

Patricia Ticineto Clough

Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at the Graduate Center and Queens College of the City University of NY
Response to Public Feelings Salon with Lauren Berlant

Event co-sponsored by The Barnard Center for Research on Women and The Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies
at NYU; held on April 12, 2011 at Barnard College

Video available at: <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/public-feelings-salon-with-lauren-berlant>

Response published December 10, 2012 at: <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/public-feelings-salon-with-lauren-berlant>

The Transformational Object of Cruel Optimism

A certain engagement with Freud is announced right at the start of Lauren Berlant's essay, *Cruel Optimism*, when she proposes that the "object of desire" "really is" about something that is not quite an object—maybe not an object at all—but rather "a cluster of promises."ⁱ And there is also a certain passivity elaborated as a fantasmatic scenario, as the cluster of promises is defined as promises "we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us."ⁱⁱ Cruel optimism, then, is about a transaction: an exchange that is both transferential and optimistically transformative. It is this transaction and how it turns optimism cruel that requires a politicizing of Freud's insights—what we might take *Cruel Optimism* to be. Another gem in her collection of essays, which are meant to collect and critically engage public feelings, Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* is something less than a character study and something more than a cultural analysis of public opinion. It is something more like a psychoanalysis of sociality—a psychoanalysis, however, that acknowledges that political economy "must run along side" it.ⁱⁱⁱ The political economic analysis that *Cruel Optimism* offers is not just about living during a specific stage of capitalism, but more about a feeling that might well be endemic to capitalism: an economy that operates, if not from the very start, then surely increasingly by distributing unequally the "chops," or affective capacity to turn fantasy into a plan rather than having it become a prison, a removal of oneself from further exchange, not by choice but by compulsion, a relentless staying attached to the "very animating potency, of an object/scene of desire" that contributes to "the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment."^{iv} This compulsion is not an addiction, not a melancholia, but a repetitious enactment—defending the attachment in advance of its loss.

It is a good old tradition that draws political economy and psychoanalysis together for a critical analysis of ideologically interpellated subjects of state apparatuses: cultural institutions, the family, the church, the school, the media, and the like. And while Berlant is of this tradition, she has produced a unique version of it. In her version, desiring production

and economic production are not working together dialectically in the formation of subjects of ideology; nor are economic productivity and desire becoming the same thing in a postideological subjectivity. Rather, desire and economic productivity seem to be crashing into each other over and over again, bringing on a critical stalemate, a lived impasse—at least from the perspective of a critic like Berlant, who is focusing on those who are not so much living in but living-on in capitalism. In this, perhaps subjects and their ideological formation are not as central to critical analysis as objects are—the objects that Marx warned would become a matter of perverse desire and fetishistic pleasure as relations between things displaced relations between humans.^v But in Berlant's take, the object of cruel optimism is not so much about fetishism or the possession of/by an object that would lead to differences of class: from the scene of the suburban possibilities in John Ashbery's poem; to the hoarding among two African American brothers in the South Side of Chicago in Charles Johnson's story; to the would-be therapeutic situation in Geoff Ryman's novel, where traumatic abuse is turned into cruel optimism in "the return to the symptom as stabilizing form, a re-anchoring in the symptoms' predictability."^{vi} That is to say, if these scenes or situations were to point to differences of class, it only would be to class as a matter of affective capacity, not of subjective desire. It would be about the very capacity to feel again and again a pre-individual bodily capacity or trigger necessary to action—and perhaps always necessary to capitalist economy—but surely, more so in the investments of what is awkwardly called prosumerism.

Or to put it another way, have not our commodities become those very objects that Berlant puts before us, and that the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas has described as transformative?^{vii} This is not a matter of the transitional object that enables individuation in separation from the mother, but rather a matter of the mother's initiating an aim in the infant—if not a compulsion—to seek transformation through another, or to attach to others and to other things as sources of transformation, energy for living. The transformational object, as Bollas sees it, is a derivative of an "infant's first subjective experience of the object, [...] less as a significant and an identifiable object than as a process of accumulating internal and external transformations;" it is the early experience of the mother as, "a recurrent experience of being, [...] the rhythms of processes that inform the nature of the object relation rather than the qualities of the object as object."^{viii} And most importantly for Bollas, this is a matter of aesthetics, as the infant not only takes in the contents of the mother's communications, but more so, their form. That is to say, the mother's touching-

hold gives form to the way the child's ego will hold instinctual needs, elaborated as an aesthetic of attachment.^{ix} Even the dream has its dramaturgical form thanks to this. The dream holds, as the ego does, as the mother did.^x

