

STUCK IN THE IMPASSE: CYNICISM AS NEOLIBERAL AFFECT

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Abstract

What if we admitted to feeling cynical? Recent work in affect theory has begun to address the category of what Sianne Ngai terms “ugly” feelings (Ngai 2007, Edelman 2004, Halberstam 2011) and the costs associated with the premium we place on so-called positive modes of thinking and feeling (Berlant 2011, Ahmed 2010, Love 2007), yet cynicism persists in many accounts as the feature of an undesirable political subjectivity. Likewise, in popular and political discourse, cynicism is denounced as the mark of an ineffectual subject who chooses to opt out, rather than reach for supposedly obvious markers of (capitalist) achievement. This dissertation refuses these characterizations, instead considering cynicism as an affect bound up in neoliberal sociopolitical shifts. I argue that cynicism describes a feeling of living under structural conditions that curtail—in ways that are often effaced—the kinds of self-determining subjectivities that have been taken for granted as a feature of Western, liberal democracies and remain foundational to imagined modes of dissent. Exploring this situation in the context of three cultural frames—politics and governance, changing modes of labour in late-capitalist economies, and a structure of feeling premised on the pursuit of happiness—I examine cynical subjectivities in fiction, film, and American political discourse so as to 1) develop an inquiry into affect as developing out of the relation between subject and structure; 2) acknowledge the commonality of a feeling of impasse and dominant cultural narratives that mask this frustration of agency; and 3) consider inertia or passivity as sensible orientations in a cultural moment in which the costs of momentum are becoming increasingly visible and its promised payoffs increasingly eroded.

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Introduction: “We Are Not Cynical!”

If there were ever a time that we needed our cynicism, it is now—when the future that is being marketed to us is so insistently bright.

—Heather Love, “Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence”

On September 30, 2012, Stephen Colbert gave a rare out-of-character interview on *Oprah’s Next Chapter*. As she and Colbert chat on the wrap-around, second-floor balcony of his in-laws’ Charleston mansion, Oprah raises what she calls a common criticism of his show: that it can appear cynical, and, in the context of his audience of “young, impressionable people,” she wonders whether that is desirable. She asks, “Do you worry that you’re creating a generation of cynics?” To which Colbert responds, “I don’t worry that I am; I would hope that I’m not,” going on to both define cynicism (sort of) and explicate his opposition to it (sort of):

I don’t believe people are only interested in themselves and I wouldn’t want to encourage that and I wouldn’t want to encourage no political engagement, because young people who purport to be wise to the ways of the world are mostly just cynical. But cynicism is not wisdom. Cynicism masquerades as wisdom but cynicism is a self-imposed blindness. *You put the blinders on yourself to protect yourself from a world you think might hurt you or disappoint you. Be a fool. Believe things will be good. Better to be hurt.* And so, I would hate to think that people got cynical. (emphasis added)

Oprah concurs nodding sagely as she tells Colbert that was “nicely said” and the show cuts to commercial, Colbert’s definition and critique standing as the common sense response to the low-lobbed question. *Of course* we don’t want people, particularly young people, to be cynical.

The fear that young people could be becoming cynical gained traction in 2013—though Colbert was not implicated—when the Harvard Institute of Politics published its spring survey reporting findings that suggest young voters are becoming increasingly disenchanted with American politics. In his conclusion to the Executive Summary, Director of Polling for the survey John Della Volpe writes,

Our research indicates that the hyperpartisanship and gridlock and that has befallen Washington, DC is having a traumatic effect not just on our nation’s status at home and abroad, but on the political health of tens of millions of once (and hopefully future) idealistic young people. At no time since President Obama was elected in 2008 have we reported less trust, more cynicism and more partisanship among our nation’s youngest voters. [...] We have been warned. (online)

Here cynicism is tocsin, a warning we must heed lest we suffer the effect of a generation irreparably traumatized and locked in cynicism, bound by a partisanship that will eventually enervate the political system. Youth demands idealism; we hope only because our youth can hope. It follows then, that the trauma inflicted on national political health is a loss of hope, a faltering of idealism. *Of course* we cannot have this. America must be driven by idealistic youth.

In her *New York Times* article reporting on the Harvard study, Sheryl Gay Stolberg highlights one of the survey’s key themes: the optimism of young voters—which played a key role in buoying Barack Obama to the Whitehouse—has deflated in the wake of Obama’s performance, which Andy Welsh, one of Stolberg’s representative young voter interviewees, describes as “a real bummer” (NYT online). The cynicism of younger voters here is posed in an inverse relation to their enthusiastic bolstering of the “Hope” campaign just a few years prior; cynicism spreads as the hope bubble bursts in

the reality of a presidency mired in the same partisanship the Institute of Politics finds growing among young voters.

In fact, one of the loudest voices defending against the threat of cynicism in America has been Barack Obama's—he whose lacklustre performance is cited or implied as one of the points of origin for the current boom in antipathy. Obama often invokes cynicism in his public addresses; beginning with the address he gave in New Hampshire that many consider to have sealed his later victory in the Democratic primary. In that speech, cynicism is posed against what would become his core slogan, “Yes, We Can.” Though its antithesis is largely unspoken, presumably cynicism threatens by suggesting that, perhaps, *No, We Can't*.

The opposition between hope and cynicism continues to fuel Obama's rhetoric. In his victory speech after his re-election on November 6, 2012, he openly defied cynics, beginning his address by speaking of how the American spirit—which has presumably been reinvigorated by his campaign volunteers and supporters—continues to lift the country from “the depths of despair to the great heights of hope.” In the middle of the speech he challenges “the cynics who tell us that politics is nothing more than a contest of egos or the domain of special interests” to account for the determination, pride, and patriotism of his supporters. Finally, all of this rhetoric draws to a head in the conclusion of the speech, in which he directly addresses what he sees as the false image of American cynicism. It is worth quoting Obama at length to make palpable the inspirational goose bumps that are meant to both spur the audience to cheering and deflate the threatening cynicism that he dismisses here as misguided and mistaken:

And tonight, despite all the hardship we've been through, despite all the frustrations of Washington, I've never been more hopeful about our future. I have never been more hopeful about America. And I ask you to sustain that hope. I'm not talking about blind optimism, the kind of hope that just ignores the enormity of the tasks ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. I'm not talking about the wishful idealism that allows us to just sit on the sidelines or shirk from a fight. I have always believed that hope is that stubborn thing inside us that insists, *despite all the evidence to the contrary*, that something better awaits us so long as we have the courage to keep reaching, to keep working, to keep fighting. America, I believe we can build on the progress we've made and continue to fight for new jobs and new opportunity and new security for the middle class. I believe we can keep the promise of our founders, the idea that if you're willing to work hard, it doesn't matter who you are or where you come from or what you look like or where you love. It doesn't matter whether you're black or white or Hispanic or Asian or Native American or young or old or rich or poor, able, disabled, gay or straight, you can make it here in America if you're willing to try. *I believe we can seize this future together because we are not as divided as our politics suggests. We're not as cynical as the pundits believe.* We are greater than the sum of our individual ambitions, and we remain more than a collection of red states and blue states. We are and forever will be the United States of America. (emphasis added)

In this speech and elsewhere, Obama invokes cynicism as the counter-force that threatens the hope and promise of the American Dream; we, the people, must defy them, the cynics. “*We are not cynical*,” Obama insists, aligning himself with an undefined American commons and standing in as synecdoche of a vast reservoir of possibility contained within the mass he addresses not only on the lawn in Chicago, but also throughout the nation, throughout the world, as millions tune in to see him claim a second victory. Yes, *of course* we can. And yet, if young voters are feeling increasingly cynical, and if this cynicism stems in part from the vast gulf left unfilled by the reality of the Hope presidency, then what does it mean to have the disappointing president tell you that you must not feel cynical; that you must fight those feelings of cynicism that his own presidency has, in part, forged? If Barack Obama, as President of the United States,

cannot achieve the plan of action he laid out as the foundation for Hope in his campaign, then what does that suggest about the chances of any young person to achieve his or her own hopes and dreams?

My project works to understand cynicism not in the meaning it is assumed to have by Colbert or Obama, but instead in terms of how it is *felt*, and particularly as it is experienced by those whose access to “hope” as understood in terms of “doing something” is truncated. Popular assumptions about what cynicism means are important to its conceptualization in that they participate in rendering particular modes of subjectivity—particular ways of feeling—desirable (and undesirable). However, they fail to account for the massive cultural, economic, and political shifts that have undermined the model of hope Obama continues to call young people to work towards. Articulating cynicism as it is felt by today’s young adults, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks quotes from an essay submitted to him by Victoria Buhler, a senior in a course he taught at the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs at Yale University in 2013:

Buhler argues that the group she calls Cynic Kids “don’t like the system—however, they are wary of other alternatives as well as dismissive of their ability to actually achieve the desired modifications. As such, the generation is very conservative in its appetite for change. Broadly speaking, Cynic Kids distrust the link between action and result.”

Buhler’s cynicism bears a relation to that decried by Obama and Colbert. In fact, the sentiments she seeks to articulate sound very much like: *No, We Can’t*. The feeling she argues for is precisely the one Obama seeks to dismiss; however her effort to articulate this feeling suggests that she sees in it more than simply a bad mode of subjectivity. For many young people in America today, trying your hardest is no longer seems a logical

guarantor of success, if it ever was. And yet, the tenacity and prevalence of the myth—as orated by Obama and repeated throughout cultural forms that celebrate the triumph of those who persevere in the face of long odds—obscures the impossibility of the fantasy for many who exist in classed, racialized, gendered, or other positions of disempowerment. Even if we were to accept that trying one’s hardest can predict success, then this is only true for some people some of the time: for example, someone like Colbert has family connections, educational capital, and a socio-cultural position as a white male that gain him proximity to the kinds of “success” promised by cultural narratives like the American Dream, and yet his perception of his own struggle—through the obscure ranks of the would-be stand-up comedian, for instance—can lead him to believe that his success has come solely through a struggle eventually “paid off.”

But these success stories are far from universally accessible. For many, familiar narratives of self-actualization through the acquisition of capital (whether financial, cultural, or both) and influence have eroded, become blocked, or were never opened in the first place. Trying one’s best, leveraging one’s agency is not necessarily a commonsense path to the positive outcomes hope promises, even if you went to Yale (and were quoted by your professor in the *New York Times*). In her 2007 article “Postfeminist Media Culture,” Rosalind Gill points out that women manage to carve out a demand for equality in a capitalist patriarchy precisely as it begins to shift towards neoliberalism—an ideology that she argues resonates powerfully with the concurrent transformations in feminism that have been classified as postfeminist (i.e. shifts towards femininity as a bodily property to be cultivated (and beautified), sexual subjectivity, self-

surveillance, and individualism as a mode of empowerment). She argues that women, to a greater extent than men, are required to consider their lives as ongoing projects in self-regulation and improvement, and, moreover, must act as though these self-regulating gestures are “freely chosen” (164). She concludes with a provocative question: “Could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?” (164). In this context, Buhler’s cynicism sounds as the voice of a woman facing a world in which the success towards which one is told one must drive oneself is so circumscribed by gendered caveats as to feel like no kind of achievement at all.

Of course, not everyone of her generation agrees with Buhler. Jonathan Yip, a Harvard senior, responded to Buhler’s sentiments by decrying her cynicism as narcissistic and ignorant of the evidence presented by “a world that has never been better”:

We—they—are cynical because they want to be. They choose to overlook the hope, optimism, and obligation that should distinguish millennials. Their cynicism masks an underlying solipsism. They exhibit the same self-centeredness that defines the dyspeptic, “voice of our generation” TV show *Girls*. [...] Much of the world is still recovering from recession, but for people across the globe, there is immense hope. It is apparently not a great time to be a Yale senior, but there has never been a better time in history to be a human being. So why are we Cynic Kids again?” (Yip online *Harvard Review*)

Yip’s response to cynicism expressed as a feeling of frustrated agency (as it is by Buhler) is to counter it not with an argument that outlines the opportunities that are available to her in particular (or to Yip himself either), but with a series of facts that include global economic progress, the near-reality of a cure for HIV/AIDS, and self-driving cars (*Review* online). In other words, Yip argues, much like Obama, for hope in the propulsion of the status quo, which in the United States means hope in the form of the market.

Such a hope supports David Harvey’s assertion that neoliberalism—which he defines as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (*Brief 2*)—has simply become common-sense (2). In fact, cynicism is bound up in neoliberal capitalism—its threat a threat to the common sense assumption that neoliberal modes of capital-acquisition and social-formation are desirable, hopeful, and promising. When neoliberalism becomes common sense, its interests are made to seem our best interests—as we can see in Yip’s argument against Buhler: that she is simply ignoring the immense social goods that are clearly visible and available to “human beings” at this moment in history. But, what if Buhler is expressing dissatisfaction with the range of opportunities available to her generation in particular despite all of the supposed markers of progress Yip points to? What if her cynicism points precisely to the unraveling of the foundational—and thus unquestioned—status of the American narrative of meritocracy? What if cynicism’s alarm bells sounds not for the break down of idealism among today’s youth, but to alert us to a crisis subtending the neoliberal modes in which labour and life are increasingly framed?

In his 2010 book *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, Harvey summarizes neoliberalism’s central crisis—the crisis at the root of all the current, related crises—as follows,

Compound growth for ever [sic] is not possible and the troubles that have beset the world these last thirty years signal that a limit is looming to continuous capital accumulation that cannot be transcended except by creating fictions that cannot last. Add to this the fact that so many people in the world live in conditions of

abject poverty, that environmental degradations are spiralling out of control, that human dignities are everywhere being offended even as the rich are piling up more and more wealth under their command, and the levers of political, institutional, judicial, military and media power are under such tight but dogmatic control as to be incapable of doing much more than perpetuating the status quo. (227-28)

Thus, much as Colbert would like to dismiss the anxieties of the young as unwise, his suggestion that young people fear the world might hurt them is in many ways *corroborated* by the conditions that frame the world they have inherited.¹ In fact, the crises Harvey attributes to neoliberalism have had a particularly acute effect on youth in the form of: rising unemployment rates,² increasing student debt loads for those who attend college,³ and years of interning, working contracts and other forms of marginal employment.⁴

Harvey suggests that the only way in which neoliberal capital can continue in the face of the crises it is currently wreaking is through the creation of “fictions that cannot last” (228). Colbert’s suggestion, then, that his potentially cynical young viewers should “believe things will be good” is not merely thin, but a misrepresentation that undercuts

¹ In keeping with the periodization followed by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in their book *The New*

² In 2010, the United Nations Statistics Division reported unemployment rates among youth aged 15-24 as follows: 20.8% in the United States; 17.1% in Canada; 10.4% in Germany; 21.3% in the United Kingdom; 22.2% in France. <<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mdg/SeriesDetail.aspx?srid=597>>

³ In 2012, The Center for American Progress reported that student debt in that country exceeded \$1 trillion. <<http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/higher-education/report/2012/10/25/42905/the-student-debt-crisis/>> The Canadian Federation of Students reports that national debt in Canada exceeds \$15 billion.

⁴ In November 2013, *The Atlantic* published an article entitled “How Washington Abandoned America’s Unpaid Interns” that estimates as many as 2 million Americans work in unpaid internships each year (the article takes this estimate from Ross Perlin’s estimate in *Intern Nation*, in which he discusses the lack of regulation and oversight that makes a definite number elusive). In July 2013, CBC reported estimates that anywhere from 100,000 to 300,000 Canadians are working in unpaid internships. As in the United States, exact figures are not known because there is no body providing oversight to the industry and regulations are piecemeal. <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/unpaid-internships-exploit-vulnerable-gAeneration-1.1332839>>

the very pressing and real issues that condition their lives as merely the concern of unwise youth. More problematically, Colbert's assessment of the situation is not necessarily a conscious misrepresentation, but, rather participates in a cultural fiction he believes to be true, much as Obama believes to be true the narrative of stick-to-it-ive-ness, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. However, when one is purportedly already living one's future—as are the young college graduates interviewed in Stolberg's article—the directive to have faith—to believe *it will get better*—leaves little to grasp onto in the present, save for an infantilizing diminishment that denies one's feelings of insecurity or failure as a wrongful and, importantly, wilful, orientation. The call Colbert makes to instead be a fool in the face of threatened disappointment or pain is an odd one, its implication being that clownishness, or carnivalesque riotousness, is the best way by which to defy the threat of pain. Perhaps Colbert sees his own antics as the solution for agency when posed against the cynicism he tries to refuse, but the connection between humour and cure is ambiguous at best: clowns in hospitals arguably terrify as much as cure. Besides, Colbert's privileging of his own chosen response to a confused, corrupt, and damaging political system ignores his own privilege in taking up that position in the first place. The directive to “simply believe things will be good” rings hollow when self-righteously issued from a Colonial manor house by two of the richest people in America.

Unlike Colbert's easy dismissal, Della Volpe sees the cynicism of young people as a warning. Moreover, he connects their cynicism to the failings of Washington, which are “having a traumatic effect on the political health of tens of millions of once (and hopefully future) idealistic young people,” suggesting that cynicism is symptomatic of a

larger, systemic crisis. However, Della Volpe connects cynicism to partisanship and gridlock, suggesting that if the political system could be remedied to become more congenial and solution-oriented, this might re-engage voters in their nation's success. On the other hand, Harvey's understanding of the current crises of capitalism views the current political system as merely reproductive of the neoliberal status quo. As such, Della Volpe's solution—which would be to revive the idealism of youth—remains ungrounded in the context of Harvey's crisis.

Since his election, and particularly since his re-election, Obama's rhetoric of hope has shifted focus from his own potential to that of the youth who, at least in generational terms, will succeed him.⁵ The hope of the Hope Campaign has been reallocated, even though his presidency has not yet concluded. Obama's reassertion of narratives of individual success, of hard work paying dividends, highlights the crux of the neoliberal fantasy without addressing the way in which this fantasy has failed to play out for Americans, middle class or otherwise. While the audience applauds his recapitulation of the familiar American Dream—"you can make it here in America if you're willing to try"—it is difficult to understand such platitudes in any way other than as an attempt to disavow the current crisis by shoring up a collective fantasy that, however comfortable,

⁵ For instance, in his commencement address at Ohio State University, President Obama said, "So you've been tested and you've been tempered by events that your parents and I never imagined we'd see when we sat where you sit. And yet, despite all this, or perhaps because of it, yours has become a generation possessed with that most American of ideas—that people who love their country can change it for the better. For all the turmoil, for all the times you've been let down, or frustrated at the hand that you've been dealt, what I have seen—what we have witnessed from your generation—is that perennial, quintessentially, American value of optimism; altruism; empathy; tolerance; a sense of community; a sense of service—all of which makes me optimistic for our future." And later in that same speech, "So you can't give up your passion if things don't work right away. You can't lose heart, or grow cynical if there are twists and turns on your journey. The cynics may be the loudest voices—but I promise you, they will accomplish the least." See the complete address and a transcript here: <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/05/06/transcript-obamas-commencement-speech-at-ohio-state/>

cannot last (Harvey 228). In Obama's rhetoric, hope is broadly attached, not only to a functioning political system, but also to the vitality of the collective mythology of the American Dream, a dream whose fraying is precisely the crisis his presidency was meant to address. Conversely, cynicism is associated with the dissolution of the dream, the dissolution of the collective mythology that shores up American notions of success and longevity. It is not Obama who has disappointed America, but the cynicism of America that has disappointed Obama (and remains the problem to be solved by the nation's youth). Cynicism is thus a state of being or feeling that is as obviously undesirable as neoliberal American capitalism is assumed to be common sense. Moreover, the protection against cynicism becomes the purview of the individual, who must police her affective frames in order to maintain the nation.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Heather Love (in the epigraph that opened this introduction) and Victoria Buhler stand more or less alone in suggesting that there may be something worth holding onto in cynicism, if only as an antidote to the pervasiveness of untenable fictions of flourishing. And yet, I seek to join these women in that lonely place.

Before I begin to outline the basis of the project itself, I want to say a few more words about the lonely place it occupies. While Obama and the figures that open this project speak to a distinctly American milieu—and thus suggest a project with distinctly American interests—I approach cynicism as an affect that signifies beyond those borders, though it is particularly visible up against the prominent public rhetoric of hope that girds the American myth of self-creation. The notion of the “American Dream” is compelling

not only to Americans. For instance, activist and writer Arundhati Roy noted in a November 17, 2011 column in *The Guardian* that wars around the world have been waged in the name of protecting “the American way of life” in all manner of non-American nations. America is held up as economic and cultural model as countries such as her example of India move towards neoliberalizing economic and social policy, entrenching and increasing divisions between rich and poor. Roy thus celebrates the Occupy movement with her audience for introducing “a new political language into the heart of empire” (Roy online), a language that circulates and resonates with struggles being waged by the disempowered all over the world. She goes on, “Few of us dreamed that we would see you, the people of the United States on our side, trying to do this in the heart of Empire. I don’t know how to communicate the enormity of what this means” (Roy online). As neoliberal dreams spread from America, so should a critique of the social and, in the interests of this project, affective costs attached to these fantasies.

Against this backdrop of a spectral cynicism haunting the youth of a neoliberalizing world, this project begins with three wagers: the first is to suspend the judgment that cynicism is an undesirable affect, even if it might feel bad to be cynical. In this mode of suspension, I want to begin to ask not only *what makes cynicism bad* but also how *the idea* of cynicism participates in making some ways of being or feeling seem bad while positioning others as unquestionably desirable.⁶ If Sara Ahmed’s book *Promise of Happiness* “explores the everyday habits of happiness and considers how such habits

⁶ In this, my project takes up the model offered by Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), which begins as follows: “This book proceeds by suspending the belief that happiness is a good thing. In this mode of suspension, we can consider not only what makes happiness good but how happiness *participates* in making things good” (*Promise* 13, emphasis in original).

involve ways of thinking about the world that shape how the world coheres” (15), then this project begins to think about how our everyday talk about cynicism likewise functions to shape a particular worldly coherence. In particular, I consider the ways in which the *feeling of* cynicism marks out a feeling of subjective incoherence that is too easily disavowed through the quick dismissal of cynicism in rhetoric like Obama or Colbert’s that immediately assumes cynicism to be undesirable. In other words, I argue first that much public talk *about* cynicism—as used in Obama’s speeches for instance—participates in perpetuating particular ways of thinking about subjects as active or inactive, engaged or disengaged, hopeful or despairing, that do not necessarily pay attention to the structural realities that play a role—in many cases a determining role—in shaping these outcomes. Secondly, I argue that the *feeling of* cynicism is not the same as the cynicism described with derision and fear in public discourse, though it is often related to those scenes. Rather, I suggest that feeling cynical in our time registers the frustration of agency under neoliberalism—even if agency is limited to the sense of market transactions, which begin to dwindle at the crisis point of neoliberalism (Harvey *Enigma* 5, 116-18). Vitality, then, cynicism is not the absence of hope but the situation of hope’s impossibility, at least in terms of the frames in which hope is offered: cynicism is the scene or mood in which certain hopes are recognized as being implausible.

Happiness, Ahmed argues, is what we are promised in the form of the “good life.” Lauren Berlant tracks the tenacity of that promise in her examination of “cruel optimism,” or an attachment to fantasy that proceeds in spite of its implausibility. Though Berlant’s project ultimately leaves cynicism unexplored, she lists it as one of a number of affects that can

erupt as neoliberalism's promise begins to falter (2). I argue that cynicism registers the feeling of the failure of that promise for some, perhaps many, of us; the recognition that the hope on offer is often unattainable, and can perhaps even be damaging. In this, I position cynicism as an affect that complements, or occurs in tandem with, rather than in opposition to Berlant's cruel optimism⁷—an affect that recognizes and registers the cruelty of a world in which agency is often severely circumscribed by the narrow frames of the persistent fantasies that ultimately function to shore up a patriarchal mode of neoliberal capitalism. Thirdly, I argue that the positioning of cynicism in public discourse and consciousness as a chosen stance of individual apathy short-circuits its structural embeddedness. In this context, to claim cynicism, in spite of, or perhaps because of, its negativity can be seen as an oppositional gesture, but one that, rather than leveraging momentum, calls attention to the failure of momentum. Cynicism is a necessary affect, but one that always needs to be repressed and vilified in order to maintain a fantasy of self-motivated success.

The second wager with which I begin this project is to take up the scene of *inertia*, to probe its limp outlines for meaning, and to look for a politics in this space—a politics that exists outside of linear action, in a kind of passivity usually regarded as ineffectual. Importantly, inertia isn't exactly immobilized, but rather registers a sort of movement or drift that figures in opposition to the straightforward propulsion implied in models of *driven* success such as that Obama promotes in his commencement addresses.

⁷ Berlant writes, "But optimism might not *feel* optimistic. Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment, it might feel like anything, including nothing: dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity, the whole gamut from the sly neutrality of browsing the aisles to excitement at the prospect of "the change that's gonna come." Or, the change that is not going to come..." (2).

In this, I pursue a tack to which I was first directed by Jeremy Gilbert, who in *Anticapitalism and Culture* calls attention to the limits of an activist politics premised on the notion that political change follows from opening people's eyes to the ills they cannot see (206). He considers the possibility—as have a number of theorists (*see* Hoggett 2001, Žižek 1989)—that many people already acknowledge socio-cultural ills and thus the larger political problem is the fact that we carry on according the status quo despite that knowledge. Both capitalism and its opposition rely on straightforward narratives that move rationally towards some perceived end: capitalism towards profit and its opposition beginning from a moment of unmasking moving towards resolution (if not revolution). The current cultural moment, instead, challenges these notions of momentum with a scene of dithering, in which profit propels towards unlivable ends and revelation repeats only what we already know. While our understandings of activism and opposition cannot account for inertia, I argue for this movement of drift as a necessary break with the dynamisms driving both neoliberal capitalism and its opposition. Turning, for instance, to the Occupy movement as a moment of collectively that overtly resisted this translation into ends by refusing to declare the solutions it sought; as a movement that found in inertia a new and thus misunderstood stance in which to locate opposition.

This notion of inertia dovetails with Lauren Berlant's characterization of the current moment in terms of a genre of unfolding time, rather than a singular state of being. The present moment, she argues, can be understood in terms of the waning of genre (6). If genre suggests the experience of watching something unfold according to a known pattern or narrative, then, as the future becomes destabilized through the erosion

of public safety nets, mortgage crises, unemployment, etc., the present moment is characterized by impasse: “a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward” (4). For Berlant, this is the genre of emergence in which one lives with both a sense of anticipation and confusion—uncertain precisely what might emerge and the effects it will have for one’s life. The subject of the impasse seeks to make sense, collects clues, but cannot necessarily make their way, thus, *impassivity* manifests as a “style of composure” in a “gestural economy” (5)—an emotionlessness that speaks to the impossibility of an emotional congruence between self and structure, between present and future. By invoking impassivity and the space of the impasse, Berlant looks to the attachments underlying even a seeming state of affective vacancy. However, her interest in *Cruel Optimism* is largely to describe the attachments and forces that remain propulsive, even in the impasse. In her central image of the cruelly optimistic subject—that of the dog-paddler running laps against slick, unbroken walls—the impasse remains a space of action, if futile action—and this is inherent as well to her description of cruel optimism as a *force* (2). If impassivity is a coldness, an expressionlessness, her descriptions capture the way in which it also a determined coldness, a tenacity that continues swimming even in the absence of a life preserver.

My interest in considering cynicism, then, is to consider the passivity of the impasse. One way of responding to the genre of impasse is to remain determinedly committed to the promise held out by a failing structure, to remain committed to swimming, no matter the personal cost. In another moment, though, one cannot possibly swim any more; one reaches the limits of what one can endure. Cynicism, I argue, is the

affective space in which impassivity bleeds into passivity; the experiential space in which the possibility of action wanes into drift. If cruel optimism sustains a force that maintains the neoliberal promise, then cynicism collapses into an inertia that itself responds to the subjective cruelty that optimism entails; an inertia that pays attention to the drowned, rather than a force that tries vainly to propel one towards the rapidly eroding island of the saved. The cynic is disliked not only for her emotional vacancy, but also for her refusal to do anything about that which provokes her disdain—her refusal to reassert the promise. However, in doing so, she also raises action as a question: is action desirable, or can action itself become costly and, if so, who will pay (or is already paying) the cost?

The third wager my project makes is to pursue a tendency towards generalization, rather than specification, and follows from the first two, in a way, though perhaps more specifically marking its territory as under the auspices of cultural studies.⁸ If cynicism is used as a blanket term, whether in headlines or political speeches,⁹ then my interest lies in gauging the traction it has as both a descriptor of the public, and as I argue, and what Ann Cvetkovich has taught me to call, a public feeling. Berlant describes her own interest in generalization in terms of the delamination of the singular from a personal story or local history as it begins to circulate as evidence of something shared more widely (12). Her methodology in *Cruel Optimism* and elsewhere is, in part, to track the emergence and resonance of what seem like singular ideas, stories, or feelings across scenes and lives as

⁸ Simon During describes the history of cultural studies as concerned with describing both the specificity of minority experiences (e.g. the British working class) and the generality of structural conditions forms of power (e.g. ideology) in the Introduction to *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 3rd Edition (2007).

⁹ One of my research methods in this project has been to monitor Google news for headlines, news articles, and blogs mentioning “cynicism,” “cynic,” or “cynical.” All three terms appeared in various news sources up to hundreds of times daily.

a means of better understanding the emerging genre of the present (12). In this, Berlant offers a coming together of what have sometimes seemed distinct strands in the history of cultural studies—which Simon During characterizes in terms of an ongoing, sometimes tense, conversation between subjective specificity and structural determination (see his Introduction to *The Cultural Studies Reader* 3rd Ed.).

Of course, the tendency towards generalization risks homogenizing experience. Like Berlant, I recognize that “the differences matter,” but, also like her, I would continue that sentence “as do the continuities” (9). One of the tasks of cultural studies is to distil and describe the implications of what is in many situations an increasingly shared global culture, particularly economically under the terms of neoliberal capitalism. My project wagers in adopting the frame of capitalism as a generalized experience, though its effects are variable based on factors like race and class, and specifically, in tracking an emerging neoliberal structure of feeling that is, in part, *American*, but in another sense bleeds out of that grand-scale collective consciousness along with prime-time television, shared wars on terror, and the weave of the international stock market, to name only a few sites of affective continuity across the globe with significant bases in the United States. The archive here explored takes up, for the most part, mass cultural texts which are themselves created on the assumption of generality: a mass market audience whose experience, while nowhere unified, is at least shared enough to constitute a common language. One important task in cultural studies is to linger on the exceptions to these purportedly universal experiences; however, another task remains the investigation of the mass itself, particularly in terms of the affects of adjustments we are promised and those

that we are collectively encouraged to disavow. While my project seeks out a contemporary structure of feeling operative under neoliberal capitalism, I do not assume that we all feel structures in the same way. Even in this introduction, I draw attention to the liminal lives that are more easily labelled cynical, and within this, the way in which some people feel cynical and others are quick to deny that feeling's validity. At the same time, while capitalism—even its neoliberal iteration—is nowhere a unified thing, there is something shared in an experience of it and the archive that makes up this project in some sense tries to understand the continuities of that experience across a range of cultural texts circulating with various emphasis in the cultural markets of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and some of Western Europe.

The notion of capitalism underwriting my archive varies—from its industrial iterations magnified by Chaplin's *Modern Times* to its apocalyptic mirroring in the fictionalized theme parks of Karen Russell's *Swamplandia!*; from the interests implicated in the machine of politics in *Ides of March* to the organless body of telemarketing in contemporary Berlin in *Eine Flexible Frau*—and my method is to focus on the “patterns of adjustment” made possible or impossible by these various incarnations (Berlant 5). Specifically, I look to these various texts to trace the genealogy of cynicism as it grows up alongside capitalism, becoming more explicit as it stretches and shrinks into a neoliberal form. My intention in this project is to present the general and particular in a different configuration—to understand culture not through either one lens or the other—subject or structure—but instead to see it as the point of overlap between subject and

structure, much in the way Foucault describes discourse as the mediation between individual and structure of power.

