

Introduction

WHAT DOES LAUREN BERLANT TEACH US ABOUT NETWORKED AFFECT?

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Lauren Berlant's profound legacy¹ for affect theory, cultural studies, queer theory and adjacent fields centers on her/their socio-sensory attunement to the role of media, popular culture, and the aesthetic in shaping everyday experience within late capitalist America and far beyond. And yet, within the pervasively digitalized media cultures of the twenty first century, it is curious, perhaps, that Berlant rarely engaged directly with digital culture, nor has their work (with notable pockets of exception) been drawn on widely in accounts of networked media within media theory, digital humanities, or critical data studies (Pedwell 2023b; see also Azhar and Boler 2023). The central claim orienting this introductory essay, however, is that the uncommon instances in which Berlant *does* address digital technologies explicitly are instructive and, moreover, that there is much to be gained from mining Berlant's rich oeuvre for what it teaches us about the changing relations among affect, subjectivity, digital culture, and 'the political' amid the intersecting crises of the present. The most significant lessons Berlant's work imparts in this vein, we will argue, concern the affective workings and implications of mediation, genre, and infrastructure in our digital age—lessons which prompt us to confront the ineradicable persistence of uncertainty, ambivalence, and vulnerability within human-technology relations, alongside the vital role of transitional infrastructures in the emergent ethico-politics of networked affect.



Grasping Berlant's distinctive take on genre—and the possibilities it holds for grappling with contemporary networked affects and ecologies—requires that we first consider the role of *mediation* in their scholarship. If, within the backstory of media and cultural studies, mediation was defined traditionally as operating in between two entities posed as separate and distinct (i.e. 'a media representation' and 'an audience' or 'a digital platform' and 'a body'), Berlant, like other contemporary critical scholars, refuses such conceptual and temporal distinctions. Rather, in resonance with the Welsh cultural theorist Raymond Williams, Berlant understands mediation as “the continua of transformation in forms, shapes, patternings, assemblings (all matter of relations among form) across our uneven and inequitably lived existences” (Seigworth and Coleman 2023, 180). Mediation is thus, as Berlant (2022) puts it in their final book, *The Inconvenience of Other People*, “not a stable thing but a way of seeing unstable relations among dynamically related things” (22). At stake across Berlant's writings are the mundane processes that affectively entangle the individual and the social, personal and political, intimate and public amid the crumbling “social democratic promise of the post-Second World War period in the US and Europe” (Berlant 2011, 3) and the racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized “ordinary of biopower” (Berlant 2022, 7). Mediation, in such conditions, concerns how everyday objects of attention are imbued with sensorial force, and is linked to “the affective sense of the familiar friction of being in relation” (Berlant 2022, 2)—dynamics in which digital media and culture now play a central role.

When it comes to understanding how, exactly, media technologies, interfaces, and narratives connect with felt subjectivity, genre is, for Berlant, vital. If genre is frequently understood in terms of “textual types linked to cultural economies of artistic movements” (Cefai 2023, 272), Berlant approaches genre more broadly, seeing it as intimately connected to how aesthetic forms elicit, channel, shape and/or otherwise invest affect with meaning and possibility. From *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997) onwards, Berlant describes genre as offering a patterned set of emotionally invested expectations for how a given situation can (and should) take shape—often in ways that model “how affect becomes ‘conventional’” (Azhar and Boler, 2023, 357). As such, analysis of the workings of genre and aesthetic form can, as Berlant (2008) suggests in *The Female Complaint*, begin to tease out “the mechanisms that enable the reproduction of normativity, not as a political programme, but as a structure of feeling, as an affect” (266 cited in Seigworth and Coleman 2023). Grappling with the implications of what

Jacques Ranciere called “the distribution of the sensible,” or with Marxist cultural theory’s account of the gradual “training of the sensorium” is thus, for Berlant, not only about how cultural-historical conditions and social relations of power immanently shape (without determining) sensorial receptivity and “visceral response” (Berlant 2011; see discussion in Seigworth and Coleman 2023; Pedwell 2023a); it also concerns how aesthetic genres—which must now surely include those linked to algorithmic architectures—mediate affective experience in the present, organizing available modes of anticipation, adjustment, and ‘living on’ through the everyday shocks of capitalist disorganization.