And if I were to put scare quotes around "the mother," it would not only be to correct what might be taken as the racialized, gendered, heteronormative slant of Bollas's descriptions, but also to notice the change in the socializing function of the private domain—the home, the school, and the church—as capitalism becomes aesthetic and the commodity becomes the transformational object. Coined by Steven Shaviro, "aesthetic capitalism" recently has been taken up by Christine Harold in her discussion of the commodity and the shift in the function of the brand from its being about representation, or the aura of the circulating sign, to the commodity itself being designed, seemingly by a known or knowable designer, to model a user's future manipulation of it.^{xi} That is, the commodity is designed to sensually transmit a "creative juice"^{xii} that will be transformative for its user, bringing a not-yet-lived or future experience into the present.^{xiii} The aura and the value of the commodity are in its use, not in its possession; the aura and the value of the commodity are in its transmission of affect, where affect refers to a bodily readiness, a trigger to action, and where exchange seems to be direct, affecting a circulation of energy across a body or bodies.

As a transformational object, the commodity points to the displacement in capitalism of the institutions of civil society—the home, the church, the school as the primary, private sites of socialization or ideological interpellation, that are meant to give indirect moral support to market activity. When, however, the commodity becomes the transformational object, it becomes a prime socializer or resource of motivation, and rather than giving indirect moral support to market activity, the institutions of civil society become intensified sites of market activity. It is not so surprising, then, that financialization, as Melinda Cooper and Angela Mitropoulos argue, has "intensified and expanded through the household turning credit on the house, health, education and a multiplicity of other life risks into tradable securities."^{xiv} Cooper and Mitropoulos conclude: "we are all accumulators, risk hedgers and managers—seeking not only to invest in and appreciate our human capital but also to skillfully manage the portfolio of risks that come with every singular life course (including, not least, gender risks, race risks, class risks)."^{xv} Thus, public feelings—and critical engagement with them—become attuned to the overworking in capitalism of an aesthetic of attachment to the transformational object.^{xvi}

It also might be of interest to note the relatively recent focus in philosophy on “speculative realism” and “object-oriented ontologies,” which give the object as much ontological weight as those philosophies that are characteristically “correlationist” have given to the subject. Coined by Quentin Meillassoux, the term correlationism is meant to point to and to initiate a critical rethinking of the presumed impossibility of a world without human knowing, or of a philosophy without the assumption of a primordial rapport between human and world.^{xvii} Although there are considerable differences among the various philosophers who are currently contributing to rethinking correlationism, they share a respect for the object, which has led to a resetting of aesthetics as the first philosophy with affect and allure doing weighty philosophical work.^{xviii} For some drawing on Gilles Deleuze, and for others drawing on Alfred North Whitehead (while also offering a critique of these thinkers), affect is made the ground of all experience, where affective relations are as much between objects as they are between those objects we have treated as subjects. Graham Harman, for one, argues that “causality is alluring” and that allusion is central to knowing, in that “the real object” always withdraws into its essence or falls back from its relations. No relation exhausts the object, which nonetheless relates indirectly through its sensual profile; the sensual is the vicar of the real object. Thus, alluring causality is also “vicarious causality.”^{xix}

In refurbishing what philosophy has long called the essence of the object—although, importantly, for him not an eternal essence—Harman offers a critical rethinking of phenomenology that is meant to resist materialism and thereby bring into question Marx’s understanding of the commodity as “only the phenomenal form of something contained in it but distinguishable from it,” which points to the potential or the capacity that is labor power: an abstraction from use or utility, an abstraction that perversely permits relations between things to displace relations between humans.^{xx} And thus, in the capitalist mode of production, Marx adds sardonically, “commodities abound in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”^{xxi} What Harman’s critique of materialism points to is the way that it “undermines” objects, in that materialism proposes that there is always something else that objects can be reduced to—atoms, protons, and the like. Or materialism “overmines” the object in that the object is taken to be little more than the sign of a social structural arrangement.^{xxii}