My methodology in this project also borrows from an approach foundational to cultural studies: that of Raymond Williams' *Keywords*.¹⁰ In his introduction to the book, Williams describes a “general vocabulary” that includes “strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage” (14). “Significantly,” he argues, this “is the vocabulary we share with others, often imperfectly, when we wish to discuss many of the central processes of our common life” (14). Like Williams I began this project as I began this introduction: interested in the general usage of the word cynicism to describe (or denigrate) a particular kind of subjectivity in popular discourse (14).¹¹ Williams differentiates his keywords from those words with more straightforward definitions by arguing that keywords, while they are defined in dictionaries, also carry value and ideological judgments (17); moreover, he describes the social and intellectual issues raised by keywords as necessarily extending beyond the analysis of the word itself, but nonetheless inexplicable, illegible, or even invisible without a consciousness “of the words as elements of the problems” (16). Likewise, my project is interested in the participation of the term cynicism in perpetuating a certain dominant view of neoliberal subjectivity—for instance, blaming the individual for their lack of “success” in a capitalist system—while at the same time articulating the feeling of that subject position.

¹⁰ To claim a methodology in cultural studies itself feels like a wager.

¹¹ Williams writes of “culture” that “it was the significance of its general and variable usage that had first attracted my attention” (14).

More recently Cvetkovich has taken up the keyword approach through the nuanced lens of affect, asking not only how we describe our common life or experience, but also how we *feel together*, how affects become public, and particularly, how the becoming public of affect does not necessarily align with the public talk around that same feeling, as is the case in terms of the feeling of depression and the public discourse around depression, which often veers towards medicalization (see her Introduction to *Depression*). In my project, cultural studies' emphasis on discourse runs up against a more recent disciplinary emphasis on affect entering cultural studies from queer and feminist theory, predominantly. Berlant suggests that, "the present is perceived, first, affectively" (Berlant 4), thus, a project which seeks to understand the emerging genre of the present under the crisis of neoliberalism must pay attention to both the affective frames of that present and the way in which these are woven into discourse about the present (in ways that both highlight and obscure the implication of subject and structure).

Though more often seen as the absence of feeling, I argue for cynicism as an affective state, in this taking up Sianne Ngai's insistence that we pay attention to "ugly" feelings, in the case of cynicism, feelings of waning, flagging, or giving in. Such feelings share a resemblance to those modes Lee Edelman seeks to value for their "resistance to the viability of the social" (3). While Obama, Colbert and Della Volpe are fearful of cynicism for its disassociation from hope, it is precisely this aspect of the feeling that renders its relevance in Edelman's understanding. Like the queer modes Edelman describes, cynicism "far from partaking of this narrative movement towards a viable political future, far from perpetuating the fantasy of meaning's eventual realization,"

instead “comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity” (4). Obama, Colbert, and Yip deride cynicism, but underlying its affect is a challenge to the foundational myth of American dominance, and, as my project will argue, to the particularly gendered frames that support the myth of dominance. Cynicism registers the way in which the success promised by neoliberalism is premised precisely on the frustration of agency for some of us—to acknowledge its validity as an affective state, then, is to engage with this challenge to neoliberal capitalism. It is also to look closely at how capitalism feels (Cvetkovich 5). To pay attention to cynicism is to pay attention to another “style of managing simultaneous, incoherent narratives of what’s going on and what seems possible and blocked in personal/collective life” (Berlant 4).

As in Berlant’s approach to affect in *Cruel Optimism*, Cvetkovich argues for the necessity of understanding affect in concert with capitalism because ways of feeling function in contemporary society as “forms of biopower” that “produce death and life not only by targeting populations for overt destruction, whether through incarceration, war, or poverty, but also more insidiously by making people feel small, worthless, hopeless” (13). This “less visible form of violence... takes the form of minds and lives gradually shrinking into despair and hopelessness” (13). In arguing for her project in rethinking depression, Cvetkovich writes that, “new conceptual categories and new modes of description are necessary to capture these feelings” (13). Cynicism, like depression, demands that we reconceptualise its affective resonance. It demands that we consider why and when some of us are made to feel worthless, small and hopeless, even if we are lucky enough to have achieved the sort of rarefied educational spheres that seem

predictive of “success.” It demands that we consider the cynical as “embodied social subjects” (De Laurentis 370)—or as embedded “in significant socio-cultural divisions and representations” (370). If Deleuzian approaches see “affect as force, intensity, or the capacity to move and be moved” (Cvetkovich 4), then we need also to consider both how certain modes of feeling register states of inertia and how certain ways of talking about affect—as desirable (hope) and undesirable (cynicism)—move us towards immobility and impasse precisely through the disavowal of stuckness. Stuckness is vital to understanding the current moment as a moment of impasse; a moment in which many of us feel stuck, despite (or perhaps because of) prevalent narratives of opportunity and hope. Like Cvetkovich, I favour the discussion of *feeling* in this regard because of its imprecision and its ability to retain “the ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences” (4). As Cvetkovich argues, feeling has a “vernacular quality” that calls for exploration through “experience and popular usage” (4). The impasse felt in cynicism—the frustration of agency—takes place at the level of the everyday, rather than that of the grand-scale gestures Yip points to as indicative of global promise.

It is in this space of the everyday that this project moves—caught up between the experience of culture and its systems and structures and our popular usage of terms to represent and misrepresent that same experience. Ultimately, I seek to understand the way in which agency is increasingly circumscribed—both by structural conditions, but also by our way of speaking about those conditions and the places, attitudes, and orientations to which we continue to ascribe hope and utopian longings. In exploring

these questions, I move through three chapters. The first chapter, “Orienting Cynicism within Politics,” considers the place of cynicism in the discourse around and representation of electoral politics using the film *Ides of March* as an example and building against the framework of the theoretical debate that has sought to make sense of around cynicism. The second chapter, “Falling Men and Women,” traces the emergence of cynicism in its contemporary meaning alongside representations of the development of industrialized capitalism—using the Chaplin’s *Modern Times*—and later neoliberal forms of capital—using Tatjana Turanskyj’s *Eine Flexible Frau (The Drifter)*. In the last chapter, “The Crisis of Happiness and a Cynical Response,” I take up the binary between hope and cynicism directly using Karen Russell’s novel *Swamplandia!*, considering the outcomes that come from a too-rigorous adherence to narratives of flourishing and avoidance of cynical spectres. The conclusion to the project, “Plausible Expectations of Hope,” considers more explicitly the gendering of the cynicism/hope binary in contemporary culture, suggesting that cynicism’s incongruence with narratives of feminine docility, resilience, and malleability draws attention to the way in which a patriarchal binary continues to underpin our assumptions of viable approaches to politics and collectivity.

Chapter 1: Orienting Cynicism within Politics

Cynicism is one of the categories in which modern unhappy consciousness looks itself in the eyes. We have the cynical zeitgeist and that specific taste of a fragmented, overcomplicated, demoralizing world situation in our bones, our nerves, our eyes, and in the corners of our mouths.

—Peter Sloterdijk *Critique of Cynical Reason* (140)

Bill Keller, the executive editor of the *New York Times*, was recently quoted as saying, “I think if you’re a regular viewer of Fox News, you’re among the most cynical people on planet Earth. I cannot think of a more cynical slogan than ‘Fair and Balanced’.”¹² Later clarifying the statement in *The Daily Beast*, Keller claimed that what he perceives as cynical is the impression Fox cultivates that their news coverage offers anything but a conservative slant designed to counter a perceived bias in “left-wing mainstream media” (Kurtz online): “That’s their right, but to say otherwise, to pretend to be something else, does strike me as cynical” (qtd. in Kurtz online). There are several overlapping definitions of cynicism implied or asserted in Keller’s statement. In the word’s first occurrence, “cynical” is used as something akin to an epithet aimed at Fox’s viewers, those gullible, or perhaps just lazy, news consumers who watch biased or ill-informed reporting presumably without recognizing it as such, or, worse, recognizing its bias and choosing to consume it anyway. In this sense, cynicism is used to identify a group that buys into a belief or position that is judged by another to be transparently false, dangerous, or self-interested. The cynical in this sense are apathetic, easily led, and

¹² Keller made the comments in a talk given at the City University of New York’s Graduate School of Journalism, though he later said to the *Daily Beast* that he’s been recycling that particular assessment of Fox News in talks he’s given over the past 5 years.

certainly insufficiently critical, preferring to consume a slanted news broadcast rather than to think critically about its content.

Secondly, Keller qualifies his initial judgment of Fox’s viewers to shift the label “cynical” onto the network itself. In this sense, the term marks a certain aesthetic or rhetorical quality of the Fox news outlet. In describing the Fox slogan and approach as cynical, Keller implies a disjunction between the network’s motto and its practices in news reporting. For Keller, the slogan is cynical because it does not accurately describe Fox News’s approach to journalism. In this sense, cynicism marks a failure to tell the truth, a failure to represent one’s position or one’s politics authentically. This sense of cynicism is quite similar to that used to describe Fox’s viewers, only applied in this case to an institution: its cynicism lies in its failure to model and engage in critical thinking, engage in self-scrutiny, or to question the consequences of the opinions and values it transmutes as fact. Cynical in this case refers to an aesthetic or rhetorical strategy designed to intentionally misrepresent or misguide.

There is a third cynicism at work in Keller’s statement; that is, the cynicism Keller himself employs. The *OED* defines cynicism with a list of synonyms: in contempt of pleasure, churlishness, disposition to find fault, surly, curish, misanthropic, captious. In our present moment, the *OED* suggests that “cynical” is most especially used to describe someone disposed to disbelieve in human sincerity or goodness, someone sneering. Cynicism has to do, then, with a judgment of character or comportment, as Bill Keller’s use of the term to describe Fox News and its viewers reiterates. However, this understanding of cynicism also describes Keller’s position as someone whose eyes are

opened to the hypocrisy of modern media, unlike those who consume Fox News, presumably. But how should one read this dismissal of Fox News, coming as it does from the mouth of a man equally implicated in the system of news media? The *Times*'s own slogan is "All the News that's Fit to Print." Where Fox's slogan suggests their reportage will offer some kind of "balanced" view of current events (though its unclear between which poles it will balance), the *Times*'s slogan implies selection and curation; thus it also implies bias, but rather than the inadvertent bias ascribed to Fox in the disjuncture between their chosen slogan and one-sided broadcast, the *Times* offers a deliberate bias towards "fitness." The *Times*'s slogan implies an inside knowledge, a reassurance not that they will offer balance, but that they will avoid news that's unfit for print, that they will take seriously their role as curators of public knowledge and will offer something more like truth, a look inside the spume of news media to what's really going on. Thus, the newspaper suggests it will offer the counterpoint to Fox's approach—a critical perspective that scrutinizes its content.

We can also call this cynicism, and in doing so, recast the misanthropy designated by the *OED* definition: the capacity to see through to the real motivations influencing opinion or action in the world, but in this case, the meaning of cynicism is almost opposite to the meaning it takes on in Keller's denunciation of Fox and its viewers. Here cynicism is not the failure of critique, but the leveraging of critique by one "in the know." In the binary Keller sets up between his own assessment and Fox News's approach, his form of cynicism is allowed. It is sanctioned by his position as spokesperson for the American newspaper of record, winner of 108 Pulitzer prizes. Further, perhaps more than

it is meant as a dig at Fox, Keller's comment is meant to provoke a wry and knowing grin among the *Times*'s readers, who are presumably equally disdainful of Fox News and its gullible viewers, and to align Keller himself with a larger group of cultural producers and commentators who have taken pot shots at Fox News.¹³ Thus the knowing cynicism of the elite—the cynicism of critique—is posed against the inadvertent cynicism of the unwashed masses (who presumably consume Fox's broadcasts)—the cynicism of insufficient critique. Or, to give this distinction a slightly different valence, the critical cynicism of the left is posed against the myopic bias of the right.

How can we reconcile these different meanings taken on by cynicism in Keller's comment? How do we account for the sense of camaraderie that flickers through some in reading Keller's dismissal of one of the most laughed-at media outlets in the United States? How to also account for the defensiveness or dismissiveness this same comment would provoke in others? *Cynical* is less often a term one elects to apply to oneself—except perhaps in online dating profiles. As well, just as Keller's comment builds a community in agreement about Fox's viewers, the word "cynicism" is equally, if not more often, leveraged to critique "left-wing cynicism," a phrase that tends to mean something like "insufficiently optimistic."¹⁴ Thus, cynicism is sometimes desired and sometimes resisted, sometimes used to label and sometimes used to forge identifications;

¹³ Fox News is a frequent target on *The Simpsons*, though Fox is also the network that airs the show. For example in an episode entitled "The Fool Monty," the Fox News helicopter appears with the slogan, "Fox News: Not Racist, but #1 with Racists" on the side. Fox has also been targeted by comedian Kathy Griffith on *Larry King Live*, by *Futurama*, President Obama, *Saturday Night Live*, Jon Stewart, Jay Leno, David Letterman, Jimmy Kimmel, Bill Maher, Conan O'Brien, Craig Ferguson, Craig Kilborn, Cenk Ugyur (*The Young Turks*), Hugo Chavez and the Muppets, to name only a few of the outlet's critics.

¹⁴ For example, in his book *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times* (2010) Paul Rogat Loeb frames a chapter entitled "The Cynical Smirk" as a call to the left to overcome the cynical resignation "that assumes that change is impossible" in the wake of Obama's re-election and failure to live up to the soaring expectations of his campaign.

it is a descriptor taken up by both the right and the left, though the meanings it takes on in each case are different. Despite this diversity in meaning, despite the vast political valleys carved out between invocations of the term, I suggest that we consider its various uses as related and as rooted in a far more complex interrelation between subject and structure in the current cultural moment (in the realm of global neoliberal or neoliberalizing nations). In fact, it is precisely the diverse meanings that are able to cohere around this single term that suggest its larger cultural relevance. Cynicism can be used across party and other lines of affiliation to indicate certain kinds of subjectivities precisely because its meaning lies in its suggestion of a particular kind of subjective relation, rather than a definite set of characteristics.

We can begin to understand this more expansive notion of cynicism in the context of what Stephen Colbert taught us to call “truthiness,” or the “quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true” (Meyer CBS online). In the first instance, then, Fox’s viewers are cynical in their willingness to consume news that is obviously truthy, even its guiding principle revealing a gap between what it claims and what it offers. Fox’s viewers judge the network’s reporting on the basis of their emotional reaction to it, on whether they like what is being reported, or not. In shifting the label to Fox itself, Keller suggests that truthiness also underpins public culture at an institutional level, producing shared knowledge on the basis of unacknowledged emotion or opinion that masquerades as fact, freedom, or human right. Or, as Dick Meyer says in his commentary announcing “truthiness” as Merriam Webster’s word of the year in 2006:

Truth today is just what you feel. For deep and serious truth-tellers, truth is what they feel strongly. Like when Donald Rumsfeld kept saying that America was winning the war in Iraq: he must have *felt* that truth very strongly because, as we now know, he didn't *think* we were winning the war. John Kerry felt very strongly that it was absolutely true that he always opposed the war even though he knows he voted for the war. Some are certain of the truth that global warming is a myth because they feel it so, so strongly. Other people feel very intensely the truth that secret Republican interests control the companies that make voting machines. (Meyer online)

In moving into the level of an institutionalized truthiness, that, as Meyer's assessment suggests, goes beyond media outlets to shape the reactions and decisions of politicians as well, we return to the crux of Colbert's initial satire on *The Colbert Report*: its ubiquity.¹⁵ Truthiness is not just a quality fostered in the consumption of certain presentations of the news, it is present in the way news is reported in nearly every source, and, perhaps more troublingly, in the social, economic, and political relationships that form the basis of the news itself. It becomes a characteristic of our cultural moment. As Meyer's description of Donald Rumsfeld's and John Kerry's contradictory stances makes clear, truthiness, or the assessment of a situation on the basis of emotion or opinion, shapes the way in which political decisions as consequential as the Iraq War are made. In this context, the news consumer is trained in a culture of truthiness to believe his or her own judgments, much like those of Kerry or Rumsfeld, "are fact-based and reasoned, not emotional." Or, perhaps worse, they recognize the bias in their own position and "they don't care" (Meyer online).

The crux of Keller's criticism of Fox seems to be that the network traffics in truthiness, but this larger social context in which truthiness becomes cultural norm raises

¹⁵ Stephen Colbert coined "truthiness," inflecting it with its contemporary meaning, in a segment called "The Wørd" on the pilot episode of *The Colbert Report*, which aired on October 17, 2005.

questions about whether or truthiness can ever be used merely as an accusation that a self-professed advocate of the truth levels at those whom they judge to be indifferent to it. In the larger social context of truthiness, the question of why Fox News's viewers, or even Fox itself, should care that their coverage might be emotionally driven is less easily answered, as is the question of what might change if they were to acknowledge a predilection for emotion-based news reporting. If truthiness operates at all levels of discourse, both public and private, then why should any particular subject—or even any particular institution of public knowledge—feel responsible for his or her own position? This is not to excuse Fox for their vehement approach to the news (or even to justify Keller's critical evaluation) but, rather, to suggest that in a culture of truthiness, the diagnosis of such consumption as wilful, chosen, as, presumably, against some more widely-informed perspective shrinks the issue to one of bad subjectivity, laziness, or simple ignorance.

In this context, Keller's declaration of cynicism misrecognizes the problem: he knowingly scorns the faulty reporting put forward by Fox, but fails to articulate precisely how *The New York Times* determines fitting news in a socio-political landscape in which extremely consequential decisions are constantly being made in some grey area between knowledge and feeling. Thus truthiness speaks to a kind of generalized emotional relativism in which one can like (or dislike) what one will with no bearing on the facts of the situation. Cynicism describes a subjective response to a social situation in which consequential political, economic, and policy decisions are being made on the basis of emotion and with overt disregard to contradictory or challenging evidence, a situation in

which knowledge and action are utterly disconnected, even in extremely consequential decision-making processes. In this case, Keller is not wrong in diagnosing cynicism as a feature of the news consumer, but his assessment of this cynicism as somehow chosen, wrongly, from a range of more politically viable or effectual positions misjudges the situation of both news media and social life more broadly. To move from this sense of disconnection between knowledge and action towards a usage of cynicism as a code-word for “bad,” as Keller uses the term, moves too quickly past the deep social and cultural incongruity contained in cynicism.

Keller uses the term cynicism to describe both willfully ill-informed viewers and a deceptive news agency, and yet, the conventional meaning of “cynical” also includes the position from which he launches his critique. Thus, this single term lumps together a range of practices and responses, from productive to consumptive, from aesthetic to affective, from judgmental to unconscious, from undesirable to cool. In each of these, regardless of the relation it is used to denote, the term cynicism marks an overlap or interstice between subject, structure, and ideology in a late capitalist or neoliberal moment. At its root, the question of cynicism is one of politics as the nexus between these three terms; that is, politics understood as the exercise of agency, subjective sovereignty, or self-determination and contrasted against ideological determination, domination, and repression. Keller’s comments position Fox News’s viewers as bad political subjects in their inability or refusal to see the disjunction he sees between that station’s mandate and its approach to the news. However, he himself uses what can be identified as a conventionally cynical mode to make this intervention. By drawing

attention to a disjuncture between how Fox News presents itself and its viewers' willingness to consume their reporting regardless, Keller makes an intervention that is meant to be political, that is meant to reveal hypocrisy cloaked by consumptive choice. Thus, cynicism seems, based on the content of Keller's comments, to mark the evacuation of politics, but if we accept that his tone is cynical, it is also a site of political engagement. In particular, cynicism speaks to the intersection of politics and subjectivity and the assumptions we make about this relationship. Presumably, Fox News's viewers are bad political subjects because they either don't see the incongruity between Fox's claims about its objectives and its approach to the news, or they don't care: they don't act on this disjuncture by turning to a more fair and balanced version of the news. But is this a fair demand to make of subjectivity? Is the *New York Times* a better embodiment of its slogan, or is this a matter of perspective? Even if one reads the *Times*, does one not still live in a country in which politicians, business leaders, and lending companies make contradictory decisions based on feeling and opinion, rather than knowledge? Keller's rhetorical cynicism intervenes to address and diagnose a subjective or affective cynicism, about which he is perhaps not wrong; however, I argue that both his cynical critique and the affective condition he diagnoses are indicative of a much more fundamental level on which cynicism names a problematic and unresolved relation between subject, structure, and ideology under the neoliberalism of late capitalism.

In her book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant describes a similarly compelling and destructive orientation between subject and structure in terms of *optimism*, which for her refers to “the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring

closer the satisfying *something* you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene” (1-2 emphasis in original). Importantly for Berlant, optimism does not necessarily feel optimistic, but can include a range of orientations—frustration, curiosity, ambivalence, anxiety, dread—towards the fantasy of “the good life,” which she argues remains the “moral-intimate-economic” locus of subjective orientation, even as it becomes increasingly difficult for many individuals to realize in their own lives (2). Just as optimism describes a relation between self and *something*, I argue that cynicism figures as a site of subjective relation, or, as what I will call throughout this project, an *orienting affect*: a sense or feeling registered individually, but indicative of or laced into a larger social situation or system. Though her book does not address cynicism in depth, Berlant mentions it in her introduction as resulting from the fraying of collective good-life fantasies (2). Thus, if optimism orients one towards satisfaction, then cynicism registers limits placed around satisfaction, the subjective registration of the failure of the fantasy, its unreachability, or its falsity. Furthermore, Berlant argues that it is not the experience of particular optimisms that is important, but the “affective structure of an optimistic attachment” (2). Similarly, I suggest that it is less the content of particular cynical statements or diagnoses that matter, but the structure of frustration it indicates.

Like Berlant’s cruel optimism, cynicism marks an affective cord that binds subjects to structure, that shapes a contemporary structure of feeling¹⁶ and, thus, that

¹⁶ I use this term in the sense outlined by Raymond Williams in his essay “Structures of Feeling” (1977), as a term “concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (132). The sense that structures of feeling work to capture changes in the social as they emerge (132), also resonates with my

marks out the political landscape in ways that demand more complexity than simply determining whether cynicism is good or bad, whether a cynical subject is desirable or not. As this project will elucidate, I suggest that our feelings of cynicism speak not only to how we choose to act, speak, or engage, but also to whether or not possibilities for action, voice or engagement are open to us. Thus, in my conceptualization of it, cynicism describes a relation to the world, as much and perhaps more than it reflects a political *choice*.

Though I argue that cynicism is not necessarily chosen as a political stance, it does have significant consequences for the way in which we understand politics and particularly the role of the subject within politics. Understood as a sometimes insurmountable gap between knowledge and action—a disjuncture between what one knows and what possibilities are open to one—cynicism suggests that our understanding of political engagement must account for the fact that action is not necessarily possible from all positions and at all times. Cynicism marks the limits to our understanding of effective political engagement. If Fox’s viewers are happy to consume an incongruity, rather than act on it, if, let’s assume, they consume such an incongruity in full awareness that they are doing so (though I doubt either of these relations is as straightforward as this formulation suggests), then politics must find another way of moving forward, beyond seeking to unveil unseeing eyes to the conditions of their own determination. Further, if cynicism marks Keller’s allegiance with his own audience, as much as it does a meaningful critique of the politics of the mediascape, then this raises important questions

discussion of cynicism here, which speaks to the interaction between subject and structure in a way that is emergent and ongoing, rather than fixed or determined.

about agency and engagement and the way in which these are connected to attempts to build exclusionary communities—cynicism raises questions about the commons, about common ground, about the way in which commonalities are forged out of ambivalences as much as they are out of certainties or clearly defined objectives or goals.

Cynicism is often seen as the obverse of optimism, or the failure of political imagination. I'm not sure that these oppositions hold either, particularly if we understand optimism as cruel, but, if we accept them, we must also account for the fact that cynicism is not for that reason a failure of connectivity, a failure of commonality or a retreat into fantasy; it does not indicate the end of affect, but calls for a widening in our consideration of affective states to include cynicism among the so-called “ugly feelings” Sianne Ngai has begun to mark out as fundamental to our understanding of contemporary subjectivity. Cynicism marks out a subjective relation to ideology that is not, and can never be, seamless—it marks a point of friction, a way in which structures cannot account for subjectivities in all their nuances, and the way in which subjects register and live within these failures.

From Cynicism to cynicism

Before the mid-19th century, if you called someone Cynical, it would have been written with a capital and you would have been using the term to affiliate that person with the Greek philosophy of the same name.¹⁷ In Greek terms, Cynicism describes a

¹⁷ Throughout, I will follow William Desmond and use Cynicism for the Greek philosophical approach and cynicism to distinguish the modern stance from its distant Classical forebear. Some German scholars maintain this distinction by using *Kynismus* for the Greek and *Zynismus* for the modern, often translated into English as *kynicism* and cynicism (see Desmond 4).

philosophical school that followed the teachings of Diogenes Laertius and sought to invert the asceticism and self-denial of the dominant mode of Stoic thinking.¹⁸ Greek Cynicism was an embodied and resistant mode aimed at opposing dominant ideologies through exuberant, loud and often offensive methods that closely resemble those described in Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnival.¹⁹ Though little to nothing remains of Cynical writing from the period, as a group, the Cynics are believed to be numerous. Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé has catalogued more than eighty Cynics, and their numbers very likely exceed this documented set.²⁰ Goulet-Cazé goes so far as to describe the school as “something like a ‘mass movement’” in antiquity (16), and surviving literature from the period suggests Cynics had a strong presence in cities and were an active force shaping the social consciousness of the era (Desmond 11). For example, in A.D. 165, Lucian, who had an ambivalent relationship to the Cynics—admitting the value of their oppositional philosophy, but disliking the way in which it was practiced (Desmond 61, Branham 17)—wrote: “The city swarms with these vermin, particularly those who profess the tenets of Diogenes, Antisthenes and Crates” (Foucault *Discourse* online). Though most Cynical texts have been destroyed or lost, testimonials tell us that the Cynics were in any case more interested in “choosing and practicing a certain way of

¹⁸ William Desmond describes the Greek Cynics as “rebellious, self-willed and ornery, but also witty and imaginative” (7).

¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin describes carnival and the carnivalesque attitude in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1965) as a sanctioned period of spectacle in which the dominant order was inverted. Like the Cynics, Bakhtin underscores the lived nature of carnival, “during carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (7). Carnival offered the people momentary access to a utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance (9). However, where carnival was sanctioned during particular periods within the year, after which life would return to normal, the Cynics lived out their definition of such freedom at all times.

²⁰ For Goulet-Cazé’s list of cynics, see Appendix A, “A Comprehensive Catalogue of Known Cynic Philosophers,” in her book (with R. Bracht Branham) *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement and Its Legacy* (1996).

life” than they were in documentation (Foucault *Discourse* online). In other words, Cynic philosophy was lived philosophy.

Of the lives of Cynics, none is more famous than that of Diogenes, who remains notorious for shitting in the theatre and urinating on a group of people at a dinner party who referred to him as a dog. Diogenes was a wanderer who gave up almost all his worldly possessions and instead lived from day to day, begging in the street while chastising passers by for their vices (Desmond 10). He was not just poor, but sought out poverty, for example, giving up his bowl when he saw a young boy drinking water out of his hands, saying, “A child has conquered me in frugality” (qtd. in Desmond 21). Diogenes refused social dictates of decorum and politeness and gave up on the structures of society more broadly: he lived predominantly in the open, sleeping in a *pithos*, or large wine jar, and was the first to declare himself “cosmopolitan,” a person without a city or home, a “citizen of the universe” (Branham 8, 24). Diogenes’s pursuit of poverty and refusal of cultural structures were directed towards the aim of human happiness, which he located in the realization of human animality outside of the strictures of culture. Diogenes saw the natural world as providing an ethical norm and viewed Greek society as at odds with that norm. In other words, in his view the conditions of society prevent human beings from living in accordance with nature and thus prevent happiness. The work of the human is to train oneself out of learned cultural and social habits and to instead pursue models of happiness, freedom, and self-sufficiency as they exist outside of culture (Branham 8-9).

It is easy to slough off the behaviour of someone like Diogenes as merely impolite—surely many mothers expend great effort instilling the conviction that bowel movements should happen behind closed doors and as cleanly as possible—and yet Diogenes’s rudeness was pedagogical, targeted to expose arbitrary social mores. Or as Žižek might say, his was an immorality in support of morality (*Sublime* 30). The Cynical approach was certainly not ascetic or disdainful of pleasure or humanity, but instead embraced and expressed these things in practices that exposed the limits social structures place on bodily, emotional, psychological, and political expression. At the same time, the Cynic was not Dionysian, but embraced a poverty that required endurance. Desmond describes the characteristics of Greek Cynicism as a contradictory mix of both the rejection of social mores and customs and the celebration of an ultimate human goodness, thus locating in cynicism an optimism about the human capacity to change, to live differently, to give up the limitations of society; an optimism that is without the cruelty Berlant finds in the term today. Desmond writes,

Ancient Cynics were astonishingly optimistic regarding human nature. For them, ultimately, human beings are good: very good. They may have been corrupted by the bad customs and needless artificialities of ‘civilization,’ but all this can be cured. A little satire, a little humbling, and lots of frugality, a simplification of one’s life, a renunciation of all unnecessary possessions and desires, a renewed living in the present moment, and one will regain one’s natural goodness and happiness. (3)

Or as Niehues-Probsting summarizes the central tenet of the Cynic way of life: “To avoid the suffering of life, but to affirm life itself” (Niehues-Probsting 356).

In both a series of lectures given at Berkeley in October and November of 1983 (the series was called *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia*) and his

last set of lectures given at the Collège de France in 1983-84 (published as *The Courage of Truth*), Michel Foucault unravels the complex strands of the Cynics' philosophy, declaring their approach the embodiment and enactment of the most radical version of the overarching Greek philosophy that one's way of life and knowledge of truth are deeply interwoven, that "a person is nothing else but his relation to truth" (Foucault *Discourse* online). Foucault outlines four strands in Cynic philosophy that each extend or invert a key aspect of Greek philosophy more broadly: "the unconcealed life, the independent life, the straight life, and the sovereign life" (*Courage* 251). The first, also described as the shameless life, has to do with freeing life "from all the conventional principles" and living it thus openly and publicly (*Courage* 255). The second, independence, "is a question of defining an attitude which is entirely detached from those events over which one has no control" (*Courage* 256). For the Cynics, this meant a life of poverty. The third principle, the straight life, has to do with living one's life in accordance with the laws of human animality, rather than social convention. The Cynic takes each of these on as tasks, actively pursuing greater lengths in shamelessness, destitution, animality, and, in the process, modeling lives of ongoing scandal for the Greek public. The final quality of the true life as taken up by the Cynics, sovereignty, extends each of these towards a reversal of social power dynamics. The Cynic claims absolute sovereignty over his own life: he "is a king; he is even the only king" (*Courage* 275). Thus crowned sovereigns, or, we could extend, any elected leaders "are only shadows of the true monarchy" (*Courage* 275). The cynic is also anti-king, demonstrating "how hollow, illusory, and precarious the monarchy of kings is" (*Courage* 275). As sovereign, the cynic focuses on the pursuit of

shamelessness, poverty, and endurance, but is also tasked with caring for others, both in the pedagogical example he offers, but also in sacrificing himself in order to meet their needs (*Courage* 278). The battle waged by the Cynic is “the individual’s struggle against his desires, appetites, and passions. But it is also a battle against customs, conventions, institutions, laws, and a whole condition of humanity” (*Courage* 280). Thus, for Foucault, the Cynics modeled a radical form of self-care that was both rigorous in its asceticism, but generous in its view of the capacity of the self and, by extension, the human and the social.