In Berlant’s recent work, ‘mediation’ and ‘genre’ are increasingly tethered to a third orienting term: ‘infrastructure’. While media theory’s infrastructural turn has often prioritized the substance of “stuff you can kick” (Parks 2015 cited in Ingraham 2023, 157), Berlant’s “infrastructuralism” centers, unsurprisingly, on the unfolding dynamics of material-ideational-affective entanglements. “[I]n the best ethnographic work on infrastructure,” Berlant (2022) argues, “buildings, roads, institutions, systems of norms and laws” are connected to ideas, concepts and affects “that bind worlds together along with ideas of what this world might be” (21; see also Berlant 2016). From this perspective, infrastructure “is another way of talking about mediation,” but with close attention to how we become affectively bound or attached to “material technology, aesthetic genre, form or norm” (Berlant 2022, 22). Infrastructure, as such, sutures mediation and genre to affective lifeworlds, to “the lively patterning or connective tissue of social forms” (Gunaratnam 2023, 318; see also Coleman 2017). Although Berlant rarely addresses digital infrastructures explicitly (at times it feels like they work quite hard to *avoid* invoking networked media), their writing can be employed to conceptualize infrastructure as both “vital attachments to people (individuals, groups and other constellations) and dependencies on the operability of devices, platforms and information networks” (Paasonen et al 2023, 287). If Berlant mobilizes infrastructure most provocatively to address both what it means to live with ambivalence and how personal and socio-political transformation might materialize, we are interested in the digitalized implications of such dynamics—and the role of networked affect in transitional infrastructures that can “loosen the object’s world-self relation while holding onto living” (Berlant 2022, 23).

Drawing on our respective research on intuition and histories of human-machine relations (Pedwell) and the digital mediation of queer mobility in urban space (Stowe), this essay focuses on what Berlant teaches us about the algorithmically orchestrated dynamics of openness, vulnerability, and receptivity. Animating links among ritual, genre, and algorithmic affect in Berlant’s (2023) short poem

“Ritual Aversions,” the first section of the essay considers what genres of affective expectation contemporary digital media landscapes may be consolidating, attending to Berlant’s invocation to approach everyday (mediated) life through ‘the episode’. The second section connects the episode to Berlant’s (2022) account of “living in the ellipsis,” exploring the affective impact of digital (bio)production processes of endless modulation. Through the algorithmic organization of pre-emptive affects and actions characterized by the condition of the perpetual update, our shifting modes of anticipation are, we will argue, such that vulnerability is (differentially) folded into sensorial receptivity, shaping the genre of the ‘elliptical present’—the ways in which we (are able to) approach ‘openness’ in fear and/or desire. Asking how we might stop ourselves becoming worn out in a world that is consistently training us for feelings we don’t yet have, the third section confronts the ambivalence of networked affect amid algorithmic personalization, the both/and dynamics of curated (queer) online worlds. We conclude with Berlant’s (2022) argument that the contemporary “critical obligation of any analyst, writer, or artist” is to offer “transitional infrastructures for the extended meanwhile” (19), considering its implications at the intersection of affect theory and digital media praxis.

Ritual, Genre, and Algorithmic Affect

When I say that I’ve never loved a ritual, it makes me wonder what “love” means.

Sometimes I fear being body-sucked into a tradition. Or being opened up in public far from where I live. Sometimes a ritual’s too okay with mechanical sincerity. Then there’s the demand that slaves and workers clap for their oppressors. Now a bot will remind you that it’s time to perform fidelity to a time. Neither *voluntaire* nor *involuntaire*, bot memory expands your subjective dark. Because the algorithm told it to, it asks you to interrupt your inattention. You are not obliged to have true or any feelings, but you’re forced to decide whether you care for the event of the date. Whenever time demands loyalty, we dissociate. Do you remember the start of this poem?

—Lauren Berlant, *Poisonality*, 2023

The excerpt above features the opening lines of Berlant's poem "Ritual Aversions" from their collection *Poisonality*, published posthumously in *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures* (Seigworth and Pedwell eds., 2023). Extending the evocative style honed with long-time collaborator Kathleen Stewart in *The Hundreds* (2019), the 12 poems in *Poisonality* each take the form of hundred-word units or units of hundred multiples. All were composed during the jarring conjunction of the COVID-19 pandemic and Berlant's diagnosis and treatment for cancer—an intensive stretch of time animated by deep collective uncertainty and, presumably, considerable changes in Berlant's own relationships with ritual, temporality, technology, and the future. This historical moment is one constituted, in turn, by the promises and perils of pervasive algorithmic architectures, as domestic and wearable AI technologies become further embedded within and productive of less-than-conscious affects, habits, rituals, and responsivities—or what Berlant (2023) calls our "subjective dark" (452). Entangled with such enveloping digitalization is also, of course, the long tail of Trumpism and the racialized tentacles of authoritarian populism in the US and transnationally, as, during the poem's very composition, "the Capitol is being stormed by whites on a mission to plant their fantasy flag next to another fantasy flag" (2023, 453). Within these intense and disorienting conditions, *Poisonality's* measured free-writing style offers a means of feeling out the affective contours of the present – of inhabiting the fraught and shifting relations among atmosphere, genre, infrastructure, computation, and felt subjectivity – that "beckons us into the creative possibilities of quantification" (Gunaratnam 2023, 316).

