with, material interest, and magnetic optimism – is taken up in *Cruel Optimism*, which explores what happens when interest and optimism are at odds: 'when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (1). A cruel optimism is a soured attachment, entered into from *within* and *without* the realm of rational calculation. In tracking this souring, the chapters form a staccatoed exploration of 'what happens to fantasies of the good life when the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises' (3). Throughout, Berlant pays attention to how desires, fantasies, and attachments are mediated by citizenship, race, labor, class (dis)location, sexuality and health.

Cruel Optimism traces the emergence of an intimate 'affectsphere' across multiple media of aesthetic expression, citing examples in literature, art and film. In Chapter 7, for example, Berlant's reading of Slater Bradley's film *JFK, Jr.* (2000) locates the political in scenes like a woman delicately placing a personal note and rose on a memorial dedicated to JFK Jr. Berlant is interested in how singular events like these, situated between desire and performativity, become general and historical. Her analysis is oriented toward the possibility of different modes of aesthetic expression to *rupture* the patterns of cruel optimism, or *break through* normative liberal models of surviving.

Berlant warns the reader not to approach *Cruel Optimism* empirically, and instead argues for (and through) intuitionist and aesthetic attunements. Crucial here is her search for 'genres' that deprioritize 'eventness' and enable the unpacking of situations in more haunted detail. In moving beyond 'eventness,' we are reoriented toward forms like the situation, the episode, the interruption, the aside, the conversation, the travelogue, and the happening. In Chapter 3, for example, cause and effect are blurred in the 'slow death' of racialized and otherwise deprivileged agents under the withering of social welfare in neoliberal regimes of power. Through querying new 'genres,' Berlant works around the failure of liberal epistemologies, marking events like these that endure in slow temporalities.

Building on work in the history of ideology by the likes of Louis Althusser, Georg Lukács and Raymond Williams, *Cruel Optimism* intervenes in several strains of critical theory. Berlant asks us to reconsider conceptualizations of everyday life, trauma, and crisis. Breaking with the theorization of everyday life, à la Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, Berlant argues that work in their vein 'no longer describes how most people live' (8). She instead urges us to think about the everyday as an unfolding 'crisis ordinary,' a state of impasse. Crisis, Berlant writes, 'is not exceptional to history or consciousness, but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming' (10). Discourses of crisis and trauma, from Cathy Caruth to Giorgio Agamben, Berlant argues, too easily explain events away as 'bad-luck' or ahistorical

contingency. The conceptual tools of trauma theory fail to address the many ways people manage feeling overwhelmed, a pervasive state of being under the neoliberal restructuring of the USA and Western Europe in the last 30 years.

Berlant's work is informed by Marxism but presents something like an inversion of its traditional terms, rewriting a theory of ideology more attuned to the neoliberal moment. Stated simply, Berlant explores the ordinary as it is *disorganized* by capitalism, rather than *organized* by it. This disorganization precipitates conditions of crisis for increasing numbers of precarious bodies as neoliberal restructuring unfolds.

All things considered, Berlant calls our attention to the persistent grind of living in the historical present. By considering the connections between publics, the political, and affect, *Cruel Optimism* furnishes new modes for sitting within this present. The stories Berlant tells, the enlivened language she employs, and her attention to the sensual matter that is 'elsewhere to sovereign consciousness, but has historical significance in the domains of subjectivity' (53) form an aspirational work. But even if Berlant helps us to recognize and disavow scenes of life that no longer work, she leaves us with the note that 'even with an image of a better good life available to sustain your optimism, it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working' (263). *Cruel Optimism* is a difficult work, and not only because of its rich prose.

Reference

Berlant, Lauren. 2008. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.795723>