Peter Sloterdijk’s massive tome *Critique of Cynical Reason*, which remains one of the most extensive treatises on the topic of cynicism and incidentally was published in 1983, just before Foucault gave his lectures taking up the topic, also celebrates Cynicism. Like Foucault, Sloterdijk parses the radical opposition to social convention posed by the Cynics, emphasizing their role in shaping their cultural milieu, even if that action took the negative form of refusal, and particularly admiring the Cynic emphasis on *parrhēsia*, or candid speech.²¹ In other words it is the political boldness of the Cynics that Sloterdijk admires, and, in particular, their extension of it into a candid way of living that functioned as an embodied, oppositional politics. Sloterdijk is predominantly interested in

²¹ Likewise, Foucault was very interested in *parrhēsia* as central to Greek Cynicism. He describes it as follows, “The one who uses *parrhēsia*, the *parrhēsiastes*, is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse. In *parrhēsia*, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks” (online). While even some Greeks used the term pejoratively to describe a “chatterbox,” essentially, Foucault is interested in the relation between truth and the mode of speaking. He says, “To my mind, the *parrhēsiaste* says what is true because he knows that it is true; and he knows that it is true because it is really true. The *parrhēsiaste* is not only sincere and says what is his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth. He says what he knows to be true. The second characteristic of *parrhēsia*, then, is that there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth” (online).

posing Greek Cynicism as a lost model of embodied oppositionality, and much of *Critique of Cynical Reason* is concerned with tracing the massification of cynicism in modernity, which has, for the most part, subsumed a biting, embodied individualism in favour of a generalized malaise and political apathy.²² Sloterdijk writes, “we must fear the worst for embodied, cheeky enlightenment. Before our very eyes, cities have been transformed into amorphous clumps where alienated streams of traffic transport people to various scenes of their attempts and failures in life” (118).

At the heart of Sloterdijk’s understanding of cynicism (both Classical and modern) is what he terms “enlightened false consciousness,” or the capacity to see through ideology, to recognize that seemingly immovable or inevitable ideological structures are in fact constructed and arbitrary. For Sloterdijk, cynicism describes a subject who has become aware of the way in which structures of power shape and condition his or her life. For the Greek Cynic, this awareness was built on the margins of society and thus fuelled an oppositional liminality, a refusal to fall in line with the ideological demand. In modern society, however, Sloterdijk argues that the ideological awareness that attends cynicism is mainstream and thus no longer sparks the same kind of rebelliousness as it once did. One of the central differences between Classical and modern cynicism, then, is the proximity of enlightenment to dominant structures of power, or the ability to enact a defiant mode of being in opposition to a dominant mode of subjectivity. For example, to return to Stephen Colbert as an example of a performed

²² Sloterdijk so insists on the distinction between Classical Greek Cynicism and its modern counterpart that he distinguishes the former by using its Greek iteration, “kynicism,” throughout his work. As mentioned, I have primarily used the capitalization of Greek Cynicism to distinguish it, though I have retained the spelling in the translation of Sloterdijk’s in any direct quotations.

oppositonality in a contemporary moment: in an interview with *The AV Club*, Nathan Rabin asks Colbert how he comes up with a satire that can penetrate the absurdity of his target Bill O'Reilly's own choices and actions: "How can you come up with satire more penetrating than the fact that O'Reilly wrote a book called *The O'Reilly Factor For Kids* at the same time that he was having all those problems with sexual harassment?" (online). To which Colbert responds, "Shamelessness is a wonderful part of the character," without clarifying to which "character" he is referring, his own or O'Reilly's. In fact it doesn't matter whether Colbert is referring to his own character or O'Reilly's shamelessness, since the satire his character invokes is often premised precisely on the imperceptibility between "real life" and "the joke." Colbert goes on to elaborate,

I find the branding that goes on in real news at times funnier than what I do. It's just so shocking to hear descriptions of [*Fox Report* anchor] Shepard Smith, you know: "Changing the world! He gives 110 percent!" Our problem is, [sic] there's no level of hyperbole that can be associated with me that hasn't at least been approached by the real thing. (online)

Colbert's assessment marks a bleeding together of oppositional satire and a social situation that comes itself to resemble a punchline (in a way, similar to understanding truthiness as a cultural characteristic). Sloterdijk makes a similar observation about modern cynicism, saying it has "changed sides" (174), has become a certain "chic bitterness" (5). I argue that not only has cynicism changed sides or become hip, but, as the example of Colbert and the mediascape he works to satirize makes clear (in which both Colbert and O'Reilly can be described as chicly bitter), a certain mode of embodied hyperbole is now endemic to mass popular culture. If Greek cynicism supported a plebian rejection of official culture, then modern cynicism is the homogenizing response of the

dominant culture to this kind of “kynical subversion” (Žižek *Sublime* 29). In other words, industrial capitalism instrumentalizes cynicism, absorbing it into mass culture, packaging it, commodifying it and turning its subversive potential into a watered down edginess, or a marker of coolness, if not effacing it altogether.²³ In his essay “The Ambivalence of Disenchantment,” Paolo Virno expands this analysis of the “emotional situation” in modernity (12), arguing that “the framework of oppositions... ha[s] been demolished” (14). For Sloterdijk and Virno, it is less that the structure of modern life produces affects such as alienation, anxiety or cynicism, but rather that it reduces these feelings from states of opposition to simply par for the course, ways of being or feeling that work within, rather than against, the status quo.

Sloterdijk suggests that even though the cynic may “see the nothingness to which everything leads,” the “essential point in modern cynicism” is “the ability of its bearers to work—in spite of anything that might happen, and especially, after anything that might happen” (5). For Sloterdijk this notion of working on, of living on, returns throughout his description of modern cynicism—we live on, occasionally experiencing the frisson of a

²³ In a similar fashion, Stallybrass and White argue for the sublimation of the subversive rebellion of the carnivalesque in contemporary culture. They argue that rather than being effaced in modernity, the rebellious and excessive spirit of carnival is, in modernity, privatized and turned into an inward rather than a shared experience. The authors describe the massification of the carnival impulse in terms of a bourgeois effort to disavow it, to encode the oppositional with all that the “proper bourgeois must strive not to be in order to preserve the stable and ‘correct’ sense of self” (104). While Sloterdijk and Virno argue that kynical subversion disappears under modernity, I would argue that it can also be seen as sublimated. For instance, the kind of bodily excess represented in the TLC’s television show *Honey Boo Boo* becomes a target for moralizing against particular modes of subjectivity, as evidenced in Ryan McGee’s assessment of the show as “perhaps the worst example possible of how to live life with a bit of respect, or at least decorum” (online). However, *Globe and Mail* television critic John Doyle argues that *Honey Boo Boo* is perhaps so loathed because of its unabashed challenge to “middle-class” norms of diet, hygiene, and recreation (online), suggesting that the show maintains a kind of embodied rebellion against the standards seen to be the core of so-called middle-class subjectivity. Thus, a moralizing response to these kinds of bodily excesses is also an effort to contain their rejection of standards believed to be held in common and to shore up a sense of an unquestioned “stable” or “correct” sense of middle-class subjectivity.

Classical Cynicism in the corners of our eyes (140), but for the most part, acting out our roles in the accepted social drama. If modern cynicism marks the migration from individual, embodied resistance to generalized malaise, for Sloterdijk it also marks a shift from body to mind, from resistant action to intellectualized apathy. Thus Sloterdijk's definition of cynicism, constructed as it is around the notion of enlightenment in the wake of *the* Enlightenment, describes both the success of the enlightenment and its political failure. Summarizing this paradoxical point of view succinctly, he writes in his preface, "we are enlightened, we are apathetic" (xxvi). On the one hand, the Enlightenment has succeeded because, after Critical Theory, after Althusser, after Foucault, we are in many ways enlightened to the structures of power that shape and condition our lives.

Importantly, this "we" includes not only the critic who theorizes power, but also the cynical mass—perhaps Honey Boo Boo herself (the star of *Toddlers and Tiaras* who went on to star in the TLC reality show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*), but more pointedly, her audience, who criticize her gleeful consumption of Mountain Dew for its embeddedness within a food system premised on profit over health. This is not to accuse Honey Boo Boo of ignorant consumption and to validate viewers' sense of their own knowingness, but instead to point to the way in which all social actors are embedded in what are often overtly visible and tangible systems and structures of power.

On the other hand, the Enlightenment and migration of critique into mainstream forms of consumption also constitutes a political failure: despite what we know about these things, we continue to live in ways that belie that knowledge; we live cynically.

Sloterdijk writes, “today the cynic appears as a mass figure: an average social character”

(4):

Modern mass cynics lose their individual sting and refrain from letting themselves be put on display. They have long since ceased to expose themselves as eccentrics to the attention and mockery of others. The person with the clear, “evil gaze” has disappeared into the crowd; anonymity now becomes the domain for cynical deviation. (4)

In this description, we hear Sloterdijk’s struggle with cynicism—though he declares cynicism the inevitable result of modernization, in this quotation, he also characterizes cynicism as a failure of the individual to put herself on display. It’s an opting out, a Bartlebian shrug that would rather not. Cynicism in this sense sounds a lot like a choice, the refusal of politics, rather than an emotional byproduct of modernization. Further, Sloterdijk fails to address the public context of a culture that “puts on display” persons like Honey Boo Boo and her family in order to scorn their excesses and reinscribe more firmly the established modes of decorum that in many ways prevent the expression of precarity, marginality, or suffering as woeful, preventable, or grievable. While *Globe and Mail* critic John Doyle, perhaps naïvely, imputes agency to Honey Boo Boo and her family (the Thompsons) in his assertion of their challenge to middle-class values (online), Sloterdijk’s description of cynical agency in the form of a “clear, evil gaze” *directed at* society from the body thus displayed raises questions about the agency of the Thompson family in their reality scenario. The Thompsons, I would argue, are largely *subject to* the social, moralizing gaze, rather than staring back at the audience who moralize their situation. In a contemporary moment, how might one put one’s self on display in order to effect the kind of Cynical oppositionality Sloterdijk privileges? In a public culture in

which oppositionality is encoded into the market, as Virno argues, how can one live one's life differently? What would one oppose? And yet, one must also continue to ask, is apathy—often characterized as a cynical malaise—the only option that remains?

The two fronts on which cynicism shifts in modernity—power and the body—are related. Sloterdijk links the burgeoning of modern cynicism with a philosophical, critical, and indeed social, climate that increasingly struggles over power, rather than truth:

‘Knowledge is power....’ This sentence brings to an end the tradition of knowledge that, as its name indicates, was an erotic theory—the love of truth and the truth through love (*Liebeswahrheit*). From the corpse of philosophy arise the modern sciences and theories of power in the nineteenth century in the form of political science, theory of class struggle, technocracy, vitalism, and in every form armed to the teeth. ‘Knowledge is power (*Wissen ist Macht*).’ This sentence fixed the course for the unavoidable politicization of thinking. Those who utter the sentence reveal the truth. However, with the utterance they want to achieve more than truth: They want to intervene in the game of power.” (xxvi)

The shift to a knowledge in pursuit of power, rather than truth, marks a shift away from the central tenet Foucault articulates in Classical Cynicism: the notion that one's philosophy should be reflected in one's life as the pursuit of truth. Instead, knowledge is wed to the conceptualization of power and the autobiography of the philosopher is no longer relevant.²⁴ Likewise, what one knows to be true is not necessarily reflected in the way in which one lives one's life. Instead, what matters is whether or how one can translate that knowledge into effect, into action or into opposition. What shifts under modernity is the capacity to channel cynical enlightenment into opposition, the capacity to channel knowledge into embodied power. Whereas Sloterdijk argues this decorporealizes cynicism and moves it into a kind of malaise, I consider cynicism as a

²⁴ Much as Roland Barthes speaks of the death of the author.

site of continued embodiment, not necessarily in terms of visible gestures of oppositionality, but instead in terms of affect. Malaise, after all, is also a way of feeling or being in the world. Cynicism is an “ugly feeling” that indexes the suspension of “one’s power to act” (2); to *prefer not to* also indicates a stance—a “powerful powerlessness” (2)—that orients one to one’s social situation. I argue that modern cynicism is not simply a watered down or intellectualized version of an Antique mode, nor is it a radical departure that invokes Cynicism’s antithesis; rather cynicism registers the effacement of the Classical mode of embodied subversion in the culture of modernity. If Cynicism once meant to live one’s life in pursuit of life itself, then (modern) cynicism registers a situation in which power usurps truth or idealism in many or even most cases. If power eclipses truth as the site of philosophical inquiry, the term cynicism emerges equally to describe the *affective* response to this condition. Thus, the body doesn’t disappear as a site of cynicism, nor does cynicism become a merely intellectual exercise, but instead reflects a change in the way the individual is positioned in relation to structures of power. Cynicism, I argue, remains affective, if not effective, even if this affect is articulated in less obvious expressions than those taken up by Diogenes.

Beware the *Ides of March*

In order to consider cynicism as an affective state produced through the relation between individual, structure of power, and knowledge, I take up George Clooney’s 2011 film *Ides of March*, which follows the fraught battle between two Democratic presidential candidates. The affective clout of cynicism is made apparent even in the decisions made

about the release of the film, which was postponed because the narrative was seen as too cynical, too focused on the bald machinations of power that underlie political campaigns, to be released into a nation still high on the “Yes We Can” mantra.²⁵ Of course, the film is seen as cynical because it threatens to return an electorate still tingling with those idealistic—and, let’s be clear, impossible—promises of hope to the less-promising space of blatant power struggles that make up the actual function of politics. It threatens with the propagation of affect: the return to confusion and malaise from the heights of optimism. If the film could threaten an electorate, could possibly leverage cynicism to shift public feeling, then that feeling must mark something held in common, something shared as equally as the hope trumpeted by the Obama campaign. As the critical assessment makes clear: the film risks either being too compelling, pulling its viewers down into the doldrums of cynicism, or not compelling enough and thus failing at the box office for not mirroring closely enough the public sentiments attending its release.

Ides of March also leverages cynicism internally to develop plot, character, motivation, and critique. The film offers a lens onto the various cynicisms at work within the political machine, and more broadly, the iterations of cynicism that shape the socio-cultural landscape. The film’s main character, Stephen Meyers (Ryan Gosling) is the junior campaign manager for candidate Mike Morris (George Clooney). He begins the movie having “drunk the Kool-Aid,” firmly believing in the promise of change

²⁵ In fact, Clooney originally intended to begin making the film in 2007, for a 2008 release, but told *USA Today* that he and writer Grant Heslov decided to delay production when Obama won the election in 2008: ““We were in preproduction on this,” Clooney says. ‘We were really getting close to starting up. But I remember sitting in a restaurant with (co-writer) Grant (Heslov) when Obama won, and we both realized we couldn’t make this movie right now. Everyone was so hopeful and happy. Now, the cynicism has come back around, so it’s time.’” (qtd. in Bowles online.)

represented by his candidate. Quickly, however, Meyers is embroiled in a power struggle with the rival candidate Ted Pullman's campaign. Pullman's campaign manager, Tom Duffy (Paul Giamatti), calls Meyers to set up a secret meeting. Though Meyers initially tries to reach his own campaign manager Paul Zara (Philip Seymour Hoffmann) to alert him to the call from Duffy, he is unable to reach him, and so, leaving an urgent message to call him back, he goes to the meeting. Meyers rejects Duffy's offer, but does not tell Zara about the meeting, knowing he'd be upset and believing, since he will not take the job, that he can keep the secret. In the end, though, information gained from Duffy in their meeting proves crucial, and so Meyers eventually confesses to Zara, which leads Zara to fire him (with Morris's full support), saying his loyalty can no longer be trusted. In the meantime, Meyers starts sleeping with Molly Stearns (Evan Rachel Wood), one of the interns. When candidate Morris calls Stearns in the middle of the night, while she is sleeping over with Meyers, she confesses a one-time drunken tryst that has left her pregnant by Morris and without the funds required for an abortion. Meyers borrows from the campaign to pay for her abortion and drives her to the clinic, impressing upon her the importance that she keep the secret, as its revelation would be devastating to the campaign. Meyers drops Stearns off at the clinic but does not stay. It is while she is having the abortion that he meets with and is fired by Zara. Shocked and angry, Meyers forgets to pick up Stearns at the clinic and does not answer her repeated calls. She makes her own way back to her hotel to find out from a colleague that Meyers has been fired. That night, perhaps fearing he'll reveal her pregnancy in retaliation, she overdoses on drugs and dies. Unemployed, Meyers approaches Duffy again, offering his services to the

Pullman campaign, but Duffy admits that he had never intended to hire Meyers. Instead, he had anticipated that Meyers would eventually confess, which would cause Zara to fire him. With Meyers and his exceptional communication skills out of the picture, Morris's campaign would be weakened, improving the chances for Duffy's candidate. As he's leaving, Duffy suggests he's done Meyers a favour, giving him the opportunity to get out before he gets cynical. But, it appears to be too late for Meyers. To regain his position, he threatens candidate Morris with the knowledge of his affair, forcing Zara's resignation and installing himself as head of the Morris campaign. The film ends in a seemingly win-win scenario that sees Zara working as a consultant on K Street, Morris assured the candidacy, and Meyers gainfully employed on the successful campaign, though none of these three seems overly gleeful at their success. And, of course this tidy ending must be read in recognition of the massive exception of Molly Stearns, the film's major casualty. Meyers notes the single rule in politics that cannot be broken: you can't fuck the interns. However, the price in this case seems to have been paid by the intern herself, who buys silence, and perhaps Morris's presidency, with her life.

To say that *Ides of March* is cynical is perhaps to state the obvious or, at least, to simply parrot numerous film critics' and Clooney's own evaluation of the film, but, in the character of Stephen Meyers, the film offers a good representation of cynicism understood as enlightened false consciousness. In fact, one could say that the arc of the plot follows the development of Meyers's enlightenment to his own false consciousness about politics and governance, the shattering of his idealistic faith in the candidate and his ability to change the world. This development is foreshadowed aesthetically in the first

minutes of the film, which show Meyers orating into a microphone, his face brightly lit by a spotlight as he addresses a darkened, hushed auditorium. Though the viewer will momentarily learn that the speech is not his own, in those first few moments, it is unclear that Meyers is not himself the candidate, is not the embodiment of future promise. The brightness of his face, the conviction of his voice, the reduction of the scene to this one animated and convicted figure, suggest the ideal presidential candidate, one who can usher in solution by sheer force of will. Quickly this unravels. Meyers trails off mid-sentence, the lights come up to reveal the auditorium as empty, and the scene ends with Meyers's request that the lectern be put on a riser on the pretense that Morris be better able to read his notes, but for the real reason that he is short and doesn't want to appear so against his rival. The illusion is shattered. We see inside the machinations of political debate and are introduced to the film's central device: the revelation of secrets and the manipulation of situations to produce other façades. As Meyers begins to see through his own faith in the Morris campaign, as he is brought, as Joan Didion would say, "inside baseball," he is forced to choose whether he will pursue power or leave the game. Meyers's cynicism very much mirrors Didion's description of the way in which "insiders" in the political process function to shore up the "traditional ways in which power is exchanged and the status quo maintained," while those "out there" continue to live their lives at a fundamental remove from these insider processes (online). Hers is a cynical view of politics, one in which insiders constitute "a self-created and self-referring class... [who] tend to speak of the world not necessarily as it is but as they want people out there to believe it is" (online), and it is this cynical view of politics, enlightened to its

own false consciousness and reduced to a scene of struggle over power that *Ides of March* begins.

While Meyers certainly becomes more cynical as *Ides of March* develops and his idealism dissolves in his incorporation in the campaign's power struggle, it is not just his character that is cynical. The film's viewer is also meant to read the film cynically. The arc of plot development in the direction of corruption and self-interest is set in that opening scene, even if the specific details and forms of this corruption are potentially surprising (thus allowing the film to remain compelling). The film's viewer is brought through a slow process of enlightenment to the corruption inherent to politics, though it's arguable whether or not these developments tell the viewer anything she didn't already know. Alongside Sloterdijk's notion of cynicism reflecting the reduction of philosophy, or in this case politics, to power is the implication that mass malaise is bred in response to this power struggle. In a cynical society, a society run by a set of "insiders," power is ceded to those who will struggle for it. For the rest, all that remains is to fill their roles as cogs in the machine. *Ides of March* reiterates this impression in the almost total absence of the voter in the film. With the exception of one scene in which the candidate banter with a group of college students, the film does not reflect voters' opinions, impressions, or habits as deciding factors in the election. Instead, the majority of the plot is focused on the two candidates' struggle to secure (read: buy) the support of Democratic Senator Franklin Thompson, whose 356 delegates will decide the candidacy (and will presumably vote with their senator). Likewise, the film's viewer is merely witness to the corruption inherent to the plot, and, like Meyers, finds herself embroiled in a situation in which the

judgment of good and evil becomes moot—there are no good guys in the film, there are no bad guys, there are simply a lot of people trying to do their job in the way it’s presented to them, whether that be managing a campaign, reporting on it, or fetching its coffee.

I don’t want to move too quickly past Molly Stearns, the intern, who calls attention to the uneven distribution of agency in the structure of political power. In fact, the film’s representation of women more generally leaves much to be desired: they play stock roles as “sexy intern,” “stalwart, savvy wife” (Jennifer Ehle), and “flirtatious, manipulative journalist” (Marisa Tomei) (to be fair, Tomei’s character could also be read as strategic and in pursuit of a larger, though elusive, truth about the campaign). On the one hand, without forgiving or accepting the repetition of female subordination and stereotype, one can read these representations in terms of the film’s portrayal of cynicism more broadly: we see the repetition of female stereotypes throughout the media and certainly in the way political campaigns address and depict women,²⁶ and yet we live in a media environment just as often convinced of our post-feminism.²⁷ *Ides of March* offers a way of reading stereotypes as endemic to the structure of electoral politics: one’s ideals are irrelevant, unless one can meet the demands of the system, which necessitates a certain kind of (itself stereotypical) behaviour. Thus, the film poses a political scenario in

²⁶ For instance, in a January 4, 2008 interview on Fox News’ “Your World,” Marc Rudov said it was Hillary Clinton’s “nagging voice” that was propelling male voters to prefer Barack Obama. On March 17, 2008, *The Guardian* ran a slideshow on its website titled “Power Dressing” visually investigating Clinton’s “uninspiring” fashion choices. Finally, an audience member famously yelled out to Clinton on the campaign trail, “iron my shirt!” And in case one were to conclude that sexism moves in one direction from right to left, let’s not forget Barack Obama’s comment about Sarah Palin, “You know you can put lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.”

²⁷ For example, Hanna Rosin’s article “The Patriarchy is Dead: Feminists, Accept It,” published on *Slate*’s *DoubleX* blog (September 11, 2013).

which stereotypes are demanded at a structural level more than they are chosen at a personal level, and are thus potentially much more difficult to disrupt. The way in which one is able to exercise one's agency is limited and predicted in advance, reduced to predictable roles within the existing system. As Meyers tells Stearns when he gives her the money for the abortion and informs her that she's going to have to quit her job on the campaign, "When you make a mistake, you lose the right to play." And yet, on the other hand, Meyers makes his own mistakes, loses his right to play, but is able to go on to find a new way to assert power, to manipulate knowledge to maintain his position. Thus, the question of whether one can ever get away from some version of such a system seems to be answered largely in the negative by the film, but the costs embedded in such a system are unequal, in the most extreme instance leading to the suicide of the most vulnerable, the least able to access its networks of power.

It is Meyers's effort to remain a part of the political structure around him that necessitates his increasingly cynical view of and engagement with the system; thus the cause of his cynicism is structural as well as personal, but it is, importantly, both. Meyers is affected by Stearns's death—in his car, outside her hotel room, he cries as he listens to the series of voicemails she's left him, essentially her suicide note. Yet it is also her death that gives Meyers the leverage he uses to reinsert himself in Morris's campaign. Stearns's death marks a turning point for Meyers. It is perhaps in listening to her series of desperate messages on his voicemail that he realizes he is already part of the system. For it is after her death that he moves from some semblance of idealism to a self-interested struggle to regain what power he can. The sense conveyed by Gosling in the role of Meyers is that

his character is merely doing what he must, what he sees as the only option for someone already imbricated in the system. However, without excusing Meyers—I think it is important to the film that his character is neither forgivable nor sympathetic—I suggest also that his following suit requires a measure of emotional labour: he weeps silently in the car, but cannot publicly grieve Stearns’s death, lest he give away his own position. No matter the critique presented by the film, its end, returning as it does to the scene of a political speech, another young, female intern in tall, staccato boots fetching coffees, suggests that no matter our enlightenment, the system will continue to churn, will continue to corrupt and kill, but also foster hope and decide the direction of nations. Thus the film’s critique is structural as much as is it is subjective, focused on a system that perpetuates its own self-interest, regardless of voters’ desires, knowledge or criticism, but without offering any sense that there might be an alternative to this system precisely because, at present, we cannot conceive of an alternative; as Cazdyn and Szeman have argued, structures of power perpetuate this sense of their own inevitability (see their book *After Globalization* [2011]).

The notion of cynicism as a mass phenomenon tied to the kind of evacuated political system described in *Ides of March* is reiterated in Timothy Bewes’s assessment. He writes, “cynicism appears in the space left empty by the mass cultural retreat from politics itself” (3). The contemporary cynic, Bewes writes, is “apathetic and introspective, resigned to, rather than revelling in his or her experience of alienation” (1). For Bewes, perhaps even more explicitly than for Sloterdijk, cynicism poses a problem for politics and in the very short description of cynicism quoted above, we can better understand the

anxiety cynicism provokes in considering contemporary political engagement. The correlation between cynicism and apathy offered by Bewes is common to a typical understanding of the term and lies at the core of its undesirability. To be cynical is to acquiesce to a struggle in which one declines to participate; to be cynical is, like Meyers, to see the corruption in your field and participate in it openly, or, like the film's viewer, to see your irrelevance to the system and yet shrug that sense of one's own inconsequentiality off. For Bewes cynicism moves inward—it marks a retreat from politics, rather than, say, the retreat of politics from the concerns of the social. His use of the term “introspective” to describe the cynic suggests this orientation towards the self rather than out onto the social, and connotes a misguided selfishness, which fits with Bewes's use of cynicism to suggest the failure of political action, motivation or engagement. Cynicism is a political orientation, or, more specifically, the failure to take a political orientation, the failure to act or to move in the direction of action, a disorientation that retreats inwards rather than confronting the world. Thus, Bewes dismisses cynicism as a wrong subjective orientation focused inwardly, rather than socially.

This suspicion of an inward focus has to do with how Bewes conceptualizes politics. When he speaks in support of politics, he imagines something quite different from the churn of electoral politics described by *Ides of March*. In fact, in his introduction, Bewes recognizes the inevitability of cynicism in the current socio-political climate. He writes, “Political engagement has no option, apparently, but to *be* cynical in such a society” (3 emphasis in original). Though Bewes finds the cynical subject

ineffectual, he shifts from assessing cynicism as an individual trait to a language of relation; here it is *political engagement* that is cynical, inevitably so. In this language cynicism looks more like what Berlant would call an attachment, a relationality or determining reciprocity between subject and structure, rather than a failure of the subject alone. This understanding of cynicism gives reason to consider the implications it draws not only for politics but also for subjectivity. Cynicism here is a state of being, the experience of alienation from agency, the feeling of being severed from the possibility of action. If cynicism also bears a psychic imprint, or registers in being, then it speaks to the interstice between something like a Marxian understanding of alienation and a psychoanalytic description of disavowal. The cynical self sees its own ineffectuality and disconnection, sighing into this alienation because there is no other option; there is no outside to alienation, only various ways in which to experience it. Moreover, given that cynicism is framed in terms of a mass cultural retreat, it marks not only an individual attachment, but also a collective withdrawal, a social or political depression, that is borne out in the image of apathy. To assign apathy to the individual, then, as a mark of individual failing or wrong choice is to disregard its structural tie and to fail to notice the difficulty, if not impossibility, of moving outside of alienation, or cynicism, to effect some kind of alternative.

Though Bewes is not interested in complicating our understanding of cynicism in this way, he is determined to understand why political engagement is disabled in a contemporary moment—he seeks to explain why cynicism appears to be the only option for politics, even as he wants to excise it. Where Sloterdijk locates the failure of politics

in a bleeding out of the embodied unruliness of Greek cynicism (a mode which he likewise remains committed to as the site for potential politics) and disillusionment with Enlightenment promises, Bewes describes its rise as a “consequence of the *formalization* of an endemic disappointment—unknowability, undecidability—as the definitive modern concept, by way of the concept ‘postmodern’” (6 emphasis in original). In other words, for Bewes, it is the migration of the qualities often characterized as postmodern into common political and social discourse and decision-making—the way in which these are taken to describe the way things *are*—that cements cynicism as a public sentiment.²⁸

Bewes describes how a version of postmodernism has become one of the “reference points of mainstream political consciousness” (2), for example quoting a 1998 speech by Tony Blair in which he says, “The totalising ideologies of the left and right no longer hold much purchase” (qtd. in Bewes 2). Thus, while politicians may not use the word postmodern explicitly, Bewes is interested in the way in which certain qualities associated with the postmodern as a periodizing or conceptualizing term—the dissolution of metanarratives, in particular—come to be taken as an “ontological declaration of the state of objective reality” (2). Bewes tracks the prevalence of cynicism—and particularly the diagnosis of cynicism, among politicians, pundits and news broadcasters—alongside

²⁸ In this, Bewes takes up postmodernism largely as it has been *misunderstood* by the mainstream, since, though the breakdown of metanarratives is common to definitions of postmodernism (see Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979]), nowhere was this mode of deconstruction claimed to describe an objective reality in which power structures had totally eroded (see, for example, Deleuze’s “Postscript on the Societies of Control” [1992] for an analysis of the way in which power forms new networks of control, even as older power structures appear to break down). While I think Bewes tends to overstate and at times misunderstand the deconstructive (or Derridean) aspects of postmodernism, what I am primarily interested in this section is the way in which he ties together this understanding of a mainstream usage of postmodern ideas and the problems it poses for politics and so I follow his analysis through this section.

the reification of the qualities he associates with postmodernism as descriptive of the current state of social and cultural life. He writes,

Thus cynicism, by which I mean a melancholic, self-pitying reaction to the apparent disintegration of political reality (in the form of ‘grand narratives’ and ‘totalizing ideologies’), is the result of a process which I have characterized as the ‘reification’ of postmodernity, where a series of essentially metaphysical insights is taken to be a declaration of truth about the nature of contemporary political reality. (7)

Thus, politicians decry a social fabric devoid of values, stability, or meaning in which cynicism threatens to further erode an already threatened and unravelling social fabric (15-19). Though he distinguishes his project from Sloterdijk’s in his explicit focus on the interrelation of postmodern theory, political apathy, and cynicism, Bewes defines cynicism similarly, as a construct of enlightened false consciousness, in his case expressed as a postmodern relativism or deconstructionism taken up as mass cultural attitude or political diagnosis.

For Bewes, the key issue for politics in this scenario of a normalization of postmodern relativism is the inversion of political objectives and approaches. Bewes’s Marxist notion of effective politics is premised on “instability, risk, and perpetual uprooting” (8), or the disruption of the status quo in order to bring about change. The problem Bewes pinpoints, then, is that effective political strategies bear a resemblance to the postmodernism he describes: the qualities he ascribes to the postmodern are also the qualities on which he feels political work should be based. However, as the language of postmodern contingency bleeds out of metaphysics and into the world of mainstream political decision-making and cultural understanding, the Marxist politics called for

comes to be misunderstood as another form of postmodern deconstruction (or as a misread form of Derridean deconstruction). A politics based on disruption and dissolution threatens to reinforce, rather than undermine, a socio-cultural scene understood equally in terms of contingency and change. A radical politics based on disruptive change can thus more easily be positioned as ineffectual, if not dangerous, because it appears to work alongside the more general destabilization perceived to be already taking place in our collective social life. Thus, for Bewes it is not the dissolution of metanarratives that destroys politics, since politics itself is already based on this kind of disruption and continual upheaval; it is not postmodernism that makes politics impossible. Instead, it is the normalization of postmodern discourse that begins to make this political mode seem overwhelming, overbearing and at risk of further disrupting society, undermining a presumably desirable stability.