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ritual as 1) "a religious or solemn ceremony involving a series of actions performed according to a set order", and 2) "a series of actions always followed by someone without variation." In Berlant's earlier writing, most notably in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), the notion of 'ritual' (alongside related terms such as 'routine', 'habit', 'intuition' etc.) informs the distinctive vocabulary they mobilize to describe how we navigate the late capitalist 'impasse' of socio-political volatility, precarity, and stalled opportunity. If the aesthetic genres of the intimate public sphere offer a set of orienting expectations concerning how to feel, interpret, and act within the 'crisis ordinariness' of the post-war Euro-North American everyday (Berlant, 1997, 2008, 2011), Berlant's oeuvre also tracks what happens when genres fail and flail. Genre flailing, for Berlant (2018), is "a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one's confidence about how to move in it" (157). When "the contours, framings, conventions, of [a familiar] situation are distributed," such as in the case of a global pandemic or debilitating

illness, rituals frequently constitute the handrails we cling onto in our attempts to manage sustained uncertainty (Turner and Coleman 2023, 331). Amid the swirling tumult of unwanted change, ritual's methodical repetition promises a certain comfort—the reassurance that, with all else in flux, a familiar architecture of action remains available and seemingly amenable to cognitive–sensory control.

In “Ritual Aversions,” however, the poem's speaker, who both *is* and *isn't* Berlant (the poem operates to invoke dissociation), confronts their antipathy to ritual amid efforts to withstand and adjust to the twin poisons of COVID and chemotherapy: “Ribs are breaking everywhere from cancer. Skeleton's clack like a marionette's dancing sticks but with nerve endings popping sharply. There is no perfect posture to relieve all that. Shifting around just redistributes discomfort” (2023, 453). In the face of terminal cancer's debilitating pain and discomfort, the speaker fears the “alien” quality of ceremonial rituals, of “being body-sucked into a tradition.” They shudder viscerally at (known or imagined) surgical interventions to come, of “being opened up far from where I live” (452). It is tempting, and indeed affectively compelling, to read *Poisonality* as straightforwardly autobiographical. Yet, as Lisa Blackman (2023) suggests, Berlant's distinctive approach to cultural storytelling is informed less by “the personal” than it is by “the non-personal.” Moving beyond confessional modalities, the non-personal may work as a “cover story” enabling Berlant to “move between different registers without exposure” (Blackman 2023, 260). In the interwoven registers of experience that animate *Poisonality*, then, we sense affective fragments of Berlant's own story alongside imprints of others' lifeworlds—an orientation that offers “a *transmutual* gesturing to how worlds are composed and put together, and how the I, the sovereign I, is not the focus and can, perhaps, should or always has the potential to be undone” (Blackman 2023, 248). In the context of “Ritual Aversions,” this approach, we want to suggest, highlights the collective and distributed nature of ritual; gesturing to how rituals, routines, and habits are shifting more-than-human assemblages that straddle the Proustian ‘voluntaire’ and ‘involuntaire’ (Berlant 2023, 252), and are, therefore, never quite amenable to human mastery in the ways we might fantasize (Pedwell 2021a, b). As such, Berlant signals the ‘cruel optimism’ of ritual's promise of control or repair in the face of terminal illness – without negating the provisional infrastructures of endurance and survival that such affectively imbued modes of repetition may offer.

As government mandated pandemic lockdowns effect abrupt changes to everyday affects, socialities, and temporalities, amplifying the reach of, and shared reliance on, digital communications technologies (particularly for those compelled to shield themselves due to underlying medical conditions), “Ritual Aversions” also queries what is at stake in our collective acquiescence to the “mechanical sincerity” of algorithmically-adjudicated rituals (Berlant, 2023: 452). In this context, Berlant’s non-personal approach has wider evocative resonances—invoking, perhaps, the impersonality of what Gilles Deleuze (1995) called ‘the dividual.’ Within the recursive relays of machine learning architectures, there are no *individuals* with visceral habits or sacred rituals but rather only *dividuals*: “the perpetually sliced-and-diced aggregation of identities-masses-markets-banks, intimate and impersonal at once” (Seigworth, in press; see also Amoores 2013, 2020; Parisi 2013; Clough et al 2015). As we increasingly delegate management of our daily lives to surveillant bots that “remind [us] that it’s time to perform fidelity to a time” (Berlant 2023, 452), what, Berlant wonders, becomes of our intuition? When automated assistants like Alexa make demands on our (in)attention “because the algorithm told it to” (452-3), what happens to our historically-informed attunement to change as it unfolds? If intuition is, as Berlant suggests in *Cruel Optimism*, a “trained thing” (2011, 52), the poem prompts us to consider what kinds of gut feelings and sensorial modes of receptivity we are training (and being trained for) via our increasing enmeshment with the “data for life” (Dow Schüll 2016) of Big Tech’s profit-oriented algorithmic architectures.