As if in touch with this philosophical focus on objects, *Cruel Optimism* seems to raise the question of whether object-oriented ontologies are an unhealthy symptom of the

capitalist mode of production. Or are these ontologies protecting the essence of the object and, as such, offering a philosophical stance from which to critically engage the commodity as a transformational object, alluring and affectively circulated, not creating subjects so much as enchanting objects and their relations? And if the commodity's action is not a matter of surface and depth but rather a matter of its affective capacity for relations that are themselves affective relations among objects as well as subjects, is there not also a need to rethink the fetish in terms of an analysis of public feelings or a psychoanalysis of sociality? Might we not also need to rethink knowledge production *tout court* as a matter of allusion or of allure? And then, might the aims of criticism move beyond uncovering truths or undermining and overmining objects, and instead run critical analysis into ways of presenting, which as a matter of allusion, must rather have a musicality of expression, a poetics of performance, a continuation of touching the real through the sensual—instigating a deep transformation of the disciplines and all authored styles of presentation of being, doing, and knowing? For some time now, Lauren Berlant's trenchant criticism of sociality carried forth in her signature style has been an exquisite exemplar of an alluring criticism. Hopefully other critics will follow suit.

ⁱ Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," *differences* 17.3 (2006): 20.

ⁱⁱ Berlant 2006: 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Berlant 2006: 27.

^{iv} Berlant 2006: 21.

^v Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977).

^{vi} Berlant 2006: 31.

^{vii} Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Objects, Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987). My reference to Bollas is resonant with Berlant's own use of his treatment of the transformational object. Her treatment of Bollas also is particularly interesting for the way it contrasts Bollas and Jacques Lacan. See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008) 239-240. See also Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011) 184.

^{viii} Bollas 1987: 14

^{ix} Bollas 1987: 34-35

^x Bollas 1987: 64-81.

^{xi} Christine Harold, "On Target: Aura, Affect, and the Rhetoric of 'Design Democracy,'" *Public Culture* 21 (2009): 599-618.

^{xii} This expression is taken by Harold from Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 1 (2001): 599-618.

^{xiii} We might draw a connecting line from Berlant's discussion of apostrophe, to Harold's treatment of affective branding, to what Luciana Parisi and Steven Goodman describe as the preemptive logic of branding. For Parisi and Goodman, preemptive branding is a "mnemonic control" that aims to remodel long-term memory through an occupation of or

the “parasiting” on the dynamics of affective potentiality in the neuro-physiological plasticity of the body-brain. Mnemonic control is something like “a distribution of memory implants,” which provides one with the bodily or affective memory of an experience which one actually has not had, nonetheless, giving a base for the future rise of affect, the repetition of an anticipatory response. Thus the power of mnemonic control is in this turn to affect as life’s non-lived or not-yet lived. For Parisi and Goodman, affect can be “conceived as a time-span that lasts a second or fraction of a second and “which lives actively in its antecedent world.” See Luciana Parisi and Steve Goodman, “Mnemonic Control,” *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death*, eds. Patricia T. Clough and Craig Willse (Durham: Duke UP, 2012) 265.

^{xiv} Melinda Cooper and Angela Mitropoulos, “The household frontier,” *ephemera* 9.4 (2009) 364.

^{xv} Cooper and Mitropoulos 2009: 365.

^{xvi} There is a sense of historical development in this take on civil society and the commodity, and surely the historically specific development of certain technologies, for one, has made the circulation of affect more operative. Yet I would caution that financialization has been a recurring event in capitalist production, and that affect is part of the recurrence. So, too, the configuration of household, home, economy, and intimacy is not a matter of a linear history.

^{xvii} Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

^{xviii} For a set of essays by authors connected in one way or another to speculative realism, see Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, eds., *The Speculative Turn* (Melbourne, re.press, 2011).

^{xix} Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” 11.26 *Collapse II* (2007): 187-221.

^{xx} Marx 1977: 127.

^{xxi} Marx 1977: 163.

^{xxii} Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009).