In this analysis, Bewes comes closer to Jameson's understanding of postmodernism's ideological task in "coordinating new forms of practice and social and mental habits... with new forms of economic production and organization thrown up by the modification of capitalism—the new global division of labour—in recent years (*Postmodernism* xiv). In other words, the mainstream adopts ideas associated with postmodernism because they are ideologically in synch with changing modes of capital (or a shift towards neoliberal capitalism);²⁹ more than this, its qualities coordinate society

²⁹ While one might substitute neoliberalism for postmodernism in order to understand cynical subjectivity and while Bewes' insistence on postmodernism seems a bit of a relic of an earlier age in which postmodernism seemed a more urgent theoretical concern, I'm reluctant to completely throw away Bewes' postmodernism as anachronism. The notion of the postmodern—particularly if it is traced through Jameson's analysis—offers a richness that combines aesthetics, theory, society and culture that has not been as fully fleshed out in relation to neoliberalism. Further, in the absence of alternate terms, the

and the individual with economic production—postmodernism comes to describe a changing structure of feeling, though Bewes does not name it as such.

As postmodern language increasingly comes to describe the state of the social, Bewes argues that politicians, critics, and commentators—and even the general public—come to see qualities like authenticity, hope or stability as the desirable goals of political intervention, since these are seen to counteract the contingency that is so threatening. A politics thus construed, rather than destabilizing entrenched or ineffectual political structures, instead works to reinscribe the status quo, privileging authenticity and stability, rather than asking what is necessary to build a more effective political structure. We can see this in the furor in America over the sex lives and indiscretions of politicians, where debate revolves around the authenticity of political figures and the match between their private and public lives, rather than in evaluating their policy decisions or voting records. In this context, Meyers is perhaps correct in declaring the ultimate political *faux pas* to be sleeping with the interns.

For Bewes, this pressure towards authenticity and away from instability erodes politics itself and thus also contributes to the rise of cynicism, which responds to the inertia of the status quo. Cynicism is suspicious of the drive for authenticity that has replaced a politics of disruption in postmodern culture, recognizing, for instance, that the authenticity of the ideals put forward by a candidate like Morris saying he will “take back the country,” or even by Obama’s slogan “Yes we can,” are suspect. However, though

postmodern accounts for the fact that things have changed since modernism. While certain threads have persisted, the rise of irony, the proliferation of pastiche in widely divergent areas of life, the distinct unseriousness of all of these approaches—whatever our issues with relativism or deconstruction, the postmodern remains a way to recognize these shifts both in cultural production and our relation to it.

cynicism might appear to be sceptical of an agenda based on sincerity, it does nothing to disrupt it, and this is why Bewes regards it with suspicion: it registers a political scape hollowed out by the empty signifiers of authenticity, stability, or hope, and yet it does nothing about it. Bewes argues that cynicism contributes to the emptying out of politics because it forms judgments on the basis of the standards politics sets for itself: cynicism recognizes that a political claim to authenticity is inauthentic, but it does not change the terms of the discussion to say that the basis of politics should be something other than a barometer that measures authenticity. Instead, even when approached cynically, the measure of political potential is skewed. For Bewes, cynicism recognizes a society of false authenticity, but at the same time acquiesces to it, thus failing as a political gesture, failing to disrupt the status quo, which remains for Bewes the essential feature of political engagement.

And yet, I argue that the recognition or refusal of the falsity of the status quo inherent to cynicism is important. If we return to the notion that cynicism might be a site of affect, and a form of affect that orients one to one's structural conditions, then cynicism marks the failure of promises like authenticity or hope. It is here, juxtaposing cynicism against something like authenticity (or hope or optimism), that Bewes unintentionally articulates what is at stake in the question of cynicism: cynicism counters a system that locates meaningful sites of engagement in empty if hopeful-sounding signifiers, and yet, threatens to succumb to that structure at the same time. It does not offer an alternative to a politics that seeks stability, but instead, inhabits the failure of politics. Cynicism becomes both something oppositional and something acquiescent at

the same time. While for Bewes this makes cynicism unresolvedly problematic, I wonder if it rather highlights a stubborn attachment to a certain notion of political effectiveness, a notion that locates politics and agency only in action, specifically in disruptive or oppositional action. Certainly, this is one form of politics, but is it the only one? And is it the most effective in responding to a socio-political structure mired in contradictory sets of descriptions and values (a structure that fosters a relation of cynicism in the subject)?

The location of politics in disruption is a sticking point in Bewes's argument, since postmodernism with all its breaks and fissures is rife with disruption and yet for Bewes contributes to a wan, apolitical public sphere. Bewes agrees that disruption exists, but argues that its political potential is drained away as the discursive features of postmodernism become ubiquitous and over-played by media and politicians. Under postmodernism, our relationship to contingency is reconfigured; we become accustomed to incongruity as a banal fact of life, rather than seeing it as a site of political possibility. In fact, Bewes's description of the normalization of postmodern discourse in society sounds very much like a description of a neoliberal social order, suggesting, perhaps, that neoliberalism might be more closely tied to postmodernism than has been acknowledged. One of the fruitful speculations posed by Bewes's argument is the consideration that metaphysical, philosophical, or aesthetic characteristics or descriptions can migrate into the way in which we not only conceptualize but also enact political, economic, or social formations.

Ultimately, however, Bewes wants to excise or at least curtail the normalized proliferation of what he calls postmodernism, and because he remains committed to the

locus of politics in disruption, he aims to do this by interrupting the repetition of the idea of social incoherence and dissolution. However, it is difficult to imagine a shift away from the language of contingency that does not also constitute a move towards security, authenticity, or truth. It is difficult to imagine a politics against dissolution that does not also become a conservative politics.³⁰ The question remains open: how can disruption be reconfigured to mean something other than a reiteration of one of the central characteristics of a neoliberal social order in which contingency is par for the course? How can a politics of disruption function in a social order in which our lives are disrupted daily by ads, housing crises and the collapse of currencies?³¹

The question Bewes does not ask is whether or not his definition of politics or political intervention can hold. If postmodernism (or neoliberalism) is all there is, everywhere, and if, as such, we have become used to disjuncture in our everyday lives, then for what reason would a particular disruptive gesture be read as political, rather than banal? This is not to say that disruption is impossible—certainly the Arab Spring demonstrates the possibility of a rift, but it is not helpful to pose the category of disruption as inevitably political, or to position disruption as the ultimate political goal without articulating how that disruption will take place and precisely what it will disrupt—as *Ides of March* demonstrates in such an off-hand way: disruption—

³⁰ Further to this point, the notion that all politics must be limited to disruption or that stability is inherently antipolitical should not be overstated. Certainly, in terms of something like union politics, stability and futurity are political goals as much as their erosion is a politics of a different sort.

³¹ In an interview with Michael Hardt in which the two discuss their respective approaches to “love” as a political concept, Lauren Berlant begins to consider “love” as a possible locus for a politics that can endure disruption without lapsing into conservatism. She suggests love offers a kind of affective continuity that mediates through discontinuity or change. She says, love “includes a promise that you will feel held by relationality, though not necessarily always good in it, as you are changing” (online).

particularly when it is taken up as a mode premised on generating winners and losers—can produce casualties. And surely this is part of the issue cynicism illuminates, even as Bewes moves to excise it: can we really understand politics as disruption? If politics is supposed to be disruption, then in a postmodern (or neoliberal) order, it is less clear what the target of that disruption should be. If in Bakhtin’s version of carnival, those holding positions of power could be momentarily subverted, who would be the targets of such an inversion in today’s social order? Certainly the Occupy movement’s lack of particular target—beyond the generally oppressive socio-economic order—gestures towards the difficulty of attempting to name targets who can bear responsibility for our social ills. Yet, this is precisely the *value* of the Occupy position: the movement troubles the simplistic assumption that we must merely name our oppressors and overturn them. Instead, Occupy offers a different conception of action or activism altogether, one that is premised on coming together in order to produce a provocation, rather than outlining in detail an alternative social order. Occupy is about inhabiting the space of cynicism—the space of frustrated agency, a position from which one cannot necessarily do anything and certainly cannot begin to outline an alternative social vision. In this approach, Occupy suggests that we think about cynicism and action as other than binary terms in which the latter should always trump the former.

Bewes is rightly critical of empty political goals cloaked in glowing notions like authenticity, hope or positivity, which *seem*, however empty they may be at root, to counter, rather than reinforce a reality overburdened by contingency and ambiguity. As such, wouldn’t a modality like cynicism that refuses such optimism bear further

investigation? And yet, Bewes insists that cynicism marks an undesirable orientation, his language returning to a sense of subjective failure or responsibility as the cause of cynicism—the notion that cynicism is a choice, even if it is a choice made easier by the proliferation of the qualities he ascribes to postmodernism. Bewes’s sense that one chooses cynicism also leads to the conclusion that simply promoting another choice could solve the problem of cynicism. He suggests that if we could begin to recognize the way in which postmodernism and its tendrils have spread into our collective, everyday lives, then politics could perhaps return. The way Bewes seeks to begin this work is to reveal cynicism as a central political problematic—to grossly generalize, his assumption seems to be: if we can see cynicism, then we can perhaps undo it. However, this faith in revelation is contradicted by cynicism itself, understood as enlightened false consciousness. If we can see ideological structures and yet continue to live in accordance with them, then it stands to reason that we could similarly see cynicism and yet continue to live cynically. In this case, if cynicism is problematic, then the problem it poses lies in how we understand politics itself. Cynicism demonstrates the limits of a politics based on unmasking—the limits of ideology critique—and yet the critique of cynicism by both Bewes and Sloterdijk reveals the depths to which both ideology critique and political action remain wed to a notion of politics predicated on revelation.

Many might similarly read a film like *Ides of March*, which can be seen to build its critique on the revelation of the political system as self-interested and based on the

pursuit of personal gain.³² And yet the film is more complicated than this easy dismissal allows: in the end, Morris, the idealistic candidate bent on promoting electric energy and reclaiming America as a vanguard in environmentalism and social care, is poised to win the candidacy and perhaps also the presidency. Perhaps inadvertently, then, the film seems to be asking whether or not all the back-door dealings that propel politics are relevant if in the end they manage to propel the best candidate into a position of power. This trajectory in the film asks us to consider what the target of critique should be. Even if we're cynical about the political system, this does not mean that the system itself necessarily reproduces the self-interest that lies behind its function. The system can produce results we deem "good" as much as it can produce "bad" results. Likewise, I argue that cynicism is less tied to the judgment of politics as good or bad, or even the judgment of cynicism itself as good or bad. Trying to demonize it reiterates the kind of ideology critique it itself disables. Instead, I suggest that cynicism speaks more to the limits placed on the subject altogether—speaks to the absence of the voter in a film like *Ides of March*, or the reciprocity between the structure of politics that produces a situation in which the voter is irrelevant and the voter's subsequent experience of that situation. Cynicism is thus not so much a position of political critique, as perhaps it was understood to mean in a Classical era as it is a mode of relation or orientation towards the

³² For instance, in his review in *The New York Times*, A. O. Scott writes, that the film, "makes its points carefully and unimpeachably but does not bring much in the way of insight or risk. Powerful men often treat women as sexual playthings. Reporters do not always get things right. Politicians sometimes lie. If any of that sounds like news to you, then you may well find "The Ides of March" downright electrifying" (online). Extending this critique a bit further, Anthony Lane suggests in the *New Yorker* that *Ides of March* falls flat because "over time, such paranoid accounts of political conduct grow less convincing than their comic counterparts" (online).

limitations inscribed around subjective agency in, for example, an era of *Ides of March*-style politicking.

I am thus more interested in the unfleshed slippages in which Bewes marks cynicism as an unavoidable state of being produced in relation to a society shaped by postmodernism (or neoliberalism). For Bewes, as for Sloterdijk, the chafe of cynicism resides in its position within the dialectic of ideology and subject. If the Enlightenment ideal is summarized in the Cartesian notion that to think is to be, then cynical subjectivity suggests that one can think and yet not be, or, one can think and yet remain unable to translate thought into action. For Bewes, this is the central problematic inherent to cynicism: its failure to act. And yet the Cartesian model, though it implies a self-aware and self-directed mode of being, does not necessarily imply an action that would counter ideological tendencies. To think is not only to be *up against* but also to be *alongside* dominant structures of power—as Foucault has taught us. While this notion of being has been widely accepted to explain subjectivity and its relation to ideology, and while we think we have accepted what Foucault has taught us, cynicism generates a sticking point: if we how we think corresponds to how we act, we prefer modes of thinking (and thus of acting) that appear self-directed, as opposed to ideologically motivated. In particular, we prefer a self-directed mode to stand behind that which we call politics. Thus cynicism is positioned as a subjective failure or an acquiescence of a most particular and insidious sort: an acquiescence that is aware of the fact that it is giving in.

Giving in to cynicism

Slavoj Žižek's account of cynicism works to articulate precisely this difficulty in understanding agency and mystification in cynicism: how is it that we can know and yet continue to act as if we do not have that knowledge? To begin, he returns to the work of Althusser and Lacan, a dyad he argues has been eclipsed by the more prominent focus in critical theory on Foucault and Habermas. For all their difference, he argues that both Foucault and Habermas rely on a similar mode of understanding the individual subject as self-mastering (2). On the contrary, he argues that Althusser's model of subjectivity is based on a kind of "subjective destitution" (2). Žižek writes of Althusser, "the point is not just that we must unmask the structural mechanism which is producing the effect of subject as ideological misrecognition, but that we must at the same time fully acknowledge this misrecognition as unavoidable" (2). This insurmountable alienation is reiterated by Lacan's notion of a fundamental antagonism, the unbridgeable gap between the Real and Symbolic, the "kernel" of the real that resists integration into the symbolic. Thus, for Žižek, the over-riding of Althusser/Lacan with Habermas/Foucault is a move away from the chafe of a fundamental and unsolvable incongruity in subjective experience as expressed in the theories of the former. However, Žižek wants to draw attention to the ethical position raised in the demand to come to terms with such a fundamental and unsolvable gap in a way that might mean something other than to bridge it through the kind of mastery or synthesis he sees in models like Habermas's or even Foucault's.

Žižek also juxtaposes his description of an Althusserian/Lacanian alienation with a traditional Marxist theory of class struggle. He describes a classical Marxist notion of revolution as “a situation of metaphorical condensation in which it finally becomes clear to the everyday consciousness that it is not possible to solve any particular question without solving them all—that is, without solving the fundamental question which embodies the antagonistic character of the social totality” (3). For classical Marxists, the domination of social life by capital precipitates all other antagonisms and therefore must be overcome and all else will follow. Thus, like Foucault and Habermas, Žižek sees classical Marxism as working towards mastery, whereas a model of revolution based more closely on the theories of Althusser and Lacan might recognize the impossibility of fundamental social resolution or revolution.

Žižek goes on to declare that most “post-Marxism” is in fact not Marxist at all, at least in the fact that it gives up this notion of an over-riding revolutionary objective. Instead, much post-Marxist work multiplies antagonisms, sometimes with the residual aim of locating the key to total social renewal in a particular deadlock, in other cases, though, acknowledging the mutuality of various struggles. Again following Lacan, Žižek argues against the prerogative of harmonization in approaching these points of friction. Instead, he draws on Freud’s notion of the death drive, the “dimension of radical negativity” (5), to suggest that the solution is not, in fact, to overcome or abolish a basic tension or friction in human existence, but instead “to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, on the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it” (5). Culture, he argues, is the cultivation of “this imbalance, this

traumatic kernel, this radical antagonism” (5). The illusion of harmony, on the contrary, is “a direct path to totalitarianism” (5). In this vein, Žižek cites Laclau and Mouffe’s social theory, which is similarly based on the notion of an originary and unresolvable trauma the resolution of which is impossible, any attempt doomed to fail. Their radical politics, then, is radical not in the “solution” it poses, but in its acceptance that “every solution is provisional and temporary, a kind of postponing of a fundamental impossibility” (6). Thus, to save democracy, we must account for its “radical impossibility” (6). Under Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism, revolution becomes, rather than a solution, a wrestling with particular problems even while acknowledging “the global radical deadlock” (6). In other words, revolution is very much not revolutionary in the traditional, Marxist sense of the word. It is not total; there is not one over-riding antagonism that acts as Rosetta stone for global harmony. The form of post-Marxism Žižek seeks to draw out recognizes the impossibility, even undesirability, of harmony as a global goal and instead reaches for acknowledgment and acceptance of antagonism as a fundamental fact of human life. As a model for such an antagonism—whether subjective or cultural—Žižek turns to Hegel, whose dialectics, he argues, is misread when phrased in terms of synthesis or progressive overcoming. Instead, he describes Hegel’s dialectics as “a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts” (6), his notion of “absolute knowledge” denoting the acknowledgement of “a certain radical loss” (7).

Žižek’s interest in friction, loss, and failure is ultimately ideological. Drawing on Lacan’s notion of the symbolic order, Žižek is interested in delimiting a form of thought that exists outside of thought—an order that disrupts the binary between “external factual

reality” and “internal or subjective experience” (19)—a form that could explain the simultaneous abstraction and banality of something like the commodity, that is, an abstraction that is not entirely contained by subjective experience and is not entirely erased, and is in fact made more interesting, by the ubiquity and ease with which individuals engage with commodities. In fact, it is the latter that is primarily Žižek’s interest in describing the sublime object of ideology. In other words, he’s interested in precisely the fact that we proceed *as if* all manner of ideological functions were not abstract and in fact these exchanges depend precisely on the unconscious denial of their abstraction. It is consciousness that stands in the way of recognizing the abstraction underpinning everyday exchange (20). The “social effectivity of the exchange process is a kind of reality which is possible only on condition that the individuals partaking in it are not aware of its proper logic... if we come to ‘know too much’, to pierce the true functioning of social reality, this reality would dissolve itself” (21). Thus the commodity form mirrors the form of ideology more broadly, for this is also his definition of ideology—ideology for Žižek is not false consciousness, “an illusory representation of reality” (21). Instead “‘ideological’ is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence” (21 emphasis in original). In other words, it’s not that subjects have mistaken view of “reality,” but that they are unaware that “reality” is a construction of their own false consciousness. Similarly, societies are not structured in ways that are ideologically good or evil. Countering the position put forward by Eco in *The Name of the Rose*—that a dogmatic obsession with the pursuit of the Good, coincident with a lack of laughter, can become a source of totalitarianism—

Žižek argues that it is not the pursuit of total Good or Evil that is sociologically concerning. Instead, he argues “in contemporary societies, whether democratic or totalitarian, that cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally” (28).

At long last, we arrive at cynicism. For Žižek, cynicism is ideological—and we can hear in his descriptions of ideology echoes of Sloterdijk’s enlightened false consciousness. Specifically, he calls it a “form of ideology” (28). The basic definition of ideology “implies a kind of basic, constitutive naïveté: the misrecognition of its own presuppositions, of its own effective conditions, a distance, a divergence between so-called social reality and our distorted representation, our false consciousness of it” (28). This false consciousness and ideological mystification is written into reality—there is no outside to ideology, and thus no way by which to simply throw away its distorting spectacles in order to see clearly. In approaching a critique of ideology, then, Žižek insists, we must “avoid simple metaphors of demasking, of throwing away the veils” (28), since to see ideology does not dissolve it, but merely “changes it into another kind of reality” (28). It is this other reality that interests Žižek. He asks, “does this concept of ideology as a naïve consciousness still apply to today’s world?” (29). Cynicism suggests it does not. Žižek answers his own question by invoking Sloterdijk’s notion of enlightened false consciousness, a situation in which “the cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask” (29). Or, as he quotes Sloterdijk, “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (29). Thus, ideology does not, or does not only,

operate in our unconsciousness of it, but instead, persists in spite of our awareness of it. It persists in spite of our cynical awareness of its existence. Here Žižek comes up against the same kind of bind Sloterdijk and Bewes wrangle with in terms of cynicism—the problem of enlightened false consciousness for politics or for agency more broadly. If we can see ideology and yet continue to act in accordance with it, then what does this mean for politics or for subjectivity? While both Bewes and Sloterdijk respond to the problem of politics by maintaining some allegiance with a Classical, resistant mode of opposition, and by demonizing the modern cynical subject, the way Žižek frames cynicism within the terms of a fundamental, unresolvable antagonism offers another way forward.

Where Sloterdijk and Bewes declare a break between Greek Cynicism and its modern incarnation, Žižek is interested in the relation between these two modes. For Žižek, Greek cynicism represents a pragmatic position that “subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation” (29). Žižek argues that this Greek mode proceeds *ad hominem*, or by using a strategy similar to campaign attack ads, pointing out the flaws in those who declare the law in order to subvert the law itself. The modern iteration of cynicism responds to this mode of subversion by taking it into account. Rather than resisting, cynicism adopts the tactics of its forebears “but still finds reason to retain the mask” (29). Cynicism is thus “a kind of perverted ‘negation of the negation’ of the official ideology” (30). If contemporary ideological structures can absorb cynical subversion, this functions in part through Žižek’s characterization of cynicism as an *ad hominem* objection. Cynicism finds its critique in enunciation—both leveraging its attack at the figures who speak ideology and likewise stemming from an embodied

position. Cynical reason focuses its attack on the figures who enact the ideological apparatus—politicians, teachers, law enforcement officers—rather than on the system itself.

While one could argue that cynicism isn't wholly explained *ad hominem*—to shit in the street is to offend not only those who would prevent you from doing so, but also the law itself—I want to argue that the way in which Žižek situates cynicism within subjectivity is vital to understanding its socio-cultural role. While cynicism might not always or completely constitute an *ad hominem* attack, there is a way in which individuals do bear the brunt of its scrutiny—one definition of cynicism sees it as a judgment of self-interest and a movie like *Ides of March* is more interested in the interpersonal intrigue that shapes politics than it is in critiquing the political structure (and how would one accomplish the latter in the absence of its personalization through characters, in any case?). Moreover, the judgment of cynicism is always attached to an individual—it is difficult to imagine what a cynical structure might look like—even as the conditions that generate cynicism lie far beyond subjective control. While understanding cynicism as enlightened false consciousness changes the way in which we understand the function of ideology, it perhaps does more to alter the way in which we imagine subjectivity. Thus its political question has to do not only with how we can differently understand our relationship to knowledge, but also lies in understanding how the changing landscape of knowledge shapes our capacity as subjects. As Žižek makes clear, cynicism recognizes that politics can no longer or not only be oriented around

seeing through ideology, and instead has to do with limits placed on our capacity not to know, but to act.

Žižek details a shift in how we can begin to understand the relationship between action and ideology. Though a definition of cynicism as enlightened false consciousness could suggest that we have moved into a “so-called post-ideological world,” he cautions that this assumption moves too quickly. Rather than a lie that pretends to be taken seriously, ideology “is no longer meant, even by its authors, to be taken seriously... its rule is secured not by its truth-value but by simple extra-ideological violence and promise of gain” (30). However, this does not indicate the end of ideology. Where traditional understandings of ideology see its mystification at the level of knowledge—*they do not know it...*—Žižek argues instead that ideological illusion lies in action—*but they are doing it*. “What they ‘do not know’, what they misrecognize, is the fact that in their social reality itself, in their social activity... they are guided by the fetishistic illusion” (31). Thus, Žižek accounts for cynicism by understanding it in terms of our misrecognition of ideology itself—if we imagine ideological illusion at the level of knowledge, then we know too much, the prevailing ideology becomes cynical. Cynical distance becomes one of the ways in which we are blinded to the structuring power of ideological fantasy on our actions—“even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*” (33 emphasis in original). Thus, rather than trying to work around the central quandary cynicism presents for our conceptions of ideology and ideology critique, Žižek confronts this knowledge/action bind by reiterating ideology at the level of action. This allows him to retain both ideology and cynicism, a problem

Sloterdijk was not able to resolve except to say that in spite of enlightenment, we remain apathetic. Žižek shows that apathetic or not, subjects who are enlightened to false consciousness continue largely to act in accordance with an ideological structure; thus ideology remains, though cynicism blinds subjects to their own complicity with it.

However, even if cynical distance can produce this kind of ideological complicity, I argue that this reading of cynicism is incomplete. That is, Žižek's model of cynicism does not account for the fact that one can be aware of an ideological premise, can even be critical of it, and yet can also be *unable* to act outside of it. Cynicism need not necessarily be linked with blindness, even in action (or in inaction). One may live in accordance with a dominant ideological imperative simply because one can see no other way in which to live. Returning again to *Ides of March*, if one reads the character of Stephen Meyers (Ryan Gosling) as an emergent cynic, a character becoming enlightened to the falsity of his idealism, then his actions through the film stem from this cynicism. Yes, his acts ultimately maintain a political structure that is demonstrably corrupt, but his character is not unaware of his complicity in this structure, nor is he mystified as to its corruption. In fact, he manipulates the corruption he uncovers in order to serve his own interests. He is not enlightened and thus apathetic, as Sloterdijk might suggest of the modern cynic, he does not sigh into his own alienation, as Bewes imagines the cynic; rather, he knowingly and actively pursues an agenda that will best position him within the circuits open to him. In the film, then, cynicism marks an orientation that develops between Meyers and the political structure of electoral politics. One might argue that Meyers (or any campaign worker, perhaps) functions in a state of active apathy, under the guiding principle that

since he cannot change a system (and it is clear that Meyers is powerless to change the structure in which he operates), then he might as well use it as best he can to his own advantage. However one chooses to describe his role or his cynicism, one must account for his *action*. Žižek is perhaps correct in saying that action often remains in accordance with ideological structures, even if these are known to be false or constructed, but what if we can know and yet *knowingly* act in accordance with ideological structures? This seems a more insidious form of cynical subjectivity, one that threatens to devolve into self-interest at the expense of any sense of a common good.

However, I also want to suggest that Žižek's framing of cynicism in the terms of fundamental antagonism rather than subjective coherence suggests that tension between cynicism and action can also tie into a more complicated view of subject formation. As Laclau offers in his preface to *The Sublime Object of Ideology*,

The traditional debate as to the relationship between agent and structure thus appears fundamentally displaced: The issue is no longer a problem of autonomy, of determinism versus free will, in which two entities fully constituted as 'objectivities' mutually limit each other. On the contrary, the subject emerges as a result of the failure of substance in the process of its self-constitution. (xv)

Here Laclau seems to go beyond Žižek. Where Žižek characterizes cynicism as a mode that allows for ideological reproduction at the level of action, I suggest that cynicism can also *register* this shifting relation to ideology. Coupled with Bewes's understanding of cynicism as responsive to the way in which society is represented as a fractured and dissolving space and with Sloterdijk and Foucault's articulation of cynicism as a deeply felt and embodied state, Žižek's notion that cynicism remains tied to ideology and shapes action (or presumably also inaction) ties these together in a way that renders the question

of cynicism much more complex. Moreover, Žižek’s comparison to the commodity or dream form suggests cynicism be examined for its form, rather than judged on the basis of its content. Instead of a good or bad political position, cynicism describes the state of living under enlightened false consciousness—it expresses the bind experienced by subjectivity under a system that disables action of all sorts, enables actions towards which one might feel both conflicted and compelled and perpetuates unattainable fantasies to which we are bound, in our actions and desires, even if we can see their unreality—such as Stephen Meyers’s persistent belief in the potential of his candidate to enact change, even as he leverages a structure perpetuated on greed and self-interest to propel that candidate. Cynicism is thus the expression of a fraying ideology,³³ the friction within the subject/structure dyad as we live it out, and is thus much closer to what Lauren Berlant terms a kind of cruel optimism, the result of an unravelling sense of “the good life” held out to us as an unattainable, but not for that reason un compelling, goal.

I argue that cynicism is better understood in the context of what Jameson calls the political unconscious, what Raymond Williams characterizes as a structure of feeling, what Jacques Rancière terms “the distribution of the sensible” (12), or what Lauren Berlant describes in terms of genre, or the “locus of affective situations” (66). While such notions account for the “structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the ‘individual,’” (Jameson *Political* 4), they also register

³³ Berlant describes cynicism as resulting from the fraying of an idealized ideological fantasy: “Fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world ‘add up to something.’ What happens when those fantasies start to fray—depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash?” (2).

this gap as expressive of the collective, affective experience of culture, a public feeling that can help to explain ourselves to ourselves. For Berlant, these “gestural economies” articulate forms of self-management reflective of people’s “relation of living” within “ongoing crisis and loss” (5). Genre for Berlant expresses “the situation” (5), which however differently experienced, currently relates to the fraying of collective ideological fantasy since at least 1990, but probably beginning much earlier than this.³⁴ She writes,

The fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy. The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment. (3)

Though Berlant does not address cynicism specifically, except to mention it in passing as one of the results of ideological breakdown, her characterization of the current cultural moment resonates with the kind of social dissolution tracked by Bewes under the moniker postmodern. Extending Bewes’s insight that cynicism is linked to a kind of cultural postmodernism, I argue that cynicism is one of the central affects of neoliberal capital (the genre of which may well be defined as postmodern)—borne out of the lived experience of a neoliberal structure in which it is not always easy or possible to connect knowledge to action. Likewise, Berlant’s description of ideological breakdown resonates with Žižek’s assertion that ideology critique is challenged to account for different kinds of subjectivities today. Finally, Berlant’s insistence on embodied experience throughout *Cruel Optimism* interrogates the correlation Sloterdijk maintains between the body and

³⁴ Berlant’s account is situated within the United States and is implicitly or explicitly linked to the various crises recently experienced in that nation. However, her conception of genre, crisis and situationality can be applied in a broader context, though not without accounting for differences in the situation from place to place.

ideological experience. Though, as I've said, Berlant does not take up cynicism, despite the fact that in many ways it indicates the counterpoint to her central theme of optimism, I argue that cynicism is equally central to how one lives in the "impasse," which Berlant describes as follows:

a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things. (4)

I argue that cynicism marks one kind of crisis in clarification that Berlant associates with the waning of genre, or the waning of a coherent expression of the social situation. In a contemporary moment, "older realist genres" no longer seem to fit social experience and instead offer only "archaic expectations about having and building a life" (6), thus perpetuating a crisis in genre and the genre of crisis (7). In this language, we hear once again confusion about how one is able to live, what actions one might take to build one's life. In a neoliberal society in which the ways of living once taken for granted are being curtailed by housing and credit crises, rising cost of living and falling wages, precarious employment and rising unemployment, it is no longer clear how to translate thought into action, or, to use the language of the self-help genre: to translate one's dreams into reality. Increasingly, the stuff of collective fantasies like the American Dream seem ludicrously distant from the ways in which one is actually able to live. While cruel optimism describes a persistent attachment to the fantasy, I argue that we must equally pay attention to other modes in which this crisis is registered, one of which is cynicism. Perhaps as much as a persistent optimism, cynicism responds to the incongruity between a fraying genre and lived life, and equally registers this incongruity as a subjective

impasse: a state in which one remains oriented to ideology, but unable to choose a coherent path by which to realize it in one's own life.

For Berlant, the impasse is linked to “impassivity,” as a “style of composure” (5). The notion of impassivity is akin to that of cynicism, marking as it does a feeling of apathy or emotionlessness. If such a state is read in terms of its position within the total social situation, then, rather than an absence, it marks out a necessary site for political investigation, a necessary site for tracking the emergent present. Foucault first hinted towards this possibility in *The Courage of Truth* when he spent the second hour of his February 29, 1984 lecture in a “stroll” through the notion of “cynicism as a moral category in Western culture” (as opposed to the historical focus of the rest of the lectures in this series). Here he posed the possibility that if ancient *Kynismus* “was a form of assertion of oneself which, no longer able to refer or get support from the political and communitarian structures of ancient life... sought its point of reference and foundation [in] animality,” then modern *Zynismus* could also be seen as a “form of self-assertion... effectuated in the face of and in relation to absurdity and the universal absence of meaning” (179). It is not the self that is hollowed out in cynicism, but rather, the self *in relation* to structures of support; moreover, the cynical subject asserts through her cynicism a form of subjectivity that expresses the structural or cultural impasse of the moment.

In this understanding of cynicism, it is quite possible that both a *New York Times* reader (or editor) and a Fox News viewer can be cynical. Their cynicism is less a reflection of a personal political choice and is much more related to an experience of

subjectivity in late capitalism: to be right- or left-wing does not necessarily give one a greater access to agency. Cynicism thus complicates our understanding of politics.