For Berlant, these questions are, in part, ones of genre. If the genres of the intimate public sphere have traditionally aided sense making, “providing framings, forms and conventions through which subjects can articulate experience and tether themselves to the world and others” (Turner and Coleman 2023, 336), the becoming ‘environmental’ of machine learning (Durham Peters 2015) could be interpreted as one massive genre flail. Through these recursive machine learning systems, we are, it has been argued, perpetually oriented and disoriented, trained and re-trained, disassembled and reassembled as part of a giant corporate psychological experiment which generates endlessly harvestable data (Andrejevic 2013; Stark 2018). ‘Experiment’ here operates as an immanent virtual laboratory for capital, in which emotional investments and sedimented habits matter less than the value generated from randomness and post-probabilistic uncertainties (Parisi 2013; Clough et al 2015; Pedwell 2021b). What genres of affective expectation can and do contemporary digital media ecologies provide then? In reconstituting the very nature of ‘the intelligible’ and ‘the sensible’ in line with state, corporate, and other powerful interests (Bucher 2018; Pedwell 2022, 2023a), the global consolidation of algorithmic architectures raises pressing questions about the nature

of genre and affective infrastructure in the twenty-first century—and what this means for the ideological mediation of collective subjective life. “Ritual Aversions” could be read, in this vein, as a quite succinct and pointed critique of the lived biopolitics of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) and its “demand that slaves and workers clap for their oppressors”—a lament for how, in rendering immanent socio-sensorial relations computational, digital infrastructures routinely flatten “true or any feelings” (Berlant 2023, 452–3).

Yet such ‘major key’ critical manoeuvres (Manning 2016) have never been Berlant’s style. Rather, as Gregory Seigworth and Rebecca Coleman (2023) put it, Berlant characteristically operates “in the midst of the processual, the episodic, the lower case, often uncaptioned events of living” (182)—and it is here, we want to suggest, that their most vital insights for contemporary studies of digital media emerge. Although headline narratives of algorithmic surveillance, exploitation, and control sign-post the contours of the mediated present with haunting acuity, they can nonetheless miss what is percolating *affectively* beneath the surface. In other words, as Susanna Paasonen and colleagues argue, and Berlant’s writing consistently illuminates, when it comes to affect, networked or otherwise, a “macro / structural / ideological / political economy level of critique does not suffice alone.” Indeed, “the connections we make, the attachments we foster, the doubts we harbour, the things that we refuse, opt in, cherish, as well as the worlds that we strive for in datafied settings hold equal gravity” (Paasonen et al 2023, 304). Within our networked socio-political ‘impasse’ in which “almost nothing has to do with events” and “ordinary life is more like cleaning up after a party,” what is required, Berlant (2023) suggests, is that we learn to inhabit ‘the episode’ (453). Through attuning to unfolding episodes, encounters, and (lower) cases, “many at a time leaning on each other without masquerading as repair or build” (453), we might establish a richer connection with what contemporary digital mediation *actually feels like*—and, perhaps, with that which affectively attaches us (differentially and ambivalently) to popular media and AI technologies and infrastructures.

At stake here is not passive reception, *Ritual Aversions* emphasises, but instead the more demanding effort of sitting “within the resonance of an impact while feeling it out” (Berlant 2023, 453)—affective labour that may become increasingly difficult the more ‘crisis ordinariness’ registers as an understatement, and as computational media reach further into the collective ‘subjective dark’ to prime, nudge, and elicit cognitive-sensory experience.

Living On(line) in ‘Elliptical Aperture’

In their *Inconvenience* book, Berlant (2022) describes “living in ellipsis” as a mode of inhabiting the episode, “an offering of how to construct and occupy the historical present” (125–26). Engaging with Berlant’s (2022) ellipsis in relation to digital culture is not only a conceptual move, we suggest, but also a way to inhabit life, *hopefully*, in its inevitable algorithmic mediation. Living in ellipses involves an orientation towards the present as a time/space of openings, closings, and continuously transforming relations, “a falling apart of meaning or connection” that can leave us with a sense of “pervasive lostness” (125). The uncertainty and precarity that comes with feeling lost, or falling apart, is likely to evoke fear and anxiety (or indeed hopelessness) as we are faced with an expanse of possibility; yet, Berlant (2022) reminds us that falling apart also holds the potential for transformative growth and becoming. If the environment is “good enough” the ellipsis “releases affective potentiality,” alerting us to the possibility that we *can* “connect the dots differently” or “devote them to play,” an experiment in new forms of relationality (125; see also Aitken in Anderson et al. 2023). Across their writings, then, Berlant (2022) invites readers to inhabit the ellipsis, to resist being “made up” too quickly, to hold “out for multiple moods and rhythms” (147), to tune into the affective glimmers of alter-worlds which might offer hope for an *otherwise*.