Though its association with apathy or inaction seems to mark an apolitical stance, in fact these states of being speak to the difficulty of cultivating a political subjectivity in the late capitalist present and challenge our conception of politics or political engagement. As Jeremy Gilbert notes, an activist agenda is more often caught up in a demystification model of political engagement—what he calls a “politics of disclosure” premised on “informing an uninformed public” (206). I argue that our model of political engagement is also premised on a certain kind of subjectivity, a sovereign subjectivity that can easily translate her ideals into strategic actions. However, if cynicism suggests that we can see aspects of our ideological structure and yet continue to live within them, then the aim of politics is made more complicated, the subject of political engagement must be rethought. Ideology critique may not be enough. Sovereign subjectivity may be impossible in certain situations, or may even contribute to suffering (as I will explore in the next chapter).³⁵ And yet, cynicism seen as affective response to a widening incoherence in these fields offers a point at which to begin rethinking our relation to the current moment of increasingly inhumane neoliberalism, our attachment to it and frustration with it, and, perhaps most importantly, our embodied experience and feeling as subjects within it.

³⁵ In an interview in the special issue of *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, Lauren Berlant talks about sovereignty as an “aspirational concept” that gets treated as a “normative concept.” Thus, for her sovereignty is something that has never existed, but the pursuit of which obscures other possibilities. Though both in this interview and in *Cruel Optimism*, she stops short of saying sovereignty should be totally thrown out, she also advocates for a new model that would better account for subjectivity and the social (see *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, Special Issue 1: <http://reviewsinculture.com/special-issue/review1.html> or *Cruel Optimism*, 97-98). Likewise I would argue that cynicism calls for another understanding of subjectivity, beyond seeing subjectivity as failing if it appears not to be following the lines of a coherent and overt agency.

Chapter 2: Falling Men and Women

Today's capitalist economic order is a monstrous cosmos, into which the individual is born and which in practice is for him at least as an individual, simply a given, an immutable shell [*Gehause*], in which he is obliged to live. It forces on the individual, to the extent that he is caught up in the relationships of the 'market,' the norms of its economic activity. The manufacturer who consistently defies these norms will just as surely be forced out of business as the worker who cannot or will not conform will be out of work.

—Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

I was raised up believing I was somehow unique,
Like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes, unique in each way you can see,
And now after some thinking, I'd say I'd rather be,
A functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me.

—Fleet Foxes "Helplessness Blues"

She could fall and fall and fall and still never quite hit the ground. Her great uncle, the earl, owned the ground, beneath this building, beneath every building on the street, the theatre, the coffee houses, the McDonald's.

—Zadie Smith, *N/W*

The meaning of the word "cynicism" began to change in the late 1840s.³⁶ From a word that designated a school of Greek philosophy practicing embodied refusal, *cynic* became an *-ism* used to describe a particular kind character. According to Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, a modern cynic seeks to expose moral corruption, particularly among those who make up dominant social groups.³⁷ Fowler groups cynicism as a mode of humour, related to ironic and sardonic forms, that seeks to challenge or undermine that which appears to be natural or inevitable and in doing so, invokes negative affects, like

³⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* records an increasing prevalence of the word cynicism (as differentiated from cynic or cynical) in the middle of the 19th century, including a French variation "cynism," to refer not only to the Greek philosophical school, but also to begin to describe the character of individuals as cynical (also distinguished by its lack of capitalization).

³⁷ See H.W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* entry for "humour," which includes the category of cynicism and provides this differentiation (241).

pessimism. In other words, the form of modern cynicism I elucidated in the previous chapter begins to take shape in the late 19th century, and, most importantly for this chapter, begins to be used to designate *character*, both in the ephemeral sense of a frame of mind or temperament and as a figure or type. In its modern iteration, cynicism is understood less as the chosen orientation of one or a few individuals pursuing a particular political or philosophical method, but becomes at once both generalized and individualized. Cynicism comes to mark a sneering or sarcastic tone—an attitude—that can be taken up by or applied to anyone, but is in either case a reflection of character, a reflection of the individual.

Also important to this chapter is the fact that our contemporary understanding of cynicism began to be formed in the same period as the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution were beginning to be understood and felt as a profound socio-cultural shift (see Hobsbawm 1975). In particular, this shift in the usage of the term cynicism coincided with what is sometimes referred to as the second industrial revolution in the mid- to late-19th century, the phase of steel and electricity, which ultimately culminated in the production line and the wide availability in Europe and North America of machine-made goods: from vacuum cleaners, to cash registers, to telephones (Adas 141-42). This is not to suggest a causal relationship between industrialization and the shifting etymology of cynicism, nor is it to suggest that the modern definition of cynicism is of an entirely different species than its predecessor. However, it remains that in a modern, industrializing moment, cynicism came to be understood less as a philosophy of refusal than as a self-interested mode of exposure (Fowler 241). While it is perhaps

coincidental that the meaning of cynicism begins to change alongside a socio-cultural structure sliding inexorably towards modernity, I suggest that the parallels between these two shifts are in fact significant and meaningful, coincidental or not. Cynicism comes to name an *attitude* emerging out of a rapidly changing and unstable industrializing moment. As well, it comes to describe a particular type of *individual* at a moment in which the inexorability and monumentality of the social shift underway were beginning to be conceptualized as a shift towards individual consumption and regulation.

Consequently, I argue that cynicism offers a means by which to understand the dialectic between subject and structure at the particular historical conjuncture of Fordist capitalism through an affective orientation that functions as a lynchpin of sorts in the fluctuating relationship between the two.

The relationship between subject and structure is well articulated in, and is in fact central to, theories of capitalism. Conceptualized by Max Weber in 1904 as “an iron cage,” the structure of capitalism is often seen to impel subjective agency into the frames of productivity (*see also* Althusser 1971), or to redirect it into the mindless and harmless avenues of mass media (*see* Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, Marcuse 1964, Debord 1967). Feeling or emotion, though less central to theories of capitalism, has also been linked to the function of capitalist societies. Most famously, in *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams coined the term “structures of feeling” in order to describe the way in which ideological formations are lived out in the experience of the social, or, as he writes, the notion of structures of feeling works to understand “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (132). As early as 1904, Weber acknowledged that, “the new

methods of work are inseparable from a specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life” (302). Building on Weber and also Clifford Geertz, more recently Sherry Ortner has defined a broad notion of a social subjectivity in terms of both the psychological, or relating to “feelings, desires, anxieties, intentions, and so on,” and as expressive of “large scale cultural formations” (34). And, Sianne Ngai suggests that, “[M]ost critics today accept that far from being merely private or idiosyncratic phenomena... feelings are as fundamentally ‘social’ as the institutions and collective practices that have been the more traditional object of historicist criticism..., and as ‘material’ as the linguistic signs and significations that have been the more traditional objects of literary formalism” (*Ugly* 25). Recent work in affect theory has paid attention to the precise nature of these structural feelings. Ortner and Ngai’s work in particular, unpacks various affective states—in the terms of subjectivities for Ortner and “ugly feelings” for Ngai—in order to better understand the nuances of the subject/structure relationship, while theorists like Lauren Berlant, Heather Love, Sarah Ahmed, and Ann Cvetkovich (each of whom is central to my work, whether explicitly or not) have worked to articulate the central role affect has in shaping or challenging our understandings of subjectivity, normativity, and politics.

Building on this conceptualization of the interrelatedness of subject and structure and the centrality of affect or feeling to our understanding of the socio-cultural, I argue that cynicism offers a means by which to consider subject and structure in a reciprocal, dialectical, and inseparable relationship with one another. However, rather than arguing that cynicism marks a structure of feeling, I want to recast this slightly to consider the

notion of a structured feeling, or a structural feeling. By shifting the more famous term structure of feeling, I want to draw emphasis to the particularity of the *feeling*, to shift away from the structural as that which is reinforced by the affective and towards the subjective experience of the structural. If “structures of feeling” indicate the affective dimensions in which ideology functions to construct subjects, then structural feelings refer to the way in which those affects play out in subjects, the way in which affects forge particular kinds of orientations to structural obduracies. Not all affects necessarily work this way, but recent work in affect theory has focused on the way in which particular feelings are generated out of forms of ideological promise or attachment (happiness for Sara Ahmed [2010], or optimism for Lauren Berlant [2012]). Here I want to argue for the need to equally understand the affects that register the failure of that promise, in the case of this project, cynicism.

Moreover, by focusing on the subjective experience of structure, I want to draw attention to the complexity of the feeling thus generated. Cynicism is more commonly viewed as a giving in to structure. Rather than fostering a dialectic tension, it is seen as a kind of nihilistic sigh, a disaffected affect, that shrugs as it eases into the “whatever” Michael Hardt links with the function of power in an era of anonymous, mobile Post-Fordist capitalism (Deleuze’s “society of control”) (36).³⁸ Cynicism is seen as unfeeling: the emptying out, cancelling, or refusal of “feeling.” While it is true that the structure of

³⁸ In referring to a “whatever” subjectivity, Hardt is taking up Agamben’s description in his book *Coming Community* (also translated by Hardt) of contemporary subjectivity as *il qualunque* (which Foucault and Deleuze take up as *le quelconque*). For each of these theorists, as is explained explicitly in the Hardt essay cited here, the notion of “the whatever” describes subjectivity in a smooth, flexible, and mobile society of control in which “contingent performativity proposes a broader mobility and flexibility that fixes no identity” (36).

capital makes particular affective demands of the subject, some of which are registered as ambivalence, or even as the kinds of waning affects Jameson ascribed to postmodernity (*Postmodernism* 10), I want to argue that even these sites of supposed unfeeling contain a complicated set of relations, actions, inactions, and attitudes that are essential to our understanding of the way in which the contemporary Western, liberal subject is interpellated. Just as Hardt and Agamben are clear that the “whatever,” does not indicate complete subjective vacancy or nihilism, I argue that cynicism is only misrepresented as empty or disinterested. Even if the utopian promise of capital generally points to particular forms of happiness, this does not mean that the subject always orients herself towards those promised forms, or does so under the spell of a blind optimism. In fact, she may see through the promise, entirely—in the kind of ideologically cynical position Žižek describes—and in doing so may balk, fail, fall, cry, laugh, refuse, or accede. Cynicism, then, marks not a failure of the subject or a failure of affect, but instead describes the orientation of the contemporary subject towards the failure of the promise of capitalism. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at the terms and subjective costs of that promise, but here I want to unpack the affective and aesthetic representation of and response to cynicism as these accompany developments in industrialized and later post-industrialized capital.

Cynicism demands that we consider the malleability of the subject in the iron cage of capital—which is perhaps now more effectively conceptualized as a pliable Lombardi

graph³⁹—in a different way. First, the subject is not merely worked through the cogs of capitalism to be spit out on the other side as either a functional, successful citizen or a puddle of guts. She can be rendered into all kinds of ambivalent and contradictory affective states, from elation to resignation to cynicism. Second, the structural feeling must refer to a set of conflicting and contradictory values: on the one hand, there are those feelings privileged and perpetuated by a socio-economic system; in our moment in North America, these include happiness, positivity, and hope. On the other, are those feelings tied to one's sense of agency within that structure. These can include feelings of triumph, but also include a set of feelings, including cynicism, that express a lack of subjective agency. Third, then, we must recognize that in the encounter between subject and structure, all kinds of affective responses are produced: fear, submission, anger, incredulity, hope, triumph, failure, and, as well, cynicism—a knowingness that cannot necessarily be linked to action, agency or self-determination, not because the subject chooses not to act, but because there may not be any actionable paths open to her, or because the choices she faces all come at significant personal cost. As Berlant claims of optimism, cynicism too can be examined not just to understand the internal state produced in a subject under a particular socio-economic system, but also as a measure of the *situation* of the subject under capitalism.

³⁹ Mark Lombardi was an American conceptual artist whose work involved mapping out the networks of global financial and political frauds in intricate, wall-sized graphs. Using news articles from reputable networks and newspapers, Lombardi would plot out the connections between various global power brokers, tracing the transfer of money and influence behind various scandals, such as George W. Bush and the Harken Energy Scandal.

The Fall Man

It is perhaps unoriginal and certainly unsurprising to undertake a discussion of the scene of industrialized capitalism using Charlie Chaplin, particularly the Chaplin of *Modern Times*. The famous scenes of his malleable body being worked through the cogs of a giant machine have become synonymous with descriptions of the human subject's incorporation into industry in the early 20th century, emblematic of the yielding of the soft human subject to the unrelenting apparatus.⁴⁰ And yet, it is precisely this iconicity that makes Chaplin a rich ground on which to consider the structural feelings that grow up alongside industrialization.

In *Modern Times*, Chaplin's famous character the Tramp encounters forms of power consistent with the era of Taylorized assembly line production.⁴¹ The factory disciplines his flesh, both overtly through the demands of the machine and more subtly, through devices like punch cards, routine, and surveillance: what Foucault or Althusser would understand in terms of the ideological apparatus of factory production. In the opening sequences of the film, the scenes in which Chaplin's factory worker tightens pairs of bolts as they go by on an assembly line, he embodies the type of worker Taylor referred to as on par with a "trained gorilla,"⁴² the industrial apparatus around him dramatizing the "iron cage" with which Weber characterized the structure of

⁴⁰ This imagery is so seminal, in fact, that Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir named their 1945 journal *Les Temps modernes* after the film.

⁴¹ In the film's credits, Chaplin's character is billed simply as a "factory worker," and not specifically as the Tramp, though, as is characteristic of many of the films in which the Tramp appears, he is never referred to by any name in the film. In fact, *Modern Times* is the last film in which Chaplin appears as the Tramp. For the sake of clarity, I've referred to the character as either Chaplin's factory worker or, simply, Chaplin throughout.

⁴² Gramsci discusses this trope in Notebook 22 of *The Prison Notebooks*, "Americanism and Fordism," pp: 302-303 in which he describes the way in which "new methods of work are inseparable from a specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life" (302).

industrialized capitalism (121).⁴³ In several ways, Chaplin's factory worker represents the subject inscribed in industry, or as Bergson might describe, the mechanical as it is encrusted onto the human (see *Laughter* 1900). Not only is he eventually drawn into the machine, but also, and more subtly, his impulses and emotions are contained, or redirected by the apparatus in which he works. For example, in *Modern Times*' opening scenes, a fly repeatedly bothers Chaplin's face and he falls behind his task as he pauses to swat at it briefly, only to give up and race to catch up with the pairs of bolts that keep whizzing past. Chaplin's factory worker does not control the assembly line, nor can he stop the machine when, in his flustered state, his wrench is caught on a bolt and he is dragged along with the conveyor belt forcing the supervisor to shut it down so he can be rescued. Chaplin's interruption of the flow of labour angers his colleague down the line, who storms over to kick the bungling factory worker in the seat of his pants. Whereas in earlier Chaplin films this kind of angry gesture would have precipitated a brawl between the two men,⁴⁴ in this instance, they begin to fight, but immediately are pulled back to the line as it begins moving again. Like the irritation caused by a fly, anger cannot be expressed on the line or it will be thrown out of line. Emotional expression is curtailed by

⁴³ In their translation, Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells cast Weber's famous image of capitalism's *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, as a "shell as hard as steel." Parson's previous translation had rendered the phrase as "iron cage." Baehr and Wells' alteration, they argue, keeps with Weber's more frequent reference to steel than iron as a complex, industrially-produced fabrication that is extremely durable, like iron, but also flexible, unlike iron. They argue that steel more accurately reflects "rational bourgeois capitalism [than] the iron of which it is a refinement" (lxx). The decision to move from a cage to a shell reflects the idea that this structure "has not just been externally imposed but... [has also] become integral to human existence. Whereas a cage confines human agents but leaves their powers otherwise intact, a shell suggests that modern capitalism has created a new kind of being" (lxxi).

⁴⁴ See for example *Making a Living* (1914), *Tango Tangles* (1914), *The Masquerader* (1914), *His New Profession* (1914), *By the Sea* (1915), *The Wild Clerk of the Pawnshop* (1916) and many others, in which Chaplin gets into fights, often over misunderstandings and minor misdemeanors. In many of Chaplin's films, fights are pre-empted by the appearance of authority figures (bosses or police officers), but in *Modern Times*, this disciplinary function is shifted to the machine itself.

the demands of labour and any relationship with a fellow worker is secondary to the primary relationship: that between the individual and his station on the production line.

In a notebook entitled “Americanism and Fordism,” Gramsci argues that the “new methods of work are inseparable from a specific mode of living and of thinking and feeling life” (302). Directly responding to Taylor’s gorilla remark, Gramsci suggests that it is “the purpose of American society” to develop “in the worker to the highest degree automatic and mechanical attitudes” (302). While in these opening scenes, Chaplin is more Benjaminian automaton than Taylorized gorilla (which presumably would continue swatting at flies to the neglect of a mundane assembly line task), Gramsci’s notion of “mechanical attitudes” captures something of the subtle subjective effects/affects of the machine-like actions demanded by the industrial apparatus. To read the film in this way—as emblematic of the mechanization of the human under industrialism even at the level of attitude—is to support one understanding of Weber’s notion that industrialization, and particularly industrially produced goods, “gained increasing and finally inescapable power over men” (121).

If the bodies and minds of the subjects of industrialized capital are recast in the molds of producer and consumer, the fuel and the function of the emerging economy, then one way of conceptualizing this shift is to imagine the human absorbed into the machine. This is precisely—and famously—what takes place in *Modern Times*: Chaplin’s body is pulled into the machine. As the workday drags on, or, as the intertitles tell us, as “time marches on,” the unseen operator increases the speed of the line and Chaplin’s factory worker simply cannot keep up. Pairs of bolts begin to speed past him causing the

factory worker to snap out of position; he clammers up onto the conveyor belt, chasing the bolts he missed. This time, the line does not stop for Chaplin's interruption and his body is dragged into the machine, leading to the famous scene of his body sliding around its giant, internal cogs. And yet, Chaplin's incorporation into the machine is quickly reversed. His body neither grinds the machine to a halt, nor is it disassembled and poured into a waiting tin can.⁴⁵ Instead, he moves through it smoothly and without injury or interruption, until the gears are reversed and the machine spits him out, intact in body, but perhaps loosened in mind. The injuries Chaplin's factory worker endures are psychic, rather than physical, as confirmed by the intertitles: "He's crazy!" Thus, Chaplin represents a different industrialized subject than the drone, the mechanical man programmed only to repeat a particular task until the punch clock tells him his shift has ended. Chaplin is now the failed worker, and, vitally, he has failed at the level of ontology.

We witness Chaplin's altered state of being through his actions. No longer made legible in its connection to the line, the ejected Chaplin begins repeating his assembly-line task—tightening pairs of bolts—though no longer in service to the machine. Dancing around the factory, Chaplin begins torqueing anything resembling a set of bolts—his co-workers noses, the two large buttons unfortunately placed on the back of a secretary's skirt or on the front of another woman's blouse. Chaplin is "crazy," because he continues to perform such a task when it no longer makes sense, but is he crazy, or is it the task

⁴⁵ This famous scene is repeated in innumerable cartoon sequences that came after *Modern Times*. The cartoon iterations often conclude by disassembling the unlucky, machine-bound character (helpfully always the "bad guy") and pouring his contents into a waiting tin can. See, for example, Nick Park's Wallace and Gromit in *A Close Shave* (1995), in which an evil mechanical dog called Preston finally gets his comeuppance when he is pulled into a knitting machine.

itself that is crazy? That line is blurred for the viewer, who sees the repetitive function as “crazy making” itself, as an absurd exercise in endurance in the face of mundanity.

Chaplin’s actions in these scenes, in other words, point to the absurdity of the demands of industrialization, stretching them to hyperbolic ends by positioning his task as the only gesture he remains capable of performing. In his satire of the role of a factory worker in these scenes, Chaplin’s performance encourages viewers to read industrialization through the lens of what Žižek describes as ideological cynicism, or Sloterdijk as enlightened false consciousness: the sequence offers a moment of enlightenment to the workings and effects of the industrial apparatus on the worker and unpacks the human costs that can attend a supposedly “common sense” set of actions. It allows a view into the machine. While Chaplin’s character is himself not yet cynical—I will come to his moment of cynicism—his portrayal of labour invites viewers to view the factory cynically: as a site of ideological and material reproduction that exacts significant human costs. And moreover, invites viewers to *share* in that sense of cynicism.

The shared cynical view of industrialization opened up in these scenes is critical to those who have celebrated the film’s revolutionary potential. For example, French filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne discuss these scenes in a short program included with Criterion’s release of the film. They note that, in the context of industrial capitalism, the human body can either be cog or an interruption—both exemplified by Chaplin’s portrayal of a factory worker. However, their description goes on to articulate a third option, though they don’t necessarily label it as such. Chaplin “dances with the machine,” they say. The machine becomes his ally in continuing his ballet. He interrupts

production, but in doing so, he is not working against the machine, but in accordance with it—he sprays oil, randomly pulls levers and turns dials, and in so doing, manages to short-circuit the boss’s surveillance apparatus, thus forcing him to come down to the factory floor to address Chaplin face to face. In dancing with the machine—by freeing the gestures it demands from the strict apparatus in which they are typically enacted, Chaplin seems to suggest that the body can coexist with the machine in another way, at least momentarily, until one is branded “crazy” and hauled off to a sanatorium. In dancing with the machine, Chaplin challenges assumptions about the mechanization of the human by the machine. While inevitably the mode of production has an effect on the human, these scenes with Chaplin suggest that this effect is neither homogenous nor unidirectional. Likewise, if cynicism about industrial production operates as the ground on which we read Chaplin’s “craziness,” this suggests that cynicism can open a space in which a range of actions can take place, from those indistinguishable with a dominant mode of function to the whimsical, rebellious dance of Chaplin’s factory worker.

I will return to the possibilities presented by Chaplin’s dance with the machine. For now, though, I want to focus on the way in which his performance exemplifies a contradictory set of affects shared by labourers in the Fordist economy. For audiences at the time, Chaplin’s complexification of the experience of labour offered a chance for fellow feeling. In his article “Work, Ideology and Chaplin’s Tramp,” Charles Musser describes the experience of the working class in the period of industrialization that Chaplin depicts:

For the American working class, who flocked to motion picture theaters for amusement, earning a living was tedious, oppressive and often dangerous. This

experience was hardly limited to those comparatively small numbers of people working on the line or in businesses that had adopted Frederick Taylor's management techniques. As David Montgomery has shown, most industries simply sought to extract the maximum amount of work at the lowest possible cost through piece work, close and often tyrannical supervision, and detailing of work into minute tasks. Inefficiencies were, in fact, rampant with their costs usually assumed by the workers. These practices had an intense, far-reaching impact on the many immigrants who found jobs in modern industries, since most had previously worked either in agriculture or traditional crafts for which they could no longer find employment. For many the workplace assumed a life of its own. Thus, the Chaplin character's ability to manipulate and mock the workplace... played off working-class experiences and resonated with the spectators' fantasies. (39-40 *Radical History Review*)

Many Americans experienced working conditions similar to those of Chaplin's factory worker. However, Chaplin acts out the role of worker in a way different than most—first, at least in these opening scenes, his naïveté is contrasted to the viewer's knowingness. He is oblivious to the emotional and psychic toll of his work, until its effect takes over his ability to function seamlessly in his role in the factory. Second, Chaplin's eventual dance with the machine takes on a kind of rebelliousness whose consequence for the average worker would likely be termination. Thus, in terms of fellow feeling, the film offers viewers both a cynical recognition—positioning cynicism as a site of recognizable and shared affect—and a fantasy of rebelliousness.

Many have commented on the function of the fantasy offered through mass media. Most famously, Horkheimer and Adorno describe the standardization of a range of consumer options that seems to fulfill individual fantasies, but in fact provide something for all “so that none may escape” (123). However, where Horkheimer and Adorno see mass media fantasy as offering an empty utopian vision that obscures a rigidly standardized reality, thus draining away otherwise revolutionary potential,

Chaplin's fantasy enactment of the factory worker does not so much distract from real life experience as offer a livelier version of it opened up through a cynical recognition of the costs such a life extracts.⁴⁶ Musser argues that the Tramp "articulated emotions that too often had to be repressed" (51).⁴⁷ For Musser, the Tramp does not bring spectators away from their own situation, so much as offer a momentary glimpse of revolutionary energy inherent within that situation, even if it does not compel spectators to follow suit. What is the revolution Chaplin gestures towards?

For Musser, Chaplin's revolutionary potential is contained in his embodiment of the Tramp: a liminal social figure, a working man who is itinerant, rather than routinized, a figure who takes work when he can get it, but refuses to remain chained to a single job or location and instead moves around at will, asserting his independence from the mechanisms of modern industrialization and asserting his freedom to move and choose in the process (Musser 49). Musser is careful to point out that tramping was (and perhaps is) itself privileged in particular ways, the "philosophy (and luxury) of young, single, working-class men who had few responsibilities and were not yet willing (or able) to accept the regimentation of most workplaces," and yet the fantasy of the tramp, the system of belief he embodied, "continued to be shared (albeit in modified form) by those who settled down to familial responsibilities and permanent employment" (49). Thus Musser locates Chaplin's revolutionary potential in his ability to point to the restriction on freedom inherent in working life and to compel his audience to commiserate with both

⁴⁶ In this Chaplin anticipates Lucille Ball's later zany comedy, described in Sianne Ngai's chapter "Zaniness" in *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012).

⁴⁷ In this sense, Musser offers a reading of Chaplin that aligns with relief theories of humour. First described by Freud in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), relief theory sees humour as an outlet for psychic energy otherwise held in check by the superego.

this feeling of restriction and the attendant fantasy of escape. Musser's suggestion that Chaplin's comedic rendition of the repetitive tasks of industrialized capitalism resonated with audiences' fantasy lives suggests a shared frustration inherent in the experience of industrialization. If the tramp remains transitory in order to assert independence and freedom, as Musser suggests, then the factory worker who remains employed is enslaved. In other words, his sense of agency is curtailed; he is no longer necessarily able to act in accordance with his beliefs. While the real-world factory worker may sympathize with the kinds of cheeky ideals embodied by Chaplin's playful and oppositional tramp, the consequences for his own life of acting on those sympathies are perhaps too great, the sense of precarity too real, and so he can only gain relief—a sense of fellow-feeling or commiseration—in seeing these acted out fictionally. The cynical reading of industry invited by Chaplin's portrayal, then, relies on recognition of the restrictions imposed by normative familial modes that circumscribe the fantasy of freedom central to American understandings of masculinity in particular.⁴⁸

Not only does the workplace assume a life of its own, as Musser argues, but it also assumes the lives of its workers. Thus the enjoyment felt by viewers witnessing Chaplin's antics in the workplace also stems from Chaplin's ability to make bare this assumption. The mechanization of the human is shown in terms of its affective burden; Chaplin demonstrates the way it feels for the worker being encrusted by the mechanical and thus expresses feelings that are too risky to be voiced by the factory-worker at large.

⁴⁸ As I will come to detail later in this chapter and in the next, Chaplin's Fordist character who pulls punchlines by acting out of sync with the machine of capital is strikingly different from later versions of this sort of workplace comedy in which humour is generated out of characters whose participation in the system is almost too seamless, as is the case in the character of Kenneth on NBC's *30 Rock*, for example.

If Chaplin is popular, then it is in part due to a recognition, a shared sense of this feeling that what is deemed “common sense”—working a job in order to make a living⁴⁹—is in fact made up of a set of absurd and arbitrary demands that are not neutral but are deeply felt by the subject and fundamentally shape his ability (or inability) to act in the world. Chaplin’s satire thus opens up what Rancière might call a *sensus communis* based on an inversion of established common sense (12-13), on an acknowledgment of the costs of common sense itself. In fact, this is part of what cynicism offers: it acknowledges that what we all take to be common sense might not be as easy, as livable, as dominant cultural narratives might lead us to believe, as I will explore in more detail in chapter three.

Certainly, Chaplin faces derailment over and over again. While thus far I have been discussing the way in which Chaplin invites a cynical reading of industry and thus speaks to cynicism as a shared, if unspoken, affect generated by the implications of working in Taylorized factories, I also want to consider the way in which his character inhabits an affective cynicism. While the most famous scenes in the film are those in which Chaplin’s body snakes through the machine, the scenes that follow offer an odd interlude in the narrative. After his nervous breakdown in the factory, Chaplin is hospitalized, cured, and released under the ironic instruction to “take it easy and avoid excitement,” (ironic, of course, because the actions that precipitated his breakdown were the easy, repetitive, and unexciting tasks of the assembly line). As Chaplin leaves the hospital and is confronted with what Simmel would call the banal shock of the city—

⁴⁹ The title of another of Chaplin’s short films is in fact *Making a Living* (1914).

crowds, traffic, machinery (106)—he seems to be on the verge of another breakdown: the prescribed cure cannot be followed in an environment that does not allow for ease and one cannot relax while perpetually in pursuit of subsistence. Moreover, the cure—even the notion of a cure—fails to address the conditions of his breakdown, which are chronic rather than acute:⁵⁰ the conditions *required* for living in an industrialized society. If Chaplin’s breakdown is in part based on his experience of sliding effortlessly into the machine, of registering his inconsequentiality to the mechanism of industry, then a social sphere that cannot meet the terms of cure threatens to push Chaplin further “into a feeling of [his] own valuelessness,” as Simmel characterized the effect of the urban environment (106). It seems there is nothing he can do. These scenes of Chaplin confused and wandering, lost in the city mark the first turning point in the film, away from the famous opening shots of the factory and towards a representation of the anonymous and fleeting existence of a liminal urban figure: that of the drifter, the unemployed single (man).⁵¹ However, where for the audience this figure might have emblemized a kind of imagined freedom, for Chaplin’s factory worker the drifter’s freedom feels more like tenuousness: an existence threaded to survival only on the thinnest threads—the lucky find of a scrap of food, a chance opportunity for casual employment, a benevolent hand-out.

⁵⁰ I borrow this distinction from Eric Cazdyn’s differentiation of the chronic from the terminal in his recent book *The Already Dead* (2012), in particular his chapter “The New Chronic,” in which he describes “the new chronic mode” at work across culture—from medicine to politics to cultural production—“a mode of time that cares little for terminality or acuteness. Every level of society is stabilized on an antiretroviral cocktail. Every person is safe, like a diabetic on insulin. A solid remission, yes, but always with the droning threat of relapse—of collapse, if not catastrophe, echoing back to us from a far-off future or from the memory of a distant past” (13).

⁵¹ These scenes also allow for a more conservative reading of the film that sees Chaplin’s liminal status as punishment for his antics in the factory. He lives out not only the fantasy of many factory workers in balking his job, but also their nightmare: being homeless and unable to feed themselves easily.

What is particularly odd about this brief interlude in the film is Chaplin's embrace of his own failure as a productive member of society. Rather than seeking work, after he is ejected from the hospital, Chaplin moves into a mode of living focused on coping and subsistence. Soon after his release from the hospital, Chaplin is arrested when mistaken for a Communist (he picks up a construction flag on the street and is assumed to be the leader of a group of striking workers). However, rather than experiencing prison as punishment, Chaplin thrives in jail: he is fed regularly, has leisure time for reading, and sleeps indoors. By positioning prison as the most nurturing environment Chaplin encounters, the film subverts the notion of prison as the ultimate carceral space, instead anticipating a Foucauldian realm in which discipline is diffused through social spaces and structures, a society in which prison is not much different than the daily life of the liminal social figure. Thus, the notion of freedom Musser aligns with Chaplin is here called into question when what looks like freedom is recast as incarceration.

In this strange lull in the film, Chaplin's factory worker refuses the fantasy of upward mobility, preferring instead to inhabit the space of failure—if one imagines imprisonment as failure—which, in any case, proves to be a much easier environment in which to subsist. In prison Chaplin can follow the terms of his prescription: he lives easily and without excitement, if under some threat of violence from fellow inmates. And even this risk of altercation is removed after Chaplin inadvertently foils a jailbreak and, rewarded for his unintentional heroism, is moved to his own cell. The next shots of Chaplin in jail are introduced with an intertitle informing the reader he is “happy in his comfortable cell.” To reinforce the idyll, the soundtrack swells with warm strings, a bird

sings, and Chaplin lounges on his floral bedspread, reading the newspaper and sighing at headlines detailing the hardships of the working class on the outside: ongoing strikes, riots, and breadlines. This scene in the film is the closest Chaplin comes to experiencing the comforts of a middle-class life, which will come to form and direct his fantasies and efforts to succeed later on in the film. The calm, however, is quickly broken as the radio informs us that as a reward for thwarting the attempted jailbreak,⁵² Charlie has been granted his freedom. Thus, in a neat comic reversal, the action that costs his fellow inmates their freedom earns him his own—both parties get exactly what they hoped to avoid.

I want to pause for a moment more on this odd sequence of events in which Chaplin gives up on working life and proceeds to break all the rules. Between his trip into the machine and his incarceration, Chaplin has become cynical—like his audience, he sees into the machine of a Fordist society in which one is productive or punished for one's failure, and he also sees through the thin myth of freedom that drives the ambition to seek work and pursue an ever-elusive standard of living. Thus, upon his release from prison, rather than pursuing the supposedly "free" life of the itinerant single man, Chaplin instead acts cynically, working to be rearrested, deliberately breaking the law within view of the authorities until one of them tosses him back in the paddy wagon. In this he demonstrates that the rules that govern behavior in capitalist society depend on one's buying into the fantasy attached to the spirit of capitalism. If one gives up on the fantasy, one can live, and live well, by all metrics except that of "freedom." However, Chaplin

⁵² Though largely a silent film (Chaplin's last), *Modern Times* includes snippets of sound mediated through technological devices—the radio, the phonograph, etc.

also questions this last measure, asking his audience to consider the value of a freedom in which one's ability to eat and live is never certain. Thus, Chaplin demonstrates how "the fantasy of upward mobility tips into the impasse" (Berlant 204). If "it is what it is," if society refuses to feed or house Chaplin, then he does not want the freedom or "success" that it offers, preferring incarceration to the empty promises offered outside the prison walls. Rather than orienting himself within a kind of cruel optimism, the promise of which he realizes will never be open to him, he takes on cynicism, seeming to shrug in the face of his inability to function in the mechanized world, accepting, and in fact preferring, an incarcerated life that would constitute failure for an aspirational member of the working class.

In an essay on *Modern Times*, French film critic and theorist André Bazin describes the film as "the only cinematographic fable equal to the dimension of the human distress of the 20th century facing social and industrial mechanization" (Bazin 7). He goes on to suggest that this idea in the film "emerges from a situation which breaks loose in all directions" (7). The "situation" Bazin pinpoints as at the heart of the film's distress resonates with Berlant's definition of situation as a "genre of emerging event" (5). If the situation in this film is breaking loose in all directions, Bazin suggests the genre of modern life is fraying, or, previously tightly woven fantasies are beginning to unravel in their inability to translate into action, to move from theory to praxis, even while the supposedly utopian threads dangle within grasp. In such a situation, Berlant claims one lives in a state of "animated suspension" (195): "When a situation unfolds, people try to maintain themselves in it until they figure out how to adjust" (195). The

situation describes the dialectic between self and world; thus, in a situation “breaking loose in all directions,” adjustment faces an impasse, and must wait for what Roland Barthes calls a *punctum*, a directional shove. In the absence of such direction, Charlie is content to suspend his life in prison, indefinitely. The central distress presented in *Modern Times* is not Charlie’s failure to succeed as a working man, which seems inevitable, but the impossibility of the fantasy, and particularly Charlie’s recognition of that fantasy’s impossibility. As such, the brief interlude in which Charlie seeks out imprisonment as the only means by which he can thrive marks a pivotal moment in the film’s plot, a moment in which Charlie toys with one response to a fraying capitalist fantasy: cynical recognition or even acquiescence.

Not everyone saw Chaplin’s articulation of the impasse as a valuable revelation. In fact, many viewed Chaplin’s acquiescence to the structures of industrialized capitalism as encouraging dangerous resignation in the general populace and attacked Chaplin for his role in perpetuating this character type. Guy Debord in his role as a founding member of the Lettrist group co-authored a pamphlet, distributed at the French premiere of *Limelight* (which Chaplin attended), which read, in part, “You are Chaplin, emotional blackmailer, master-singer of misfortune... You are ‘he-who-turns-the-other-cheek’—the cheek of the buttocks—but for us, the young and beautiful, the only answer to suffering is revolution” (qtd. in Rasmussen 368). Summarizing their anger towards Chaplin, Rasmussen writes,

The Lettrists argued that Chaplin and his films practiced a kind of emotional blackmail, merely compensating for a boring life and not creating the possibility of a new one filled with excitement and adventure. Chaplin belonged to the past and was an obstacle toward creating a new life without alienation and suffering.

He signaled passivity and weakness and a lack of desire to change this situation.
(368-69)

The Lettrist objection sounds very much like Horkheimer and Adorno’s culture industry thesis in which amusement precludes revolution, and a character who dithers, rather than effecting revolutionary transformation—which in their formulation is inexplicably associated with youth and beauty, much as it is in Obama’s charge to hopeful youth constituents—merely reiterates the seeming immovability of structures of power. Or, as Rasmussen summarizes the position, “The poverty of modern life [is] portrayed... as an unchanging fact of life instead of as a reason for revolt and destruction” (Rasmussen 380). Likewise, the Mexican communist literary monthly magazine *ruta*, though it saw in Chaplin’s slapstick potentially revolutionary “bombs of laughter,” declared Chaplin’s films not just passive, but ultimately reinforcing the norm (Castronovo 161). As Russ Castronovo summarizes, the magazine, committed to revolution, concluded that “such satirical dissent amounts to a ‘timid anarchy’ in which the radical actor becomes complicit with the very social structure he protests, as his extremism actually makes the status quo appear balanced, rational, and normative” (161).⁵³

Castronovo sees *Modern Times*, which he refers to as Chaplin’s “artwork essay,” as more critical (23, 157). First, he unpacks what Chaplin saw as the film’s critical potential: its commentary on the loss of the revolutionary potential inherent to silent film. At various points in his career, Chaplin argued that silent film offered the ultimate democratic form. Since it is without language, and relies on human gesture and the visual,

⁵³ This reading of the film also lines up with Cazdyn and Szeman’s argument in *After Globalization* (2011) that structures of power like globalization or capitalism inculcate feelings of inevitability in which failures such as Chaplin’s inability to thrive are seen as subjective, rather than as structural inevitabilities.

Chaplin felt silent cinema offered universally legible texts—a kind of aesthetic Esperanto. Chaplin, the most iconic silent film star, could stand in as “everyman,” as long as he did not open his mouth. With the advent of sound, and precisely the addition of voice to film, Chaplin felt characters would be individuated and thus locked to particular national or class identities, thereby destroying the potential for universal communication. Leaving unremarked the assumption that a white, male body could speak for everyone in the universe (or that a visual medium offers universal legibility), Castronovo recasts Chaplin’s argument for universality, arguing that it is not the film’s silence that spreads it around the world, nor Chaplin’s availability as an “everyman,” but its status as a commodity, particularly an American commodity, a fact that Chaplin repeatedly disavowed or downplayed, thus making the global, unifying language it produced not that of universal affect, but that of the market.⁵⁴ Castronovo argues that any critical potential in *Modern Times* must be read in light of this ambivalence: as a critique of the consumption of film made through the medium of film itself, or as a critical view of mass culture’s impact on the audience made through the lens of mass culture itself. Ultimately, Castronovo argues that *Modern Times* “charges that mass art—especially film—democratizes access to a theater of ethically unfulfilling consumption” (170). Castronovo ends somewhere in the vicinity of Adorno and Horkheimer, arguing that the commodity status of Chaplin circulates in service of a universality that looks much more like

⁵⁴ For Castronovo’s full argument and deft reading of *Modern Times*’ treatment of silence and the social role of film, see his chapter “‘Bombs of Laughter’: Motion Pictures, Mass Art, and Universal Language” in *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 136-179.

uniformity than community, perpetuating “the singularity and dominion of the American commodity form” (179).

While Castronovo’s reading of the critical potential of *Modern Times* and its ultimate fold into a kind of consensual commodity imperialism is convincing and apt, what is excluded from consideration is the way in which the character of the tramp, and in *Modern Times*, the factory worker, captures something of what it *feels like* to live under the shared language of the commodity. The popularity of Chaplin’s character is not only linked to the creep of commodity culture around the globe—and thus to the reduction of democracy to univocality as Castronovo argues (179)—but also to the spread of affective conditions perpetuated by those changing structural relations. I argue that the language of the film can simultaneously be that of the commodity and that of a shared affective environment whose global spread follows that of the commodity. This is not to say that the feelings attached to industrialized capitalism are necessarily universally similar, but what is important is that one’s affective being is inextricably bound up in the possibilities presented to the subject in an industrializing economy. As an industrial apparatus grows, subjects magnetize to the structure in ways that open up or privilege certain ways of thinking, acting, and speaking while shutting down or dismissing others. Chaplin traces precisely this development in *Modern Times*. In his portrayal of the common experience of work under industrialized capitalism, Chaplin articulates a subjectivity caught in what Polanyi describes as the fundamental conflict between the market and the requirements for an organized social life (244). In other words, Chaplin describes an industrialized capitalism that, in functioning precisely as it should, renders

the lives of its workers difficult, if not precarious, or, as Polanyi writes, in seeming anticipation of Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, a capitalism that produces an impasse between structure and subject (245).

While Horkheimer and Adorno, the Lettrists, Debord, and a group of Mexican Communists were suspicious of mass culture for its representation of acquiescent characters, they failed to recognize that what happens to characters in films “is not the same as what happens to people” (Berlant 9). In other words, if a character flirts with a cynical embrace of incarceration,⁵⁵ this will not necessarily encourage viewers to do the same, but instead might begin to describe an “affective scenario” that makes different “claims about the situation of contemporary life” (Berlant 9). Sympathy on the part of audiences need not necessarily lie with the actions of the character, but perhaps also with the affect they describe, the articulation of a shared public feeling of entrapment, inevitability and futility. Thus, as Berlant suggests, “cinema and other recording forms not only archive what is being lost,” nor do they only offer a blueprint by which a different future might be realized, but also “track what happens in the time that we inhabit before new forms make it possible to relocate within conventions the fantasy of sovereign life unfolding from actions” (Berlant 7), or, as I would argue, what is *felt* in that intervening time.

One thing that “happens” in this interstitial time is the production of what I call orienting affects, or modes of relating to a structural scenario into which one finds oneself

⁵⁵ Similar arguments are often made in the popular media about the role of violent video games in inspiring violence among youth. While it is tempting to assume a one to one relationship that would explain troubling phenomenon like youth violence, the relationship between player and game is often much more complicated. What is interesting in the case of most cultural practices and objects is the affective linkage between subject and object.

knit. These are affects that determine directionality—even if that direction is one of confusion—or forge an orientation to the impasse. Among these orientations is optimism, as Lauren Berlant’s book *Cruel Optimism* so eloquently articulates. But cynicism as well marks a subjective relation to structure. If we are optimistic, we are oriented towards the promise, however vain the hope it offers; if we are cynical, we are unable to suspend our disbelief in the promise.

I will expand on the tension between the push towards optimism and the feeling of cynicism in my next chapter. In Chaplin, though, we begin to see how this vacillation troubles the question of politics under industrial capitalism that remained central to critical theory and the avant-garde at the time. The factory worker’s flirtation with cynicism, his threatened acquiescence, is problematic for proponents of revolutionary social change, and yet it also raises an infrequently asked but key political question: How can we critique the individual for failing to illustrate an alternative to a systemic or structural reality for which no alternative has yet emerged? For the Surrealists, this revelation of inevitability and stuckness, and Chaplin’s perpetual invocation of it, was in itself revolutionary. For those committed to social change, it represented a troubling shift, a playfulness that teetered on resignation; a position that made the question, “what is to be done” into a punch line, answering only with failure and absurdity, rather than a program of action.

In this context, it is vital not to overstate the significance of Chaplin’s flirtation with cynicism in *Modern Times*. These scenes remain a brief, if thematically resonant, interlude. While Chaplin is trying to be rearrested, he meets the gamin (played by

Paulette Goddard), a companion who lives equally precariously on the fringes of the working world. Barely more than a child, and orphaned when her father is shot in a group of rioting unemployed, the gamin refuses the structures of power that would contain her, escaping first from the child welfare officers who want to place her in an orphanage and later the paddy wagon in which she and Chaplin are being taken to prison. After the two fall out of the police van on a tight turn, the gamin makes her escape, beckoning the factory worker to come with her and forcing him to choose between the easy confinement of prison and the precarious life of freedom. He chooses to run.

Having successfully escaped, the factory worker and the gamin rest in a suburb on the verge of grass between sidewalk and road. The two watch as an aproned wife sends her lunchbox-toting husband off to work, and, though he mocks their performed, normative happiness—bearing out his role as cynic—Chaplin’s character asks, “Can you imagine us in a little home like that?” The film then shifts into fantasy, offering viewers Chaplin’s hyperbolic vision of suburban plenty: a fully-flowered and doilies home in which fruit trees spread their laden branches through the windows and an obedient cow can be summoned to provide fresh milk whenever one might desire. The gamin looks almost crestfallen as she imagines the scenario, and when Chaplin’s description ends with the two of them sharing a huge piece of meat, the viewer can read her lips as saying, “I sure am hungry.”⁵⁶ The distance between the fantasy and her reality—homeless, sitting on a suburban curb, about to be ejected from the neighbourhood by a patrolling police officer—is monumental and yet she recovers from her despair and, after a pause, nods

⁵⁶ No title card is presented for this bit of dialogue, but the viewer can clearly read Goddard’s lips.

enthusiastically. Chaplin's face is now the serious foil to her smiling fantasy; he agrees, "I'll do it! We'll get a home, even if I have to work for it." The fantasy is reasserted in this scene, though it is now contingent on the "we" in the factory worker's declaration; as Gregory Stephens summarizes, "He can no longer swallow the machine age's *martial law*, but *marital love* gives meaning to work and play" (Stephens web).

The cynicism with which Chaplin flirts in his embrace of prison morphs here into a kind of shared optimism, with the reassertion of the fantasy of the good life as aspirational within the framework of a heterosexual couple,⁵⁷ even though circumstances suggest it remains unattainable. In a central thematic detail, the film's theme song is introduced in this scene, a song called "Smile," written by Chaplin and later given its famous lyrics, "smile, though your heart is aching..."⁵⁸ This scene marks another turning point in the film, from opportunism to effort, from monad to dyad, from cynicism to optimism as the factory worker seeks out employment in order to support a life with the gamin.

⁵⁷ Though the film implies that Charlie and the gamin are a team, it does not set them up as romantic partners, neither in this scene, or later in the film when they share a derelict home, each occupying separate bedrooms (well, Chaplin sleeps in a kind of shed attached to the outside of the hut).

⁵⁸ The full lyrics to the song are as follows:

Smile though your heart is aching.
Smile even though it's breaking.
When there are clouds in the sky,
You'll get by.
If you smile through your fear and sorrow,
Smile and maybe tomorrow,
You'll see the sun come shining through,
For you.
Light up your face with gladness.
Hide every trace of sadness.
Although a tear may be ever so near,
That's the time you must keep on trying.
Smile, what's the use of crying.
You'll find that life is still worthwhile,
If you just smile.

However, optimism in the film doesn't play out into a happy ending. Chaplin uses a letter of reference from the Sheriff to secure a job as night watchman in a department store—a seeming utopia in which, after hours, he and the gamin can fill up on treats at the soda counter and ride roller skates in the toy department before bedding down in the silk sheets of the display mattresses. However, Chaplin and the gamin gain only temporary access to the utopia promised by commodities—they are partial, surreptitious players in the successes of capital and the rewards of consumption. As if anticipating Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of commodity culture, the pair here exemplify a different mode of relating to mass culture: a temporary, tactical pilfering of consumer goods, an enjoyment stolen from the outside.

Chaplin only holds the department store job for one night. He is fired after allowing his former co-workers from the steel mill to break in and eat their fill—they are careful to point out that they're not burglars, only hungry. Chaplin is arrested in the morning when he is discovered hung over in a display of fabrics. When he is released from prison one week later, the gamin meets him with word that she's found a house in which they can live. What follows is one of the strangest segments in the film: the gamin and Chaplin play at living a middle class existence while squatting in a hovel in the desolate landscape behind the factories. They are happy or at least pretend convincingly to be so, even as the house falls to pieces around them. Again, Chaplin momentarily secures work as a mechanic's assistant when the factories briefly reopen, but within a day, the workers once again go on strike and Chaplin is again taken to prison after he is again mistaken for a strike leader. This time, when he's released from prison, the gamin

has found work as a dancer and promises him a job as a singing waiter. Though Chaplin characteristically bungles his duties waiting tables, he is successful as an entertainer, singing in a kind of emotive Esperanto in his only spoken (well, rightly, sung) lines in the film, and the manager promises him a full-time position. However, just when it seems the pair has found a path to financial security, the delinquency officers catch up with the gamin. She and Chaplin narrowly escape, fleeing the city in the night. The next morning, the two are shown sitting on the edge of a road in a desolate landscape far from the city. The gamin looks tired, and she collapses onto her arms, asking, “What’s the use of trying?” In a reversal of his earlier position, Chaplin, who is whistling even as she cries, tells her, “Buck up—never say die! We’ll get along!” This seems to bolster her spirits and the two set off down the road, hand in hand as the sounds of “Smile” swell around them. In the last moments, Charlie turns to the gamin, points to her uncertain face and gestures that she should smile, the audience can read the instruction on his lips as well, “C’mon, smile!” She does, and the two walk off, grinning, into the sunrise.

On one hand, then, *Modern Times* appears to track Chaplin’s redemption or reorientation to the affective frames appropriate to success as a subject under industrialized capitalism: his move from a resigned cynicism to an optimistic gumption. Though he continues to encounter failure through the film, barely holding jobs, spending more time in prison than out, finally being chased out of town, he no longer *pursues* these failures, and instead persists in the belief that subsistence—if not plenty—will come. He insists on optimism. Tali Sharot in her book *The Optimism Bias* suggests that such a view is adaptive, protective and necessary to a functioning life. She writes:

The optimism bias protects us from accurately perceiving the pain and difficulties the future undoubtedly holds, and it may defend us from viewing our options in life as somewhat limited. As a result, stress and anxiety are reduced, physical and mental health are improved, and the motivation to act and be productive is enhanced. (Sharot xvi)

In one sense, *Modern Times* enacts this adaptive view of optimism: though his life does not become any easier, and in fact may in some ways be more precarious than it was when he was employed in the factory, where at least he earned a wage, Chaplin's optimism keeps his nerves in remission. His anxiety about the future, by the end of the film, is dispelled in the solidity with which he is now fastened to his faith in the fantasy of "getting by." He also works to remedy the despair he sees creeping into the gamin's outlook at the close of the film: she has lost her resolve, but he teaches her his lesson, and so, when she risks giving in, he reminds her to smile.

On the other hand, as much as it seems to reiterate a typical narrative of American pluckiness in the face of immense odds, the forced nature of their shared, final smile is not lost on the viewer. While one might force one's self to smile, even if one's heart is breaking, that does not remedy the brokenness. And this is the question left hanging at the end of *Modern Times*, though Chaplin and the gamin might smile, their smiles paper over the larger structural situation that has produced the conditions of their despair in the first place: chronic unemployment, hunger, a lack of housing, a child welfare system that terrifies, rather than supports. The pair is pushed to the fringes, leaving society behind them, penniless, homeless and with nothing but their smiles to keep them warm. While audiences can—and do—read this denouement with the optimism of an American frontier story—and certainly it references the traits of that genre as Chaplin duck walks

off into the sunrise—the liminal status of the pair is not remedied. They might smile, but they are broken and have been broken repeatedly by a system that refuses them opportunities to thrive. Sharot’s description of optimism suggests a protective affective blindness: optimism may reduce one’s anxiety, but this does not mean that the cause for anxiety is removed, but merely that one changes one’s affective response to that stimuli, one reorients one’s affect. This insisted-upon optimism ignores any structural basis, diagnosing failure as a subjective orientation, rather than as a systemic feature of capitalism. In his instructive miming of the gesture of smiling, Chaplin draws attention to the way in which the smile is painted over another set of feelings, including the film’s earlier representations of despair, pain, and cynicism.

As a cognitive neuroscientist, Sharot is inclined to see optimism as a trait common to humanity in an ahistorical and general sense: an adaptive trait programmed into our brains. However, as Catherine Malabou has argued in *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, there is nothing ahistorical or generalizable about our brains—and presumably, therefore, also the affects produced therein—except for the fact that all humans have had one (a brain, that is). Elucidating recent developments in neuroscience, Malabou describes the brain’s neuronal plasticity. Specifically, she argues that the brain not only changes over time but changes in concert with social and cultural shifts. In other words, history makes the brain as much as the brain makes history. Thus, a trait like optimism, while it may have some wide-ranging adaptive relation to survival or security, in the specific and emphatic modern form it is given in *Modern Times* can also speak to a

socio-cultural moment in which optimism is positioned to seem an essential, inevitable factor for survival within a current social system.

Malabou is particularly interested in the co-emergence of neuroscience's modeling of brain plasticity and the shift from capitalism as a centrally organized, managed system, "to an auto-organization at once dynamic, multipolar, and adaptive to circumstance" (Jeannerod "Introduction," xii). In his introduction to the book, Marc Jeannerod asks, "Might we have a 'neo-liberal' brain that would impose its model on our socioeconomic organization? Or, inversely, might the global economy's upheaval generate a conceptual change that would affect, by contagion, our view of the way the brain functions?" (xii). The answer offered by Malabou is both: the brain, she writes, "*is a history*" (1 emphasis in original). Her project, then, is to generate "a consciousness of the brain" (2), in order to better understand the mutual constitution between history and the brain; to understand, in other words, the brain as a site of activity, of work, of action (4). Thus in understanding optimism as an affective relation to the world, as a mode of consciousness that manifests both in one's emotional life and in one's actions, one must understand it not as inevitable, or as a fixed neuronal quality, but as an active, dynamic relation between consciousness and world. Optimism, then, does much more than merely reduce anxiety or enable action, as Sharot argues, but manages particular kinds of anxieties, enables particular modes of action, just as all brain activity might, and does so in concert with a particular socio-cultural moment.

Read in this context, the ending of *Modern Times* can be seen to draw attention to (and anticipate) a neoliberal future in which optimism functions in concert with

disavowal, as an affective register that glosses over current struggles in favour of a vaguely defined future success. Chaplin's caricatured insistence on smiling in the face of despair draws attention to the vigorousness with which the ideology of optimism is inscribed in a developing industrialized economy. In the context of a film bent on outlining the plight of the working class in the face of a rapidly developing system of inequality and struggle, optimism becomes an affective tool by which one *believes* oneself to grasp control, but that in fact works to enmesh one in the very structure that would deny one's thriving—in other words, optimism is cruel, as Berlant has so aptly noted, but is also essential to the fantasy of success that allows one to endure perpetual failure.

There is a different way in which optimism can be read in *Modern Times*. While the film's ending might leave the viewer with questions as to Chaplin's chances for success, his earlier behaviors in the film offer moments that describe a different kind of relation between the individual and structure, outside of the masquerade of smiling in the face of heartbreak or buying into an ideology of neoliberal promise. In his review of *Modern Times*, Bazin notes that much of Chaplin's comedy is based in his struggle with objects, with things: he fumbles with pianos, alarm clocks, ladders (7-8). In grappling with these objects, whose typical use he often bungles, Chaplin fights back, Bazin argues, by finding "uses for them different from what fate had decreed" (8). In other words, he finds other ways of using or doing things than those dictated by common sense. Bazin suggests that *Modern Times* should be read in its entirety as an extrapolation of this central comic technique—thus Bazin suggests that Chaplin asks whether or not the

objects, the stuff, of industrialized capitalism might be put to another use. Certainly this reading is borne out in the famous opening scenes in which Chaplin's body is pulled into the machine, neither disrupting it, nor being destroyed by it, but instead being spit out and subsequently using the machine itself strategically in order to defend against attack.

Modern Times, then, suggests that the current model of industrialized capital produces only mental breakdown, despair, or false optimism, but, that within this structure lies the latent possibility for using it differently. This form of optimism lies in seeing the stuff and structure of industrialized capital—whether people, objects, or relations—as *plastic*—having “at once the capacity to receive form (as in clay, for example, which is a ‘plastic’ medium) and the capacity to give form (as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery)” (Malabou 5). Thus when Chaplin mistakenly crushes an oilcan in an industrial press, he shows the mechanic its new potential as a shovel, but the mechanic can see only the loss of lubricant. Chaplin's dynamic use of the machine suggests a structural model that is not a one-way street to physical, intellectual, and affective colonization by the apparatus of industrialization, but is rather a dialectic, a conversation in which change inevitably occurs, but in a way that is interactive, the subject has the capacity to shape structure as much as he or she is shaped by structure.

The notion of plasticity can be glimpsed in *Modern Times* not just in oilcans, but also in subjects. I argue that *falling*, one of the most ubiquitous gestures in Chaplin's films, offers a means of considering the relation between subjectivity and structure, and, in terms of my interests here, of reconsidering the meaning assigned to orienting affects like cynicism or optimism. More than he is fired, more than he flirts with other men's

wives, perhaps even more than he breaks or is broken by objects, throughout his short films and features, Chaplin *falls*. In *Modern Times* alone, Chaplin jumps into the machine tumbling into its cogs and wheels, he falls with the gamin out of the paddy wagon, he collapses on a suburban verge, he dives into a pond only to find it too shallow for swimming, and he falls into machine levers. In each of these falls, Chaplin is uninjured. He bounces back to his feet, sometimes almost instantly.

Chaplin's falls are elastic, and in that, they illustrate the central binary around which Malabou's discussion of the brain is built: that between plasticity and flexibility. The distinction between these two terms—flexibility and plasticity—encapsulates the central problematic of her book. Flexibility indicates a kind of suppleness: “to be flexible is to receive a form or impression, to be able to fold oneself, to take the fold, not to give it. To be docile, to not explode” (12). Flexibility is one-directional: the flexible can take a shape but cannot give it, can only bend to the strictures determining movement. On the other hand, plasticity, while it maintains the sense of adaptation, not only “receives form” but also has “the capacity to *give form* (as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery)” (emphasis in original) (6). The brain, Malabou argues, is plastic—its neurons shaped by and in turn shaping the world, but, if “the brain is plastic, free,” then why are we “still always and everywhere ‘in chains’” (11)? To answer this question, Malabou argues that our “sense of plasticity is hidden,” substituted by flexibility, the “ideological avatar of plasticity” (12), which, importantly, obscures history's impact on the plastic object or network: flexibility assumes total malleability, while plasticity assumes the possibility of deformation and damage (as well as reformation and construction). As Chaplin grapples

with the material world, he indicates its plastic possibilities: crushed oil cans can become shovels, toppled subjects can bounce back as strike leaders. At the same time, he describes the overriding demand for flexibility: Chaplin's factory bosses want him to bend seamlessly to the machine's demands, not to indicate either its detrimental effects on the subject or its potential to be used otherwise—they want oilcans, not shovels.

The notion of flexibility versus plasticity also maps onto an understanding of cynicism as an ideologically contingent affective state. The flexible looks a lot like the cynical: it acquiesces to structure, sometimes even deliberately, rather than disrupting it. While Chaplin allows for such a reading—of, for instance, the scenes of his body sliding through industrial cogs—to dismiss his performance as nothing but a flexible fold into capitalism is to dismiss the ongoing and reciprocal dance Chaplin effects with the machine—whether literal or figurative—through the rest of the film. Malabou emphasizes that the plastic brain or organism takes the imprint of that which it encounters—it is *affected* in a way that the concept of flexibility does not allow. Likewise what looks like acquiescence in cynicism also indicates the affective imprint of an industrialized capitalism on the subject. Cynicism is not just giving in, but a reshaping of subjectivity to an affective demand that can be invisible. So, while a flexible reading of *Modern Times* might marvel at Chaplin's elastic body winding its way through the cogs, to read his subjectivity as plastic is to note the way in which he is shaped by—affected by—this experience, as subsequent scenes of his “craziness” demonstrate is the case.

Moreover, to dismiss Chaplin as nothing but flexible, or as merely (acquiescently) cynical, fails to recognize that it is precisely this cynical stance that sheds light on the

thinness of the optimistic pretense that underwrites his attempts to achieve the fantasy dangled as reward within the system. Thus, if Chaplin is cynical, his cynicism is perhaps not so ineffectual or resigned as the Lettrists might imagine, though it might not produce the kind of revolutionary rejection they desire in their cultural figures. The cynicism presented in *Modern Times* does not preclude optimism, but it does demand an optimism that does more than merely paint smiles on the miserable, the suffering. If Charlie is optimistic, he is so in a way not counter to but directly evolving out of his cynicism, in his consciousness that things must be done differently, both structurally and subjectively. He will continue to fall, to get back up, not because he is necessarily optimistic about his chances to achieve the fantasy, but because each new move suggests a potentially new way of coordinating oneself within the system.

Falling Man

Outside of slapstick, falling rarely encourages readings of its plasticity, and, as I argue in the remainder of this chapter, the notion of a plastic fall man is increasingly out of sync with the subjective experience of neoliberalizing capitalism. As art critic Marcia E. Ventrocq writes, “Few images can surpass a falling figure for the efficiency with which it triggers a spectrum of grave readings: helplessness, humiliation, fear, failure, mortality” (Ventrocq web). While we laugh along with Chaplin’s slips, trips and tumbles,

the image of a falling man has much more serious (and much less plastic) resonances in modern society.⁵⁹

In fact, the words *falling man* cannot be put together today without evoking one of the most chilling images taken during the events of September 11, 2001: a man falling headfirst, perfectly vertically, framed by the two towers of the World Trade Center before their collapse. The image, taken by Associated Press photographer Richard Drew at 9:41 a.m., ran on page seven of the *New York Times* on September 12, 2001, and in hundreds of other newspapers around the world, then was promptly removed from circulation due to overwhelming reader complaint. The image, like almost all images of the “jumpers,” as they became known, was made taboo, viewed as an insult both to victims and to survivors, as tasteless exploitation of suffering.⁶⁰ As the jumpers were relegated to the stuff of myth and controversial art shows,⁶¹ news media instead began running endless images of ash-covered survivors fleeing the scene—“terrified, confused, wounded—but alive” (Engle 33)—and rescue workers moving into the rubble—“alive and engaged in purposeful work” (34). Speaking specifically of a scene in which firemen erected an

⁵⁹ Eleanor Kauffman argues that the cultural meaning of falling is developed in the post war period. She writes, “It is not surprising to find a link between trauma and falling in an entire strain of postwar literature. It is arguably the case that, in the wake of the Spanish Civil War and World War II, a new and more aerial form of spatial perception came into prominence, one in which something or someone might reasonably be expected to fall out of the sky. Such a form of perception, vertical rather than horizontal in its orientation, is often experienced as an uneasiness directed at falling in both its physical and its metaphysical senses. That is, there is both a literal fear of falling from a height and a spiritual angst about falling, generally through no agency of one's own, from one station in life to another” (Kaufmann 44).

⁶⁰ Tom Junod summarizes, “Papers all over the country, from the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* to the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* to the *Denver Post*, were forced to defend themselves against charges that they exploited a man's death, stripped him of his dignity, invaded his privacy, turned tragedy into leering pornography” (“The Falling” web).

⁶¹ A sculpture called *Tumbling Woman* by New York artist Eric Fischl (one in a series of five) provoked controversy when it was installed in the lower concourse of Rockefeller Centre in September 2002 due to its figuration of a woman's body falling against an undepicted ground (see Karen Engle's chapter “Tumbling Woman” in *Seeing Ghosts: 9/11 and the Visual Imagination*).

American flag on a pile of rubble, Karen Engle writes that the firemen “are transformed from city functionaries to servants of the nation, bringing a message of triumph and hope to desperate citizens” (35). Hope and meaning thus trump the ambiguity and fatalism of the falling man image.