The ellipsis, for Berlant (2022), is closely aligned with infrastructure: both are “transitional forms that slow and extend ways to live inconveniently with each other” and, in doing so, both tell us something about how to render objects which are at once fraught and enabling “available to transition” (xi, 9). Importantly, what Berlant (2022) figures as ‘objects’ are not only “material things” but also “forms of life, wrought out of affectively and politically jagged relationships, “clusters of promise, projection and speculation that hold up a world that we need to sustain” (27 cited in Gunaratnam 2023, 313). Making everyday objects available to transition, shaking up the ways in which we are ambivalently bound to the affective amalgam of suffering and sustenance they may reproduce, requires the cultivation of transitional infrastructures that aim at “the extension of life *from within lifeworlds*”—improvising heterotopias within “the unevenness, violence and ordinary contingency of contemporary existence” (italics ours, Berlant 2022, 20, 25). This is never, of course, easy or straightforward, whether affectively, psycho-socially, or practically.

As Berlant (2022) writes, “[t]o achieve a transformational infrastructure is to loosen up in the moment when everything in me would prefer not to, would prefer for there to be a moving walkway between where I am and another place I can already see: a sidewalk embedded with concrete footprints that seem to have a destination in mind” (150). The idea of “loosen[ing] up” is pervasive in their work, and fundamental to queer theory more broadly. A queer orientation involves deviating from the predefined path, a disrupting and reordering of normative social relations driven by desire for an otherwise (Ahmed 2006, 2014). A queer path might need space and time to develop, perhaps with no final destination in mind; meanwhile, to reconstitute the normative is to move between predefined locations (Ingold 2007), following the “sidewalk embedded with concrete footsteps” (Berlant 2022: 150). And yet, as Berlant reminds us, loosening up and deviating from those footsteps can be an onerous (or indeed unimaginable) task, especially when the environment doesn’t feel ‘good’ or supportive enough to engender a letting go of our attachments to the normative infrastructures and objects which promise to help us cope with the fearsome vastness and uncertainty of life.

Crucially, for our purposes, life, the elliptical present, now takes place in and through a digital media landscape whereby the (bio)production process is one of endless modulation, perpetual slicing-and-dicing; becoming *dividual*. As algorithmically constituted subjects, we are perpetually dissected and segmented, parsed into multiple strands that move at various scales and speeds through datafied terrains (Clough et al. 2015) in ways that mediate who has access to certain possibilities, and who doesn’t, based on value-laden ideas of ‘relevance’ (Cluley & Brown 2014). Our digital falling apart (dividualisation) and reassembly is shaping the very parameters of the ellipsis, as the openings and closings of the contemporary moment are actualized by the performative algorithms organising ‘the social.’ The content and connections—the modes of relational sociality—available to social media subjects are increasingly shaped by the computational dynamics of these platforms.

The censoring and ‘shadowbanning’ of queer, trans, and disabled creators alongside the circulation and amplification of homophobic and transphobic imagery and hate speech is just one set of ways in which the possibility of “connect[ing] the dots differently,” deviating from the “concrete footsteps” is constrained by current digital ecologies and entanglements: “TikTok uses its AutoR algorithm to imagine a social networking platform where trans, queer, disabled, fat, and people of colour

do not exist” (Rauchberg in Pain ed. 2022, 197), such that the convivialities and solidarities that can be virtually realized, and the extent to which we can imagine, or hope for, an *otherwise* is limited. The algorithmic streamlining of potentiality, then, shapes the materialization of the elliptical present, as one in which safe and ‘liveable’ belonging for marginalized communities, or even queer existence, is rendered more or less (im)possible.