The image of the *Falling Man* only resurfaced and gained its title in 2003, when journalist Tom Junod wrote an article for *Esquire* called “The Falling Man” that explored the identity of the man in the image and the controversy around it.⁶² Junod reports that the rejection of the image stemmed largely from its stark representation of a “jumper,” a person who died not from fire or smoke, but from the choice to leap out of a window, rather than succumb to deadly and inescapable forces within, in other words, its bare depiction of a suicide. He argues that it was the jumpers more than any other aspect of the event that elicited shock and horror. Junod writes,

It was the sight of the jumpers that prompted Rudy Giuliani to say to his police commissioner, “We’re in uncharted waters now.” It was the sight of the jumpers that prompted a woman to wail, “God! Save their souls! They’re jumping! Oh, please God! Save their souls!” And it was, at last, the sight of the jumpers that provided the corrective to those who insisted on saying that what they were witnessing was “like a movie,” for this was an ending as unimaginable as it was unbearable: Americans responding to the worst terrorist attack in the history of the world with acts of heroism, with acts of sacrifice, with acts of generosity, with acts of martyrdom, and, by terrible necessity, with one prolonged act of—if these words can be applied to mass murder—mass suicide. (Junod “The Falling” online)

The figure in *The Falling Man* remains anonymous, though not due to lack of investigation. Junod reports the hesitance or outright anger with which various journalists trying to determine the man’s identity were greeted. No victim’s family wanted to claim

⁶² Throughout, I will differentiate between the image known as the *Falling Man* and the figure in it, which I will identify as the Falling Man, by the presence or absence of italics respectively.

the most famous jumper as their own—no one, it would seem, wanted to align themselves with that most horrific outcome of the attacks. Rather than victims, the jumpers remain liminal figures, having chosen to jump rather than retain the hope of escape, the hope of familial reunification, no matter how vain or impossible such a hope was in the face of the situation.⁶³

Why this extreme discomfort with the *Falling Man*? Of course, there is the fact that it is a very difficult image, an image of a living man about to die an unimaginable death, framed against two vertical towers about to crumble. And yet, many difficult images circulate in culture, not without controversy, but without the same kind of unrivalled censorship.⁶⁴ There is something about this particular image, about the images of the jumpers more broadly, that relegated them to trauma-porn sites in the underbelly of the Internet. First, and perhaps most obviously, there is the fact that in the *Falling Man*'s identity as a "jumper" he represents suicide to a nation as yet too publicly Christian to accept such a choice.⁶⁵ Second, there is the fact that the figure remains anonymous.⁶⁶ Aaron Mauro argues that in his anonymity, the *Falling Man* is made absent, the figure of a collective trauma that is signified by its inexpressibility (588). While not disputing the

⁶³ The various interviews Junod conducts suggests these are the ways in which even the families of other victims of the attacks read the acts of the jumpers: as indicative of a loss of hope, as hurtling towards the inevitable, rather than dying unseen, trapped in the fatally wounded towers.

⁶⁴ To name just a few difficult images from recent years: there is the image taken in Vietnam during the war of a small girl running while napalm burns her body; there are images taken in Iraq of U.S. soldiers torturing captured Iraqis; or, most recently, the video footage of police officers shooting Sammy Yatim on an empty streetcar in Toronto.

⁶⁵ In this the image resonates with the controversial case of Terri Schiavo over a family's right to end or maintain the life of someone in a permanent vegetative state which ended in 2005 with Schiavo's death after her feeding tube was finally and permanently removed.

⁶⁶ Though Junod has offered the most reasoned and researched account of his likely identity—offering several possible names and occupations—there is simply not enough conclusive evidence available in the photo to make a definitive identification.

caesura the *Falling Man* represents in terms of trauma theory or cultural representation, I argue that in his anonymity, the Falling Man is also made overwhelmingly present. The viewer cannot identify his suicide with a particular individual, a particular choice; instead, they themselves must identify with it.

Thus, the *Falling Man* suggests a larger symbolic trajectory in terms of American cultural narratives, particularly prefacing an America in decline. In an interview with NPR, Junod describes the aim of his articles about the image as to encourage a sense of commonality between the figure and the viewer, to reassert the Falling Man as a seminal figure in a moment of collective history—perhaps *the* seminal figure, the one that establishes the collectivity of the event in the first place. Junod concludes his first article by compelling his audience’s recognition of their affiliation with the Falling Man: “we have known who the Falling Man is all along” (Junod “The Falling” online). Presumably, of course, the Falling Man is “us,” but it is precisely what the Falling Man tells us about “us” that renders him taboo. If he is *us*, then he is not the “us” that American politicians and media sought to re-establish after the event. He is not the kind of “us” that could be posed with any confidence against the enemy “them” who perpetuated these events in the first place (since of course if there is an “us” then there must be a “them”). The incongruity of the image with the dominant post-9/11 national narrative, aesthetic, and affect is striking. Junod summarizes:

At a time when the country was greedy for heroes and martyrs to give purpose to its pain, Drew's photograph portrayed a victim representative in his fear, his desperation, and in his solitary resolve. At a time when the country was desperate for images that were communal and redemptive, Drew gave it a man left to the mercy not of God but of gravity, and dying utterly alone. (Junod “Falling (Mad)”)

The *Falling Man* offers an image of America incongruent with a national myth of achievement and triumph. The figure in it inverts the plot of Manifest Destiny, from preordained triumph and the perpetual promise of upward mobility into defiant annihilation and headlong plummeting—he is a superhero headed in the wrong direction. In a similar vein, Engle links collective uneasiness with representations of the jumpers with their figuration of interstitial space. She writes, “[the] lack of a claim on either life or death depicts a state utterly out of the control of the living” (13). While the latter portion of Engle’s statement refers to the lack of control either rescue workers or funeral planners have to assist a body falling through space, I want to read “state” in her quote in a more expansive way—as both a way of feeling, a state of being, and the body politic of a nation, in this case, the United States of America. Can the falling man be understood in reference to a state that has migrated so far beyond the needs of its inhabitants as to render them helpless, tumbling through space without hope of intervention?

This is precisely the speculation Junod makes when he returns to the image of the *Falling Man* in a follow-up article for *Esquire*. He wonders whether or not the images of the falling men and women, and of the *Falling Man* in particular, became so synonymous with obscenity because of the accuracy with which they reflect the unspoken public feeling of an America in decline:

Drew’s photograph became a symbol both specific and universal because it dared to tell us that 9/11 was not the beginning of something but rather the end, that it didn’t constitute the “victory of the American spirit,” as presidents and pundits tried so hard to tell us, but rather a loss, final and decisive, with which we’d always have to reckon. (“Surviving” online)

In this context, the identifiable features of the Falling Man become important. Though Junod wants to claim him as “us,” he is identifiably not “us”—at least not all of us. Though his particular identity remains unknown, a few key details pinpoint the Falling Man’s social position: he is male, non-white, and a food service worker, as evidenced by his chef’s jacket, black pants and running shoes. Thus, *The Falling Man*, while it gestures to the reeling American identity post-9/11, is also emblematic of a more specific and emergent crisis. The figure belongs to the demographic that would be most affected by the pending economic crisis of the first decade of the millennium, a crisis that was spawned from similar Manhattan skyscrapers.⁶⁷ In this the *Falling Man* anticipates the attack that America would perpetrate on its own citizens in the form of fraudulent mortgages and irresponsible lending, which, while not literally propelling the precarious out of tall buildings, would severely limit many Americans’ ability to thrive.⁶⁸

Junod uses this speculation to account for the recurrence of the image of the *Falling Man* in the credits of the television show *Mad Men*, which premiered in 2007. Of course, the credit sequence also references the period aesthetics of the 1960s, in which the show is set, particularly Saul Bass’s iconic posters for Alfred Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* and the falling man image of the poster for *Vertigo*. But, in a post-9/11 world, the image of a man in free fall between a set of Manhattan skyscrapers cannot be read as

⁶⁷ Significantly, the century that culminates in the 9/11 is bookended by another crisis that spawned the same iconography: on October 24, 1929, Will Rogers wrote in his syndicated weekly column, “When Wall Street took that tail spin, you had to stand in line to get a window to jump out of, and speculators were selling space for bodies in the East River,” which sparked rumors that ruined speculators were leaping from buildings on Wall Street.

⁶⁸ On November 4, 2012, *The New York Times* reported that between 2008 and 2010, the years during which the recession began to be felt in the United States, the rate of suicide increased four times faster than it did in the eight years before the recession began (Carey).

unrelated to the events of 9/11. Interestingly, *Mad Men* revises the image, dressing the falling man in a suit, rather than a chef's jacket, but the reference is clear.⁶⁹ Further, in an interview with *The New York Times*, the show's creator Matthew Weiner describes the ad man—the falling figure in the title sequence—as “glib, cynical” (qtd. in Steinberg online). Going on to say that he wrote the characters, particularly the ad men, to resonate with his own contemporary experience, reflective of what he feels is a common public sentiment. He says, “I was very happy, but I did have this sense about my life and where it was going, sort of like, ‘Is this it? What’s wrong with me? Why aren’t I happier?’” (qtd. in Steinberg online). Weiner wrote *Mad Men* in part to track the emergence of his own vague affective state, linked to his feelings of cynicism. *The Falling Man*, thus has become a kind of shorthand, an icon that manages to encapsulate a vaguely felt but shared feeling not unlike the feeling of tumbling infinitely through space—or an ideologically inscribed flexibility that has bent to a breaking point. Weiner assumes his viewers will relate because they feel equally adrift.

The fall of the Falling Man is of a different sort than Chaplin's elastic tumbling; it will be terminal, though in the iconic image, this terminality is to come, imminent but not yet. While Chaplin anticipates a growing demand for subjective flexibility, the falling man tracks the consequences of its development in the service class in America. Where Chaplin's bumbling is funny in that it visualizes (by opposing) the developing constrictions on agency under industrialized capitalism, that joke isn't funny anymore in a cultural moment at the cusp of the terminal leap. The “jumpers” make choices not

⁶⁹ Don DeLillo also revises the image of the falling man to indicate a man in a suit in his 2007 novel *Falling Man*.

unlike Chaplin's early in *Modern Times*: to give up on the narrative of hope and make a choice for freedom (at least in the form of free-fall) that nonetheless entails significant personal consequences.⁷⁰ Where for Chaplin the freedom to pursue a middle class existence came at the price of freedom itself—in the form of incarceration—for the jumpers, the cost of “freedom” is death. In this sense, then, while *Modern Times* can resolve a cynical awareness of these costs through a return to optimism, *The Falling Man* leaves open no such redemptive reading. The image, then, suggests something about the conditions of this fantasy, the costs it entails, and emblemizes a choice against hope in terms of terminality, which is perhaps a significant reason for its banishment from public remembrances.

Fallen Woman

If Chaplin offers a momentary cynical consciousness reflective of the emerging affective burdens of a developing industrialized capitalism and *The Falling Man* emblemizes and prefigures the terrible failure of the promise of capital, particularly for some sectors of the American working population, then I want to conclude this chapter by considering where cynicism takes us—or some of us—in the current, post-industrial moment of capitalist development, what we might call late-late capitalism.⁷¹ Berlant

⁷⁰ In his 2009 article, Junod suggests that for some the image of *The Falling Man* invokes a kind of freedom. He writes, “Some people who look at the picture see stoicism, willpower, a portrait of resignation; others see something else—something discordant and therefore terrible: freedom.”

⁷¹ I take this notion from Christopher Nealon's essay, “Camp Messianism, or, the Hopes of Poetry in Late-Late Capitalism” (*American Literature* 76(3): 2004) in which he distinguishes a current moment (in 2004) from Jameson's 1984 description of “late capitalism.” The contemporary poetry that is the focus of his essay tells “the story of something like really, *really* late capitalism; capitalism in a fully globalized and

describes the contemporary moment in terms of *impasse*—a moment in which many of us are unable to achieve the “good life” held out as promise and yet to which we remain attached in a relation of what she terms “cruel optimism.” If *leaning into* the *impasse* fosters a relation of cruel optimism,⁷² I want to consider the *impasse* from another affective vantage point: that of cynicism. Of course, Berlant recognizes that cynicism and optimism are not opposed terms in her conception of the latter’s cruelty. Just as Berlant argues that optimism is not necessarily a positive or desirable orientation, I argue that cynicism need not be seen as immediately negative or undesirable, but instead should be considered alongside optimism in its relation to the *impasse* fostered by the neoliberalization of labour and the economy. Unlike the yearning momentum of Berlant’s cruel optimism, cynicism manifests as *inertia*, a feeling Kathleen Stewart describes as having, “hit a wall in what [we] can and can’t do” (15). To phrase this in terms of affect, then, cynicism describes a feeling of being unable or unwilling to move or be moved in ways that index flourishing. While Berlant’s optimism describes an attachment to fantasy, even in the moment of its waning, cynicism relinquishes the fantasy, recognizing its promise for its cruelty.

To explore the cynical subject of late-late capitalism, I turn to Tatjana Turanskyj’s 2010 film *Eine Flexible Frau*. The English translation of the title is *The Drifter*, and thus,

triumphal form, the destructive speed and flexibility of whose financial instruments alone make Nixon’s lofting the dollar off the gold standard in 1971 look thoughtful and conservative” (580).

⁷² I take up the phrase “leaning in” deliberately as a reference to Google COO Sheryl Sandberg’s 2013 book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, which advises women to lean into their ambitions in an effort to reverse the over dominance of men in positions of corporate and political power in America. While intended as a guide to self-empowerment, the book advises women to lean into the existent structure in an effort to force their way into its patriarchal structures of power without recognizing that these structures are predicated on excluding modes of femininity that don’t replicate familiar forms of (white) male power.

between the two titles, we can understand the film's interests in not only the notions of subjective flexibility so familiar to accounts of neoliberalism (*see* Zygmunt Bauman [2007], Paolo Virno [1996], Richard Sennett [1998, 2006]), but also figurations of velocity, liminality, and affect. The film is in many ways a portrait of the challenges of work under neoliberal capitalism, particularly as these are faced by a woman: it follows Greta, an out-of-work architect and divorced, single mother as she drifts unattached through Berlin, half-heartedly searching for employment.⁷³ If Chaplin is interested in the disciplinary effects of schedules, time, and, punch clocks, Turanskyj's film inhabits the distended time and space of the unemployed, highly-educated, highly-consumptive, "creative-class" freelancer. Through the film, Greta approaches friends for job leads, but they are reluctant to help. She also visits a career counselor, who is similarly caustic, using their sessions to berate Greta for her prickly personality and lack of enthusiasm. When not listlessly pursuing opportunities, Greta puts up with the abuse of her young teenage son, who lives primarily with his father and considers Greta a loser. She goes to parties, but hangs around the fringes. She gets drunk. While Chaplin, for the most part, is determined by the rigorous bodily and affective demands of a structure, Greta drifts into a more ambiguous set of directives that less obviously but no less thoroughly conditions her life through their influence. *Drift*—an indeterminate, unproductive movement—

⁷³ In his book *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, Harvey notes that "the disruption" in the housing market began to be visible as early as 2006 when the rates of foreclosure "leapt upwards" in low-income neighbourhoods in cities like Cleveland and Detroit, though was ignored by official channels because the people affected were mostly African-American, Hispanic, or single women. By 2007, this crisis began to affect middle-class suburbs (and thus also families) and only then became a concern of both politicians and media (1). This migration of financial precarity through class and gender (though race is largely absent from the film) is something *Eine Flexible Frau* speaks to, particularly tracking the complicated weave of creative-class demand, unemployment (and freelance employment), and parenthood for the one-time stay-at-home mother returning to the workforce in the wake of divorce.

constitutes her dominant experience, and the only exit that seems to be open to her is a total affective makeover. At least this is the message she receives over and over: that she is too hostile, too unlikable, too cynical; that she does not try hard enough.

Greta's characterization as a drifter does much to describe the changed and changing environment in which she attempts to live and work. Sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello note that the years since 1970—they peg their analysis to the period following 1968—witness a flourishing of capital and a concomitant dissolution of the social and reduction of the subject to the individual charged with managing her own survival (2005). This notion of dissolution or dissolve is central to many characterizations of what Boltanski and Chiapello term capitalism's "new" spirit. Perhaps best captured in Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity" (2007), the late-late capitalist work environment (in the post-industrial parts of the planet) demands "habitual mobility, the ability to keep pace with extremely rapid conversions, adaptability in every enterprise, flexibility in moving from one group of rules to another, aptitude for both banal and omnilateral linguistic interaction, command of the flow of information, and the ability to navigate among limited possible alternatives" (Virno 13). These characteristics are firstly, affective—requiring a certain kind of subjectivity as much or more than they call for specific skill sets. Secondly, they are what I call *orienting* affects—encouraging one to aim or direct oneself towards particular ends as a subject of neoliberalism. Thirdly, as many cultural and feminist theorists have noted: there is a clear resemblance between demands made on the neoliberal worker and the traits ascribed to traditionally feminized

work: flexibility, adaptability, enthusiasm, gratitude and meekness (Fraser (2009, 2013), McRobbie (2008, 2012), Schwartz (2013), Weeks (2011)).

And yet, all of this Brownian motion does not necessarily translate into what we might imagine as success: financial stability, secure wages, a glittering condo downtown. While the current moment might demand a certain velocity, shift or movement, it often does so in the absence of discernible—social, communal, or political—trajectories that might lend a sense of orientation, thus making drift an apt metaphor for the kinds of resultant, survival-based movements. In the wake of the housing crisis, the European and North American recessions, and the translation of work into enthusiastic and underpaid entrepreneurship the promise of “the good life” attached to the middle class aspirations is fraying, as Berlant tells us. Yet, we are advised to love our work—to think of it as personal fulfillment; as remuneration and job security shrinks, at least we have our passion (see Miya Tokumitsu’s article “In the Name of Love” in *Jacobin*). We—*we women* especially—are advised to *lean-in*, even though—according to the very terms of capitalism itself—the success achieved by so-called aspirational figures like Sheryl Sandberg (the author of *Lean In* and Google’s COO) is not open to any but a small contingent. We lean into the perpetual motion machine that is the neoliberal workplace and, while inwardly we might hope at best to survive, we outwardly must be grateful for the opportunity to subject ourselves to its machinations at all.

While Virno describes late-capitalism’s demand for a sometimes frantic subjective movement—what Ngai describes as an aesthetic of zaniness or a demand for hyperactivity (see her chapter “The Zany Science” in *Our Aesthetic Categories*

[2012])⁷⁴—his interest lies in describing the neoliberal demand made on the subject and the way in which a subject’s affective life is “put to work” by the neoliberal economic model (13). In this, Virno names *cynicism* as an affect that is made functional in the current system—a shrug that sees no other way of doing things and so acquiesces, or a mode of “cool” detachment (13). I want to pause on the tension here between a structural demand for *action* under neoliberalism, sometimes even zany kinds of action, and an affect characterized by its *inertia*. On the one hand, liquid modernity seems to demand a kind of frenetic action as one moves through the city, from job to job, contract to contract, from work to home to social spaces. This demand is exacerbated by the so-called creative economy in which the worker is tasked with the production of perpetual newness. On the other hand, as Bauman’s account of liquid modernity suggests, not only are there many who cannot keep pace, but there are also many who are not even offered the chance to keep pace and who drift into the liquid of modernity. These two groups—the winners and losers under neoliberal capital, to put it too crudely—are often conceived as separate spheres. For instance, in Richard Florida’s account of the new economic order, the service and working classes are indexed to precarity, while the creative class is described as a haven of rising incomes, lower unemployment, and job satisfaction—the repository for hope in capitalism’s future. However, the character of Greta suggests that the kinds of hyperactive demands made on the individual can occur *simultaneously* with feelings of drift or inertia (and not just with aesthetic expressions of zaniness). Those

⁷⁴ Importantly, Ngai characterizes “zaniness” as a feminized aesthetic, grounding her analysis in the character of Lucille Ball, but extending this sense of feminized hyperactivity into other liminal (less clearly feminine) characters like Jim Carrey’s Cable Guy and Richard Pryor’s The Toy.

who occupy positions of seeming privilege can also drift, can also face precarity, can also feel inert. Moreover, their cynicism, as Greta's character makes clear, marks them as ineffective within the system, rather than sliding coolly through it, as Virno suggests. It is precisely the lack of productive action—a failure to respond to the zany demand—that marks the cynical subject's precarity. Moreover, the effects of neoliberalism—its affects—manifest “murmuringly,” as Nealon writes, or, in other words, do not necessarily register as structurally related effects/affects (580). In the case of Greta, what we tend to see as privilege (such as the ability to acquire debt) masks recognition of her struggle, resulting in the further personalization of negative affects as descriptive of negative (uncooperative and therefore disposable) subjects. There is a structurally *demanded* affective orientation that accompanies the propulsion linked to success, but also a structurally *produced* set of affects among the drifters. Berlant defines one of these in her conception of cruel optimism, Ngai another in her characterization of zaniness. But, if leaning into the impasse of neoliberalism's subjective demand fosters a relation of cruel optimism or zany action, then I want to consider the impasse from the vantage point of cynicism. What if cynicism is more than what Virno sees in a kind of hip disinterestedness? What if cynicism does not acquiesce to frenzy, but to drift? Considered as such, it poses a challenge to the affective constellation seen as inevitable within a neoliberal economy by refusing the cruel yearning that propels common notions of productivity. It offers flatness in response to an affective demand for energy, inertia rather than momentum; it refuses the futural deferral that gives shape and promise to

hopefulness; and it challenges the ubiquitous feminization of labour under neoliberalism by drawing attention to the affective and gendered burden of this demand.

The neoliberal subject is tasked to fight drift, as is articulated by Richard Sennett in the first chapter of his book *Corrosion of Character*, which, not incidentally, is entitled “Drift.” In it, Sennett describes the working life of Rico, a businessman and the son of a working-class janitor, in many ways an analogue to Greta. Despite having achieved his parents’ white-collar dreams for his future, Rico finds himself downsized repeatedly, having to continually relocate his family to pursue career opportunities, and watching his children adopt the attitudes he brings home from the office. After he is downsized once more, Sennett asks Rico if he’s angry. He responds, “Sure, I felt angry, but that doesn’t do any good. There was nothing unfair about the corporation’s making its operation tighter” (29). Sennett summarizes, “There was no action he could take. Even so, Rico feels responsible for this event beyond his control; he literally takes it into himself as his own burden” (29). Sennett describes this response not in terms of internalizing guilt, nor of losing one’s nerve, but instead as the expression of an ethical character. He writes, “Rico focuses on his own sheer determination to resist: he will not drift” (30). Rico finds in his own determination a tenacity that seems to offer solidity where none is available. However, whereas Sennett sees in Rico a kind of ethical determination and will against drift, in Greta we see the way in which this assumption of ethics turns into a moralizing against the drifter, the one who gives in.

On the one hand, Rico represents the orientation Greta is encouraged to emulate, the stance presented at the end of *Modern Times*—a determination to express timeless

values like confidence, loyalty, well-adjustedness, even when these do not reflect circumstances. On the other hand, however, and as Sennett goes on to note, this expression of will in the face of uncertainty traps Rico in a set of values that can only be unchanging and static in their total disconnection from the ways in which he is able to live his life; “The flexible behavior which has brought him success is weakening his own character in ways for which there exists no practical remedy” (31). His expression of will cannot orient itself to some tangible future goal, some point after which things will get better, because his working life remains determined by the same set of conditions; as long as he is working in a neoliberal job market, he will face an environment that demands values contrary to those he would choose to live by, were he to have such a choice. As such, *will*, Rico’s absolute resistance of drift, becomes a mask, the means by which he disavows his own precarity (and the possibility of connecting it to that of others). Moreover, the terms in which he understands an insistence on *will* as a positive ethical position and *drift* as a morally dubious failing not only masks the structural conditions that precipitate affects like cynicism, but also evaluates these affects through an assumption that agency is an exercise of *free* will, rather than a capacity deeply shaped by available opportunity.

While Sennett goes on to claim Rico as an “everyman for our times,” I want to suggest that Rico’s position offers only one way of reading and responding to the impasse of the current moment: as an affective incongruity internalized and masked by the outward appearance and performance of “success.” In his case, cynicism is refused in move quite like that described in a Žižekian ideology (or Lacanian disavowal) in which

the subject nonetheless insists on the mask, on living *as if* in an unenlightened subjective state (29). Greta, on the other hand, drifts in the impasse—she embraces cynicism—and in so doing, calls attention to its structural reality. If Rico incorporates the lessons of flexibility, of mutability, no matter the incongruity, then Greta suggests a saturation point, a point after which one cannot take another relocation, another false optimism, and instead drifts into the void opened up between the possibilities supposedly available for one's life and one's ability to grasp those possibilities. Read in terms of cynicism, Greta expresses (rather than represses) the cynical recognition that what one knows, believes, or desires does not necessarily correspond with how one is able to act and live in the world, or, to use Žižek's terms, she offers a subject who refuses the mask. Moreover, the circular structure of the film—beginning and ending with Greta standing and staggering alone in a fallow field outside the city—suggests that, as one person suffering alone, there is very little that can be done in the impasse to change the conditions by which one's life is determined. Greta is emblematic of the choice Rico actively works to suppress—she drifts and in so doing exemplifies another response to a precarious world, a cynical response that does not necessarily offer a solution to the impasse, but at least refuses to personalize its effect.

Rico's personalization of his unemployment obscures the structural causes behind it, or, perhaps more accurately, it recognizes the structural causes as simply *par for the course*.; more than that, Rico's response grudgingly affirms the efficient operations of the structure in its ejection of him. According to the rules of capital, the corporation is justified in streamlining its operations, his redundancy is inevitable, and so his

willingness to bear it individually coheres with a neoliberal logic of individualizing suffering, labeling it irrelevant to the function of the economy (29). In a sense, Jameson anticipates this impact on the subject in *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* in his description of the “waning of affect” under late capitalism (10). While Jameson’s analysis has been critiqued for its failure to acknowledge the centrality of affect to capitalism,⁷⁵ he describes a flat, affectless, subjectless, postmodern culture as, in part, the product of the waning “of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some kind of active way” (21). I want to suggest that the waning sense of agency Jameson describes speaks to an affective subjective position as much as it does to a political problem. Sennett implies as much when he connects Rico’s sense of impasse to his inability to conceptualize his life in terms of a clear narrative (26). Both theorists connect the confused affective environment and fragmented experience of late capitalism to a waning sense of agency. Or, as Sherry Ortner summarizes, for both Sennett and Jameson, “The crisis of postmodern consciousness is... a crisis of orientation within an uninterpretable, or what Sennett calls illegible, world” (44). Responding to this confusion, Rico subsumes whatever feelings of anger, betrayal or depression he might

⁷⁵ For example, in the Introduction to *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai writes, “... we see how capitalism’s classical affects of disaffection (and thus of potential social conflict and political antagonism) are neatly reabsorbed by the wage system and reconfigured into professional ideals. Nothing could be further from Frederic Jameson’s more widely known thesis about the ‘waning’ of negative affect in our contemporary moment. Instead, Virno shows how central and perversely functional such affective attitudes and dispositions have become, as the very lubricants of the economic system which they originally came into being to oppose” (4). I agree with Ngai’s assertion that feelings, and often ugly feelings, are operational within capitalism today, but, I also contend that Jameson’s notion of a waning affect can itself be registered as an affective burden taken on by the subject, whose affective life is increasingly integrated into a system that demands certain kinds of feelings. Moreover, I want to argue here that while cynicism in one sense can be seen as functional within neoliberal capital, it also registers more ambivalently, as Ngai has argued of her own list of ugly feelings, in a way that raises the questions central to understanding questions of agency or suspended agency under capitalism.

have under the mask of will and the construction of narrative—he rationalizes to forge interpretation, meaning, and stability inwardly; on the other hand, Greta refuses the mask of will—the narrative explanation that she must be happier in order to achieve a happier life—that is being pushed on her and in so doing foregrounds its irrational and incongruous basis.

This affective demand parallels what Virno describes as an “immediate coincidence” “between labor practices and modes of life” under neoliberalism (Virno 13), characterized most prominently as a kind of “permanent mutability” both in life and on the job (14). This notion of mutability recasts the more commonly leveraged flexibility. If flexibility is understood in Bauman’s terms as “a readiness to change tactics and style at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret” (Bauman 4), mutability suggests *change* is the over-riding influence. One does not bend oneself to suit one’s working conditions, one must *become* the change one sees in the world. Thus, Rico cannot acknowledge his performance, since any acknowledgment of a disjuncture produces a dangerous gap into which the subject risks falling. Greta also faces the demand to change, as her supervisor at the call centre, Ann, articulates in her job interview with Greta when she says, “You know, you *always* have to be friendly. Smiling on the inside. Even when people are unfriendly, you have to be able to take it.” The demand for mutability is clear; Greta must not only perform friendliness, but she must also “smile on the inside,” offering potential customers the same seamlessly flirtatious

femininity as her co-workers to survive, even (or especially) in a low-paid, service-sector job.⁷⁶

When asked if she thinks she can do it, Greta responds honestly, though indirectly, with, “I can try.” However, her ability to yield is immediately thrown into question: in the interview, Greta balks when Ann asks her to move to the seat next to her. In this instance, she does give in to the will of the job—she changes chairs—but she does not do so in the friendly, deferential manner implied in the request. Instead, she calls attention to its *demand* by getting up slowly and awkwardly and making a show of draping her coat over the new chair and slouching in her seat. In this, Greta lives out a different mode of subjectivity, one that refuses to maintain the mask and in so doing, draws attention to the absurdity of the demand made by labour—the limited scope of the range of choices it sets out—and its affective and gendered burden. Her cynicism, then, refuses the notion that there can be an individual—and particularly a feminine—solution to a system premised precisely on such gendered and individualized costs.

By refusing to meet the demand for a seamlessly agreeable feminine subjectivity, Greta draws attention to it. In a system in which, as Angela McRobbie says (quoting from Ulrich Beck), one “can only look for individual or autobiographical solutions to what are... systemic or structural problems,” Greta refuses to smile (McRobbie “The Sky” online). Her impassivity calls attention to the way in which subjectivities under neoliberalism are made to “suffer agency,” to use Jane Elliott’s term (itself a re-working of what Berlant calls “sovereign agency”). Through “suffering agency,” Elliott describes

⁷⁶ In this, the demand on Greta parallels the affective labour Arlie Hochschild first described as endemic to the work of flight attendants in her book *The Managed Heart* (1979).

the way in which forms of domination are reinforced precisely *through* the imposition of choice and agency on the individual. Elliott argues that the intensification of agential activity is a direct by-product of... structural inequities” (86); for instance, she points to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when people were forced to make decisions like whether or not they would drown in their attics or attempt to swim to higher ground through treacherous waters (85). Though the embedded choice suggests agency, the context determines this agency as suffering. While the experience of telemarketing is in no way equivalent with the experience of abandonment in the wake of a natural disaster, what I want to emphasize is the illusory choice—or action—that excuses larger questions of structural responsibility or care.

Elliott sets up her account of suffering agency as a means by which to challenge Agamben’s assumption that situations of “bare life” need necessarily be accompanied by subjective passivity or inertia (86), and to consider the more complex ways in which agency is woven into neoliberal structures of governance. While I agree with her position, I also want to add that situations of subjective passivity or inertia in the context of the fraught agency she outlines need not be read solely in terms of subjective domination, but can equally indicate a complicated subjective relation to changing modes of subject-formation under capitalism and the failure of social responsibility and recognition.

One of the most striking differences between a character like Chaplin’s in *Modern Times* and Greta’s in *Eine Flexible Frau* lies in the sympathy with which they are received and framed. Chaplin’s modes of opportunism—stealing, squatting, lying—are in part justified through narratives that see him as having no other choice and are further

vindicated by his eventual embrace of optimism despite circumstances. On the other hand, Greta's significant stores of educational and cultural capital give the sense of choice, thus allowing her friends (or the film's viewer) to see her passivity and prickliness as adopted rather than adaptive; her cynicism is seen as an irresponsible *decision* to remain inert—a choice.