Louise Amoore (2020) describes machine learning algorithms as an ‘aperture’—an opening that is simultaneously a closing, or a shutting down of potential pathways. In bringing the affective dynamics of digital mediation to bear on Berlant’s ellipsis, we propose the phrase ‘elliptical aperture’ to recognize the centrality of algorithmic technologies in rendering the forms of relationality that can be realized in the ellipsis. The elliptical aperture is a time/space of algorithmically orchestrated openings, closings and continuously transforming relations; it is a way to both conceptualize and experimentally inhabit the present digitally mediated moment. Given that machine learning algorithms are far from neutral, and are imbued with binary capitalist logic (Eubanks 2017; Noble 2018; Benjamin 2019; Chun 2021), are digital technologies priming us for socially normative ways of being as they manipulate available openings and closings? Or does our falling apart in digital entanglement nonetheless enable hope for an *otherwise*? Questions articulated via ‘either/or’ framings, like this, are rarely of great interest to Berlant, who advocates for staying with ambivalence and ambiguity, the both/and of ordinary affects—the ways, that is, in which holding on to hope for an *otherwise* might also, inevitably, involve holding on to the digital devices and infrastructures that keep us entangled in and subject to corporate and state-oriented algorithmic governance.

This is why, we want to emphasize, Berlant (2022) focuses on “loosening” (rather than abandoning, relinquishing, or destroying) our everyday objects (digital or otherwise): “you can’t simply lose your object if it’s providing a foundational world infrastructure for you” (28). What we can (try to) do, however, is use “the contradictions of the object to reconfigure it,” exploiting “the incoherence of the forces that overdetermine it” (ibid). When objects are reoriented in this way, or when “an ordinary form of life is radically disturbed such that a subject’s or people’s sense of continuity is broken” (the disorienting impact of COVID and terminal illness reverberate here), what can result, Berlant (2022) claims, is “the release of affective enmeshment from its normative attachment habits” (123). Although this “freed energy and attention can be inconvenient, even frightening”, it is nonetheless “available for recomposing the world, causality, and possibilities” (124)—yet only if, that is, we are *receptive* to such possibilities.

Receptivity to affective releases within the ellipsis, however, is now shaped by the algorithmically adjudicated categories of hierarchical difference that mediate the genre through which we approach ‘openness’ *in anticipation*. Worms, traversing through the earth, must *move* in order to make the openings in the soil that enable their *movement*, they “may be moving simultaneously within and outside of the normative world” (Berlant 2022, 21)—akin to world-making, we suggest, from within elliptical aperture. Moving within normative infrastructure in ways that push objects and boundaries towards transformation involves being *receptive* to openness: we need, Berlant (2023) notes in their poem “Port” in *Poisonality*, “to unclench enough to keep the shop open for the thrill of another encounter.” We need, that is, to “take in new things that might kill or cure us” in order to “let things become other things” (461).

A body’s openness to being affected, we want to suggest, depends upon the affective *genre* through which openness is understood—fear, for instance, reads openness as the possibility of danger or pain, whilst hope reads openness as the possibility of desire or joy (Ahmed 2000; 2014; see also Cefai 2023). Berlant (2022), of course, remains deeply attentive to the “material effects of inequality’s persistent force” (4); hope is an ambivalent affect with unequal access, and those with access might be bound “to preserve normative habits of social reproduction” (Berlant, 2011, 21; see also Ahmed 2014) in proximity to those objects of desire or joy that are brought closer with hopefulness. Moreover, the reality of social subordination and algorithmic violence primes some bodies to (not unrealistically) anticipate threat or injury in the openings of the elliptical aperture.

Algorithms are, as we know, powerful gatekeepers, not only shaping the possibility of digital community networks and exposure to “people like us” on social media, but also limiting freedom of movement and access to life-sustaining resources (Aizeki, Mahmoudi & Shupfer eds. 2024; see also Eubanks 2018), as well as (re) enacting the differentially racialized surveillance and policing of certain bodies (Keyes 2018; Benjamin 2019; Amnesty International 2023). Living at the intersections of marginalization thus mediates the affective potentiality that is released in the ellipsis; openness may be obscured, the door only ajar, the path flooded with a sense of fear that circulates and consolidates in gendered, racialized, sexualized, and classed relays and blockages within digital ecologies.

If vulnerability involves openness being read as a site of potential danger, demanding evasive action as the body prepares for flight in anticipation of pain or injury

(Ahmed 2014), is the vulnerable body able “to unclench enough to keep the shop open for the thrill of another encounter ... to let things become other things; to continue to throw [themselves] against what unwelcomes life” (Berlant 2023, 461)? The computational technologies that train our receptivity to openness are clearly not objective decision-makers, such that vulnerability is algorithmically (re)constituted in socially-differentiated and divisive ways. Since “threat has long been shaped by desire arising from the entanglement of capitalism and colonialism” (Abbas 2019 cited in Dixon Roman 2023, 394), the omnipresence of looming hazard or peril that has differentially bled into ordinary life might be turning us away from fearful ‘openings’, nudging us towards objects of love/desire that maintain attachment to normative, exclusionary, and/or extractive ideas of ‘the good life.’ Our entanglement with digital technologies might therefore encourage a certain “hardening” towards one another as we anticipate pain or injury in potential encounters, binding us to what we already know and accelerating “the speed at which we point fingers at each other and say, ‘I know exactly what sort of person you are’” (Drage in Drage & McNerney eds. 2024, 12).

The ‘sort of person’ someone is, in a computational media landscape, however, is always shifting and unknowable as techno-capitalist database marketing relies on the continuous modulation of difference (Zwick & Knott 2009; Darmody & Zwick 2020; Chun 2021). Amidst the ideological and discriminatory operation of algorithms, and the online filter bubbles and echo chambers so central to digital culture, then, there remains a pervasive sense of opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that, while, never static nor definitive, is persistent in shaping our receptivity to the present moment as elliptical aperture as we are trained to pre-emptively feel, respond, and act on the basis of an ‘unknown unknown’.

“I’m training for a feeling that I don’t have yet”

‘Can you feel your receptivity? ... I’m training for a feeling that I don’t have yet’

—Lauren Berlant, *Poisonality* 2023

In *Ritual Aversions*, Berlant gestures to how the recursive dynamics of algorithmic pre-emption and prehension are keeping us in a near-constant state of anticipation, training for feelings that we don’t yet have, but always *could have* as we inhabit the elliptical present. If openness is read as potential danger, the speed

at which difference is reconstituted via computational technologies keeps open the structural possibility that an object of fear might pass us by at any moment. Thus, our expectations and anticipation towards the elliptical present are being continuously (re)trained through each updated version of the object of fear (Bucher 2018). In this way, our *intuition*—our sensory-socio receptivity towards the elliptical present—is shaped by digital technologies that recursively “incite us to pre-emptively act on an ‘unknown unknown’” (Dixon-Roman 2023, 386); to live life (computationally) primed for unending uncertainty. As the poem’s speaker proclaims, “it’s easier for me to love exposed nerves without a purpose since I love being alive” (Berlant 2023, 453). We are interested then, in what version of ‘being alive’ we are algorithmically trained to desire, and how our attachment to this life is keeping us tied to the digital technologies that expose our nerves to constant anticipation.

One way in which our anticipatory receptivity to the openings and closings of elliptical life might be illustrated is through the unequal access to “the right to the city” (Lefebvre 1968), or the right to mobility, notably for queer and trans subjects who often modify how they behave and present in public, avoiding certain locations altogether amid an increase in public violence and hate crime towards LGBTQ+ people (Stonewall 2017; Azzouz & Catterall 2021). Gendered, racialized, sexualized and classed bodies are continually becoming a/under threat, a/at risk in public spaces. Anticipation of danger comes, in part, as we have discussed, from algorithmically amplified media discourse; the prevalence of online hate speech, misogyny, sexism, and politically motivated homophobia, and transphobia shapes how non-normatively gendered and sexualized people affectively experience, or anticipate, encounters with/in public spaces. This anticipation, and thus the possibility of (hope for) a *queer* right to the city, is mediated by the algorithmic dis/ordering of the world that makes the elliptical present appear in certain ways. Whilst Big Tech algorithms defended in the language of responsible ‘content moderation’ create a world in which non-normative bodies are erased, and social media/online news reporting alert us to constantly refreshing transphobic and homophobic political rhetoric and incidents of violence against queer communities, the ‘openness’ of public space is approached *intuitively* with the expectation of a threat that is an ongoing process of algorithmic becoming. Our anticipation of fear is sustained, or perhaps our *receptivity* is *re-trained*, through our attachments to digital media which bring closer the promise of the (always changing and unknowable) object of fear.

Computational technologies, in these ways, shape future becoming-events and objects based on a past, imbued with values, beliefs, and ideologies, such that specific pasts remain ever-present in the imagined future, generating anticipatory affects and actions—we are training for something that might never materialize. Whether the threat, or the good life, comes to be isn't necessarily of concern, given that their status as what *could have been* shapes how we approach the elliptical present *in anticipation*. Since “pre-emption is an operative logic that can never be false,” when we act, or feel, pre-emptively based on an ‘unknown unknown’ we are creating and maintaining a version of the truth based on what could have happened (Dixon-Roman 2023, 387; see also Massumi 2010, 2015). The elliptical aperture, then, is an ever-changing present futurity that we are algorithmically training (and being trained) for—such that uncertainty becomes a primary affective orientation, the body is always prepared/preparing for something unknown to happen (Puar 2023), and our receptivity to this contingency and indeterminacy is shaped by socially differentiated modes of vulnerability.

Meanwhile, digital technologies are also presenting us with a ‘solution’ to this fear, uncertainty, and vulnerability, the promise of a means to induce transformation that might feel possible from within the throes of the custom-built, hyper-relevant bubbles which invite us to anticipate a highly personalized world: the good life. These online spheres might register as a safer place to be, an affective escape from an unwelcoming world. Entangled within such computationally-rendered socialities, we might feel able to cultivate the alt-world imaginary *from within*, as we are brought closer to worlds that feel like they have been specifically crafted by, or at least *for*, us. Of course there is much contradiction and ambivalence in these relations, since such hyper-personalization wouldn't be possible without intensive techno-capitalist surveillance—an immanent tether to normativity (Zwick & Knott 2009; Darmody & Zwick 2020). Nonetheless, we remain bound to the digital in our more-than-humanness, whilst we (genre) flail about trying to find ways to “keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant 2011, 24).

Attending to the ambivalent both/and of algorithmic affect in this way could, we suggest, cultivate more empathic (or perhaps more realistic) understandings of why we stay attached to digital devices, platforms, and infrastructures—encouraging a move beyond the shaming of networked affective attachments (Anderson 2022, 2023), towards an exploration of how social media and AI technologies might be both making the ordinary (into a) crisis, and making it more bearable. As Berlant (2022) so compellingly illustrates, the “inconvenience” of being an imperfect subject

surrounded by imperfect objects forces us to generate alternative forms of getting through existence, creating pervasive cuts and “heterotopian builds” in our digital entanglement, and often in ways that enable continued attachments to life (even and especially a cruelly optimistic one). Digital media clearly manage our (in)attention, modes of anticipation, and understandings of ‘the good life’ via techno-capitalist profit motives aligned with social normativity; yet, reading with Berlant we are inclined to question how our “being wooed by a line of code” (Winterson 2024) is not an entirely passive or involuntary relation. Voluntary and involuntary affects and actions are increasingly entangled as we are cultivating receptivity styles (and/or modes), in and through our algorithmic mediation, which enable us to attend to the unequal price of vulnerability—finding glimpses of utopia from within the folds of the normative worlds, in the promise of happiness in (online) spacing out.

In such conditions, digitally-enabled *dissociation* might be a praxis of survival. Rather than pathologizing digital ‘addiction’ or ‘distraction’ (see, for example, discussion in Paasonen 2021), Berlant instead teaches us to attend to how human-machine relations can shape the management of self-disintegrating intensities, offering relief from a compromised world as we affectively generate (virtual) spaces, habits, and rituals of alternative life alongside the threat, breakdown, and crises of the present. In a world characterized by algorithmically amplified uncertainty where we are always anticipating something unknown, dissociation could be interpreted, Berlant ventures, as a transitional tactic of affective citizenship: an (in)volitional way to avoid being overwhelmed or worn out by the ‘affective surround’ of threat and distress, to keep on living on through shifting our attention to the co-presence of an otherwise.

Amid the interconnected socio-political, economic, technological, and environmental crises of the present, the ethical obligation of the cultural critic is not only, Berlant (2022) argues, to offer “judgement about positions or practices of the world” or “prefigurations of a better good life”; it is also to cultivate transitional terms and genres that “that help alter the hard and soft infrastructures of sociality itself” (25–6). From this perspective, the challenge facing current critical scholars, practitioners, and subjects of digital media is not only (how) to trace the continually changing logics and practices of ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff 2019), ‘discriminating data’ (Chun 2021), or ‘ontopolitical control’ (Massumi 2015), but also (how) to participate in re-making the (im)personal “patterns, habits, norms, and scenes of assemblages and use” that constitute everyday infrastructures (Berlant 2022, 95).

This does not, we want to emphasize, entail taking the identification of affective ambivalence in algorithmic sociality, or the inevitability of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and contingency in human-machine relations, as analytical endpoints. Rather, using, if we can, the reconfigured energies that come from flailing, from falling apart, from dissociating, Berlant (2022) invites us to inhabit the elliptical aperture so as to “figure out how to move better with [our] objects” (171) in ways that might incrementally (re)train our receptivity. With the necessary acknowledgement that “everything proceeds under conditions of probability, friction, accident, and uneven transformation,” our collective task is, they suggest, to pursue how, in “transforming the temporary into the contemporary,” infrastructure can “remediate the world” (22). Remediating our (digital) worlds is, in this view, not such an audacious aim; rather, it is already afoot, percolating in the emergent affective relations, rituals, and receptivities of the present.

Endnotes

1. At the time of her/their death in 2021, Lauren Berlant was the George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago.

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