At various points *Eine Flexible Frau* draws attention to the factors narrowing the range of options available to Greta: on the one hand, the move towards gated communities offers her few opportunities to work as an architect trained and interested in building integrated, community-based spaces; on the other, her available employment option is to oversee the construction of temporary corrugated housing for itinerant garment workers. Her status as a single woman whose son lives predominantly with his father alienates her from both her coupled, heterosexual female friends living as housebound “partners” to their husbands' career success and from the queer community she is peripherally linked to. Where Chaplin gains various sympathies—of a prison guard who gives him a reference letter so he can find a job and a café owner who takes a chance on him as an unproven performer—Greta's avenues of support have dried up or become toxic. Her friends—many of whom she hasn't seen in years—won't help her with job recommendations and even when they do, the opportunities they can offer her are temporary or fraught.⁷⁷ Her counselors and therapists are intent only on pressuring her to change, to adjust to the affective demands of the market—cheerfulness, confidence, friendliness—without acknowledging that such affects are completely out of sync with

⁷⁷ At one point, a friend recommends her for a position that turns out to involve designing utilitarian housing for migrant workers.

Greta's current state of depression and available opportunity. Even her teenage son treats her with scorn and derision, calling her a "loser" and avoiding her during their visits or canceling them altogether. Towards the end of the film, her exclusion and alienation are made complete when her friend Max, who has been the most sympathetic to her plight throughout, pushes her out of a café after she stumbles in drunk and begins awkwardly propositioning the business contact with whom he is meeting.

Given her arguably bleaker situation than Chaplin's—particularly in terms of her alienation from any kind of community—it is poignant that, as an audience, we don't like Greta. Aside from a few moments that draw the viewer to feel compassion for her (or perhaps merely encourage us to pity her)—in particular the scenes in which she is upbraided by her son or therapist—Greta is not a sympathetic character: she is drunk most of the time, prickly and condescending to her friends, bleary-eyed, and disengaged from most conversations. Why don't we sympathize with Greta? First, while Chaplin is recognizably precarious in his poverty, Greta, as I have suggested, appears well equipped to live a "successful" life. She has enough disposable income (or enough credit) to go out to bars, wear stylish clothes, and live in an urban apartment. Thus, it is easier to moralize her precarity as the result of bad choices. Second, Greta's position is similar to that faced by many who work in the so-called "creative economy." As such, her struggle is not unique—it is not that of the underdog fighting "the man," but rather that of the middle-class individual struggling as much as her supervisor to keep up with debt, child-rearing, and rent (or mortgage) payments. One of her friends highlights this position when Greta tries unsuccessfully to collect on a debt owed her and the friend, rather than apologizing

for not being able to repay, is angry: “I’m struggling too. You think you’re the only one who’s been harmed?” We dislike Greta in part because she refuses to make the adjustments many of us feel called to make. Third, while Chaplin’s character is consistently positioned as the victim of an unfeeling system, Greta is presented as the unfeeling figure in a system that seems superficially to care. Her supervisor models success for Greta, performing a sales call, but Greta only laughs at her. When Greta fails at her work, she does so not in the inadvertent and slapstick manner in which Chaplin fails at his work, but obviously, deliberately and consciously, scornfully pantomiming the gestures of the kind of enthusiasm-mongering required of telemarketing—what Berlant terms “the open secret of zombie managerial enthusiasm” (221). Thus while Chaplin’s cynicism works in elastic tension with the sympathy we have for him, Greta’s cynicism challenges the terms under which we lend our sympathies to the precarious and the frames we place around our understanding of care. We care—in some cases—for the destitute who seem to have no other choice, or who seem the victims of bad luck, but we moralize the suffering of those whose failure seems a result of refusing the increasingly narrow range of choices that (might) lead to success. Tying each of these together, I suggest that we dislike Greta because she is a cynical woman.

When asked by her employment counselor what she is really good at, a deflated Greta quips: “drinking.” To which the counselor responds, “Ah, a cynic.” Sennett, following Richard Rorty, might also call her an ironist, a state of being that sounds similar to that generated under cynical ideology “in which people are ‘never quite able to take themselves seriously because they are always aware that the terms in which they

describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (Sennett 116 quoting Richard Rorty). Sennett is particularly interested in the worker’s ironic view of *herself*, which he argues is the “logical consequence of living in flexible time, without standards of authority and accountability,” or in a system in which change itself is made “the responsible agent” rather than a boss or other authority figure (116). Sennett, again borrowing from Rorty, is cautious about irony: sociality cannot cohere through irony, nor does it “stimulate people to challenge power,” but instead it becomes self-destructive, one begins to question one’s worth, even one’s reality as a subject, in the absence of external recognition (116). Cynicism and irony run parallel in their responsiveness to feelings of irrelevance within larger and anonymous structures of power; however, where the ironist views herself irrelevant, the cynic with her attention to an ideological underpinning maintains an awareness of the structural production of that feeling. Cynicism thus expresses precarity as endemic to structure—its feeling of what Berlant calls a lack of enthusiasm drawing attention to the conditions that normalize this feeling as the purview of the neoliberal individual (219).

The judgments launched at Greta, whether by the viewer, or the characters in the film itself, moralize her situation, moralize neoliberal capitalism and its players, which Eric Cazdyn argues causes us to misrecognize it, to misdiagnose its problems (2). Cazdyn argues that it is not that capitalism is flawed or evil, but that it works precisely as it should, generating a growing number of losers to fuel the ever-greater winnings of a few (2). In a session in which she investigates Greta’s strengths (which, incidentally, remain

unnamed), her career counselor fast-forwards through a prerecorded projection of Greta experiencing a breakdown. She plays the tape at a point at which Greta is sobbing, saying that she's alone, that she has no one. It is one of the few moments in the film that we witness Greta's emotional state—and we do so only in flashback. Pausing the tape, the counselor suggests she must “work on her performance,” “learn to come across the right way,” and “define goals.” Greta does not respond, but slouches in her chair, staring at the image of her tear-covered face. The contradiction between Greta's projected anguish and the list of directives she is offered is unsettling. It is as if Turanskyj has blown up the maxim, “Smile, though your heart is breaking!” to its most hyperbolic iteration. While we don't necessarily sympathize with Greta, in this scene, we can feel the lack of recognition she is offered by the structure being perpetuated around her, we can feel the impossibility of her position as a person whose suffering is continually criticized, moralized, even while it remains unaddressed. We feel the impossibility of meeting a demand for friendliness when the treatment one receives is consistently uncaring.

In fact, the counselor does not notice the incongruity between the recording of Greta's anguish and the false positivity of the directives she's offering. She does not ignore the contradiction, but rather, for her, it is not there. Her instructions to Greta are not ruthless or sadistic, but realistic and practical. If she wants to gain employment, Greta must learn to perform seamlessly, without irony, laughter or cynicism. She must learn to suffer agency. Even if the system itself does not act morally, its players continue to base their judgments of each other on moral terms—as our own reactions to Greta as viewers make clear. Thus, if Greta cannot mold herself into a model employee, then an

employment counselor, even one with the ninety-seven percent success rate that Greta's boasts, cannot help her. The employment counselor offers the voice of a system functioning precisely as it is designed: "You have to learn to deal constructively with your experiences. If you're not interested in your life, who else will be?" This encounter highlights not only the incongruity of Greta's affective state with that being demanded of her, but also the incongruity between a system that is merely doing business and the affective burden it places on the individual in the process. The individual life is irrelevant to the system unless it is working in tandem with it. Ultimately, the employment counselor tells Greta that she simply cannot help her, "We're not getting anywhere," she says. The two are cycling in the impasse framed by the contradictions inherent to a neoliberal model that leverages feeling and unfeeling in contradictory and often impossible ways for the subject who must bear out those contradictions in her own existence.

To conclude, I want to draw attention to one particular incongruity highlighted by Greta's cynicism: that is, the contradiction in a neoliberal, Western, service-sector-based capitalism between the set of affective demands *placed on* the individual—cheerfulness, reliability, flexibility—and the affects *produced in* the individual—anxiety, depression, feelings of worthlessness. *Eine Flexible Frau* repeatedly draws attention to the demand that the worker keep improving herself, keep pursuing opportunities, to keep pushing, keep leaning in, even as the economy collapses and social supports erode. Thus, the film highlights the contradiction between the neoliberal demand for action, agency, and momentum in an economy in which opportunities are increasingly limited or tenuous.

Sure, Greta could get on with things, could smile more, could try to become more likable, but these actions also perpetuate a punishing structure. McRobbie notes that *Eine Flexible Frau* “dissects the states of depression, which are so endemic within the ranks of the workers in the new ‘creative economy’” (“The Sky” online). The film not only dissects such states, but also describes the way in which they are utterly bound up in the affective demands made by that same economy. Cynicism thus becomes the corollary of the demand for optimism, not its opposite, but the feeling generated by the relentless drive to perform optimism, no matter one’s situation, a compulsion I will investigate in more detail in the next chapter. Cynicism is expressive of the incongruity between the affects demanded as subjective performance and those generated in feminized, suffering subjects by what McRobbie, Florida and others refer to as the creative economy.

These kinds of incongruities are *part of* the current function of post-industrial, neoliberal capitalism, what Jean and John Comaroff term the age of “millennial capitalism,” which they describe as “an age in which the extravagant promises of millennial capitalism run up against an increasingly nihilistic, thoroughly postmodern pessimism” (27). The promise of capitalism and the failure of that same promise are maintained in functional tension with one another in capitalism’s current iteration: we see through the promise, and yet we continue to abide by it, until, perhaps, like Greta we can no longer maintain the façade. Both promise and subjective failure are inbuilt. As this chapter has demonstrated, the affective experience of the subject living through processes of industrialization and post-industrialization is borne out by this tension between subject and structure, between the promise of capital and its failure, in fact its inability, to deliver

on that promise, at least in the sweeping terms that the promise predicts. The relation of subject to structure through the orienting affects of optimism and cynicism articulates the tensions and contradictions that are most often borne privately, individually, and with increasingly little support.

If one *leans into* a crumbling economy, one is liable to fall. As it is in the other texts under discussion in this chapter, falling is a central and recurring image in *Eine Flexible Frau*. Greta not only drifts, but also falls, and, unlike Chaplin's slips, trips and falls, which are often elastic and seldom result in lasting injury, Greta falls hard and painfully, getting up only slowly and awkwardly, or, sometimes, not getting up at all before the camera cuts away. Unlike the *Falling Man* (whether in the iconic 9/11 image or in the image's other repetitions, which, incidentally, never include the moment of terminality), Greta's falls hit bottom, repeatedly. In the beginning of the film, she heaves slowly and drunkenly up the stairs to her apartment, falling through her apartment door and landing hard on the floor. At the end of the film, she weaves and stumbles through a fallow field on the outskirts of Berlin. At various points, she staggers through gardens, lies face down on public benches and collapses on patches of grass. However, the scene most directly taking up the theme of falling occurs in the middle of the film, after Greta is fired from her job at the call centre. She walks towards three theatrical friends in a field and as she approaches, she falls to the ground dramatically. Jumping up to greet her, two of the friends come over and immediately begin telling her how to correct her fall, demonstrating bowed legs and thrusting torsos that waver close to the ground but never give in to gravity. "This is how you should fall," they tell her, pausing low to the ground

and then bouncing up quickly in an approximation of Chaplin's slapstick maneuvers. This way plays up the pathos, they suggest. However, Greta cannot emulate their gestures. Her legs will not bow and she cannot pause for effect; she cannot bend and snap, but can only fall hard on the ground. Eventually she just lies there, face down, while her two friends dance around her.

While *The Falling Man* image in the early 21st century in many ways remains exceptional, and is thus managed, excised from common experience through its exceptionality, Greta, like Chaplin, exemplifies an everyday sort of falling. However, unlike Chaplin, she falls without pathos and without a set of gestures by which to bounce back. In other words, she falls with the kind of terminality that is only hinted at in the *Falling Man*. In fact, since the figure in the *Falling Man* was himself a service worker, Greta, in some ways, continues the trajectory begun in that fall: she is emblematic of a service-based economy in which precarity has become the rule, rather than the exception. Sennett attaches this kind of precarity to the proliferation of risk and risk-taking in society, arguing that risk is “driven... by the fear of failing to act” (88). One takes the risk because the notion of not acting is more fearful. Sennett's conclusions support Elliott's description of suffering agency under neoliberal models of governance, in which action or choice no longer coheres with an uncomplicated notion of subjective freedom, but instead marks a new form of domination that is effected precisely through choice, through agency. As evidenced in his interviews with Rico, Sennett suggests a structure of feeling based on incorporating chance, taking the risk of acting, “even if you know rationally you are doomed to fail” (90). On the other hand, Greta suggests a different

relation to both precarity and action. She is unable or unwilling to take risks and chooses not to act in the ways being demanded of her. In doing so, she highlights the narrowing scope of choice under neoliberalism. If Sennett is interested in “how institutions shape an individual’s efforts to change his or her life,” then I am interested in how predominant structures of feeling reflect and/or work to disable an individual’s efforts to change his or her life (84). In Sennett’s risk society, “passive people wither” (88). In Greta’s, passive people might wither, but in doing so openly, even faced with the spectre of terminality, they also unsettle the actors, they raise questions about our collective emphasis on and faith in action or agency.

If in the 20th and 21st century texts I discuss here, precarity is imagined as a brink, the precipice, the threat of fall, in *Eine Flexible Frau*, that brink is overtaken. The precarious are not at risk of falling, about to fall, or even tumbling through mid-air. They have fallen, hard. Moreover, the individual is sole witness to her own crash. At the same time, the dominant structure of feeling built around their fall is one that trumpets optimism, cheerfulness, and positivity. The Comaroffs have noted this odd fusion of “modern and postmodern, hope and hopelessness, utility and futility” in millennial capitalism, and the “mass of contradictions” these odd pairings generate in the world, which becomes a space of simultaneous “possibility and impossibility” (24). They note the “occult economies” that have spawned in the confusion as a way of making sense of the “inexplicable phenomena” produced in a neoliberal economy, such as facing unemployment even when one has diligently wound one’s way through the system of education and training to emerge as a “professional” (26). I want to argue that cynicism is

another response to the confused separation of knowledge and power under neoliberal capital. Faced with an incongruous and, in many ways, incomprehensible, reality in which one's knowledge cannot be translated into viable or predictable outcomes, is not cynicism a predictable response? If one cannot even fall correctly, then what is to be done? If the occult is one way of explaining a set of unseen factors that influences one's life but which remains beyond one's ability to control or even comprehend, then cynicism is a way of registering the affective burden of this confusion, of acknowledging the sense of erasure one feels as an individual living in such a system. Greta gives in to the "whatever" that Hardt has noted as the characteristic gesture of subjectivity in the world of Post-Fordist capital (36).⁷⁸ She not only gives into the whatever, but also takes it on—she shrugs and gets drunk. She feels "whatever." She feels cynical.

It is easy to assume that Greta falls/fails *because* she is cynical. Indeed, this is the message she is given by all those around her who push her to act differently. But I want to argue for a different, less moralizing, view of cynicism. I argue that cynicism is not the cause but the symptom of precarity. In other words, Greta is cynical because she falls/fails. Late in the film, her friend Max breaks the news that he won't be able to help her secure a position in his firm, even in the demoted role of construction manager. In a line she hears repeated to her by several friends, he tells her, "it won't work out." When

⁷⁸ See footnote 36 for a longer discussion on "the whatever" as taken up by Hardt and Agamben. I would argue that Greta also invokes the colloquial meaning of the word "whatever" (the meaning Agamben leaves aside in his opening paragraphs in *Coming Community*), and in so doing demonstrates the way in which the Post-Fordist demand for a kind of empty subjectivity in the smooth-functioning society of control comes up against the definition Agamben gives to his "whatever," "being such that it always matters" (1). She is a subject who feels both the weight of the meaning of her own being—the specificity of her unemployment and divorce, for instance, and her simultaneous meaninglessness to the system, or its indifference to her (Agamben 1).

she presses as to why, he expands, “It won’t work out because it never worked out.” Precarity, failure, falling, have provided Greta’s dominant structure and experience, to paraphrase Berlant (192). While everyone around her is pressuring Greta to be more cheerful, the film itself offers no indication that such a switch in attitude would yield any change in her circumstance. Optimism is not the inverse of cynicism, but merely a way of papering it over, disavowing the structural causes that in many ways prevent or otherwise curtail positive feelings towards the future. Optimism, as Berlant notes, is cruel, and thus, I argue that cynicism provides a necessary affect in terms of reorienting the individual to the structural conditions that determine his or her life. I will explore this binary between cynicism and optimism further in the next chapter, particularly in terms of its centrality to the foundational myths of American capitalism and its consequences for people caught living in the bind between a compulsive optimism and a situation that warrants cynicism.

To end this chapter, however, I leave the question of our changing relation to cynicism from emergent to late-late capitalism. It is not just Chaplin’s redemption *via* the gamin into normative modes of behaviour that renders him a likable character, but also his redemption from cynicism that indexes his possibility as a subject. Greta shows us that Chaplin’s flirtation with cynicism is not anomalous but instead indicative of the irrelevance of subjective welfare to profit-focused industrialization. And yet, our moralizing of her cynical perspective prevents recognition of the larger infrastructural conditions that breed such cynicism in individuals. To despise or deride cynicism, then, is to retrench the individualism that gives rise to a cynical sense of powerlessness in the first place, is to demand that subjects—particularly precarious or feminized subjects—

lean in, or take the fold, without acknowledging that the further a woman leans, the more likely she is to fall. To decry cynicism is to repeat the demand of optimism without considering whether or not a person has reason to feel optimistic about their situation, whether or not we have reason to collectively feel optimistic about our chances as a species. To label cynicism as bad subjectivity is to deny the historicity, commonality, and structural embeddedness of affect, and to ignore the necessary interrelatedness of subject and structure. To instead inhabit an affective cynicism is to explore the impressions pressed into us by the structures under which we live. Cynicism is not, and need not be seen as, merely giving into or giving up, but also as leaning-back, the refusal of an optimistic momentum that is often cruel.

Chapter 3: The Crisis of Happiness and a Cynical Response

And we, who always think of happiness
rising, would feel the emotion
that almost baffles us
when a happy thing falls.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, “The Tenth Elegy,” *Duino Elegies*

As I have been arguing throughout this project, cynicism suggests both a way of feeling and a kind of orientation or (confused) directionality. It is an affective state that is as much about the movements or choices of bodies, specifically the boundaries drawn around movements or choices, as it is about a particular feeling; or, it is about the way in which these two intersect and mutually inform one another: agency and feeling (as Sianne Ngai’s notion of frustrated or obstructed agency makes clear [3]). Cynicism is the coming together of both of these; that is, it is a feeling that registers the state of being constrained by ideological, practical, or political boundaries that one can see or sense but under the constraints of which one must live in the absence of an alternative. Paul Hoggett describes a similar bind by breaking apart what he sees as a common assumption that reflexivity leads to power or action. Drawing on a body of critical sociology that argues, *contra* Anthony Giddens, for a recognition of a situation in “which people may be well aware” of institutional characteristics that “constrain them nonetheless” (79), Hoggett points out that reflexivity can occur alongside powerful feelings of powerlessness: “As a powerless object of multinationals, state bureaucracies or racist institutions I nevertheless may still retain the power to know about the injustices that impact upon me; in this sense I am a reflexive but powerless object” (45). Thus, where Giddens (and more general

disciplinary wisdom in cultural studies and sociology, not to mention folk or common knowledge) moves seamlessly from reflexivity to action, Hoggett calls for attention to be paid to the passive, not as a pathology of the disadvantaged, but as a position from which thought and pause might stem. The break that comes from a recognition of powerlessness, he argues, could interrupt the reiteration of normative or patriarchal modes of action, which are, in Hoggett's account, tied to our assumptions about reflexivity as an autonomous site of action (45).

In this chapter, I consider the tension between agency and inertia that subtends cynicism as it is inflected through a different set of affective relations: that is, the binary between cynicism and happiness. This binary describes a bind similar to that unraveled by Hoggett: happiness is privileged as the presumed focus of action, or engagement, while cynicism is defined by its passivity (and thus also the blockage it effects to the pursuit of happiness). If cynicism describes a kind of stuckness—a subject caught in the bind Hoggett describes between knowing and doing, who might feel dissatisfied, disaffected, disenfranchised, but cannot see a way in which to counter the forces producing such feelings—then its antidote is seen in momentum, in a path out of the circularity that Berlant describes as a dog-paddling motion turning laps in the ripples of contemporary crisis. Affectively, the antidote to cynicism becomes a reassertion of the pursuit of happiness. Like Hoggett suggests of reflexivity, culturally, we labour under the assumption that happiness moves us in positive and desirable directions, that action in the direction of greater happiness—often defined as the reassertion of normative, comfortable frames—is both a social and personal good. Like Hoggett, then, I seek to interrupt this

propulsion towards happiness to consider the feeling of stuckness that is obscured or bowled over in our momentum.

The feeling of *stuckness* is historically significant. Whereas people have always experienced a certain exertion of control circumscribing their capacity to act, whether in the form of the visible threat of Medieval torture or the covert conditioning of incorporated disciplinary tactics; whether through the poverty of a nearly insurmountable working class position or in the threat of downward mobility, as Western (North American, Australian, European) societies shift towards neoliberalism, feelings of *stuckness* attend the so-called *freedoms* of the self-regulating market.⁷⁹ In his essay “Postscript of the Societies of Control,” Gilles Deleuze suggests a defining feature of what he terms *societies of control* (chronologically linked with shifts towards neoliberalism, though Deleuze does not use the term) is “ultrarapid forms of free-floating control” (4).⁸⁰ Or, the appearance of new forms of social, political, and economic organization that “could at first express new freedom” (4). Thus, stuckness is fundamentally at odds with the notion of freedom that is, at least superficially, touted as a neoliberal priority.

Yet, even as Karl Polanyi predicts in 1944, “the means of maintaining freedom are themselves adulterating and destroying it” (262). Or, as Deleuze might say, what looks like freedom, in fact feels like debt (6). As networks of control emerge, Deleuze argues, we enter a “state of generalized crisis,” because the disciplinary structures and

⁷⁹ Karl Polanyi describes the annihilating function of the completely self-regulating market and the social implications of the shift off the gold standard in his book *The Great Transformation* (first published in 1944).

⁸⁰ Deleuze contrasts societies of control with the Foucauldian model of disciplinary societies, based on institutional forms of discipline, such as the school, factory, or family, for example.

institutions that characterize and underpin the waning social model begin to break down (3). The crisis Deleuze sees, then, is, in part, a crisis of freedom. In a similar sense, though through the entirely different methodology of economic analysis, in their book *The Crisis of Neoliberalism*, Duménil and Lévy describe neoliberalism (in the context of the United States, which is the focus of their study) as premised on an inherent contradiction between an economic strategy based on an “unbound quest for high income” on the one hand and, on the other, the unsustainable trajectory of that desire, particularly as the U.S. seeks to remain exempt from the kinds of constraints placed on other capitalist countries (34). In other words, they describe neoliberalism as premised on a desire for an unfettered freedom in one place (the United States) that can only come at the expense of restraining the freedom of others. This contradiction between freedom for some and restriction for many, they argue, produces a latent or inherent crisis in neoliberalism in that its very premise is untenable over the long term. While Duménil and Lévy describe a tension between freedom and constraint in terms of an international jockeying between nations, the crisis they describe can also be seen in the smaller-scale distribution of access to so-called freedom: for some (the managers of the mortgage companies that underwrote the housing crisis, for instance) the freedom to pursue profit, happiness, and upward mobility is available, but it is so only at the expense of others (the purchasers of enormous mortgages, for instance).

In his book *The Already Dead*, Eric Cazdyn suggests that “if you really want to understand a system... you must look away from what appears to be the immediate crisis and toward the crisis that is at work even when the system is functioning well. This crisis

constitutes the system itself; the system cannot function without its internal crisis” (1). In terms of capitalism, this means understanding crisis “not [as] what happens when capitalism goes wrong, but when it goes right” (2). On the other hand, though Duménil and Lévy note the current crisis is the fourth to attend capitalism and will, like the others, produce structural changes in the economy and social order (and so they don’t necessarily position it as unique or outlying within capitalist approaches), they also describe its particularly trenchant trajectory of declining accumulation and disequilibria as difficult to correct and, without intervention, terminal (2). Here they suggest that the crisis underwriting the neoliberal shift in American capitalism is reaching a breaking point. But, what if Cazdyn is right and the crisis underpinning neoliberal forms of capitalism is not reason to herald its imminent undoing, but rather evidence of its tenacity? If one looks to the tension between unfettered and constricted freedom at the root of neoliberalism, it seems Cazdyn’s assessment is terribly accurate: “one cannot suspend [the] fundamental rules of profit creation and expansion under any circumstances (and thus cannot suspend class conflict, gender inequality, imperial violence, brutal dispossessions, ecological destruction, and psychological suffering)” (2). Furthermore, public discourse such as Obama’s call to youth to continue to reach for the future they desire, even as that reaching throws their parents into foreclosure, reinforces the sense that this crisis is so engrained as to have effaced the burden that freedom places on many.

In what follows, I present the crisis of neoliberalism as a crisis in happiness—a crisis that premises the pursuit of happiness as the ultimate human right, but that also ignores the tremendous costs that this pursuit entails. Duménil and Lévy describe another

key to the crisis underwriting the current moment as the fraying of the individual expectation of ever-increasing wealth, which could also be characterized as a crisis in one of the fundamental principles underlying American identity and collective mythology: the pursuit of happiness. If the pursuit of happiness is understood as the paramount freedom of the individual to seek upward mobility, then the crisis of neoliberalism marks a weakening in the viability of this ideology, or, as Lauren Berlant describes, rephrasing the crisis of neoliberalism Duménil and Lévy describe, a fraying sense of access to the notion of “the good life” that is held out as the promise of the pursuit of happiness. However, following Cazdyn, I contend that this crisis in happiness is formative of the current cultural moment, rather than a marker of its demise. The pursuit of happiness becomes an eternal and yet ultimately unreachable goal, and thus the fodder for a wide market of self-help manuals and Internet memes designed to engage one in the ongoing quest for one’s own happiness.

As (North) America moves into a moment overdetermined by crises—the financial crisis, the housing crisis, the economic crisis, the crisis of global warming, the crisis of terror alerts—the collective identification around the myth of self-actualization is also threatened, and, in the absence of an alternate narrative around which to build their lives, people live within a set of “overwhelming and impending crises of life building and expectation” (Berlant *Cruel* 3), or a condition of “endemic uncertainty” (4). Though not all of these crises are constituted by neoliberalism—for instance, climate change predates the advent of neoliberal economic policies—they are all implicated in the spread of what Wendy Brown (following Thomas Lemke) has called the spread of “neoliberal

rationality”—or the migration of market rationality—into all areas of life. Crises are framed within the terms of neoliberalism, that is, are understood through the rationale and language of the market. Under the rigorously individualistic model of neoliberalism (Brown 39), the individual faces crisis alone—in a society in which the notion of social good has eroded, and the myth of self-actualization has come to mean that if one is unhappy, it is because one has not pursued one’s own happiness rigorously enough (Brown 43).

Berlant notes the curious fact that in the current moment of crisis, the fantasy that subtends the breakdown remains intact, if not stronger. That is, the founding mythology of the American Dream, which dovetails nicely with notions of self-actualization that render the individual the primary unit by which to measure success and failure, are retrenched as individuals continue to imagine that pursuit of “the good life” might offer exit from their current misfortunes. Berlant fleshes out our affective relation to the current moment of neoliberal crisis as one of *attachment*. Certainly, accounts that purport to describe the crisis of neoliberalism, such as Duménil and Lévy’s, allow its base assumption: that we are in a moment of crisis, seeking to stanch losses, rather than address endemic conditions. Thus, the promise of the American Dream, what Sara Ahmed terms the promise of happiness, remains the genre by which we make sense of our lives, and so, we remain attached to its “good-life fantasies” (2), even if we cannot access them in our individual lives. If in an earlier moment of industrialization Chaplin could encourage audiences to smile though their hearts might be breaking, could encourage faith in the promise of happy endings, Berlant notes that this optimism has

become a cruel, painful and damaging attachment as “evidence of [its] instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds” (2).

Berlant’s book tracks the emerging genre of impasse (perhaps opposed to the genre of crisis, though not explicitly framed as such by Berlant), the sense people live within of being stuck between an unreachable fantasy and a social structure premised only on that unachievable model. I want to tease out a relation implicit in the cruelty she discerns in optimistic attachment: that between the cynicism of recognition and the happiness posed as the reward for attachment. Berlant notes that the fraying fantasy of the good life produces affects such as “depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism” among others (2). One of the interesting things about this list is the proximity of cynicism and optimism. While Berlant does not necessarily pose the two terms as equivalents (Berlant notes the “incoherent mash” of affective relations to “the good life” in this moment of its waning [2]), nor does she understand optimism solely in terms of positive attachments, for her both register as an attachment to “the good life.” If we understand the promise of “the good life” in terms of the goal posed in the pursuit of happiness, then this formulation suggests crisis precipitates a range of attachments to happiness whose superficially positive or negative valences do not mitigate the underlying conditions of impasse. In other words, for Berlant, we can have superficially positive or negative affective attachments to the so-called crisis of the current moment, but these do not change the underlying cruelty of the situation. Happiness, and in particular, the *pursuit* of happiness, is for many an unhappy endeavour.

In this chapter, I draw out the explicit frames of the everyday impasse of neoliberalism in terms of affect and agency, in particular considering the way in which our assumptions about desirable or undesirable affective states orient us within a crisis of agency. I am interested in the way in which motivation, agency, and action are so often conceptualized in positive frames—as remedial in times of crisis—and remain committed to the promise of happiness,⁸¹ while concurrently cynicism and other negative or passive states are implicated as ultimately and unquestionably detrimental, unpromising, and unhappy. While these kinds of oppositions have been teased out in works ranging from cultural theory to psychology, my particular interest here is in these terms as political affects, considering the role each plays in reinforcing a set of normative values set up as the status quo in late capitalist society. My curiosity in this framing of happiness and cynicism, then, is whether or not the acknowledgement of cynicism as an “unhappy” affect generated out of a particular relation between subject and structure might prise open other ways of imagining our relation to our own sense of agency, to others, and ultimately to our planet. The pursuit of happiness presumes a goal, and this goal becomes most visible in the United States in its explicit relation to the American Dream—happiness is held up as *the* aim; though one might struggle, the narrative of American

⁸¹ To give just a few examples of this pervasive popular belief and its directives on how to achieve happiness (which it assumes as a shared, prime goal): molecular biologist turned Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard’s *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life’s Most Important Skill* (2007); Gretchen Rubin’s book *The Happiness Project* (based on the blog of the same name), which the book jacket summarizes as follows: “On the outside, Gretchen Rubin had it all—a good marriage, healthy children and a successful career—but she knew something was missing. Determined to end that nagging feeling, she set out on a year-long quest to learn how to better enjoy the life she already had”; Neil Pasricha’s *The Book of Awesome* (2011) (also based on a blog: 1000awesomethings.com); or Sonja Lyubomirsky’s *The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want* (2008).

exceptionalism is based on the notion that if one works hard enough, if one wants it badly enough, one can persevere and succeed in achieving happiness.⁸² This framing, which assumes happiness is a marker of flourishing, rather than cruelty, bleeds beyond national borders and subtends the narratives that subtend and foster neoliberalism more broadly. Thus, though framed in terms of an *American* dream, this chapter seeks to understand that fantasy as resonant beyond those particular borders in its propulsion of neoliberal fantasies more broadly. This pursuit of happiness, optimism, or hope might seem to be contrasted to cynicism, but both respond to a scenario of affective attachment and sense of crisis: hope to pursue and affirm the aim of happiness and cynicism to register the breakdown of that notion of the good life. If our persistent orientation to happiness can be damaging—as I will come to show, might even be dangerous—then perhaps our persistent distaste for cynicism may be less damaging than we assume.

Swamplandia!

If happiness stands as a goal, then hope propels one towards that goal, while cynicism threatens to derail one from its track. In order to unpack these two threads and their implications for our understanding of the political subject in the context of the neoliberal crisis of everyday life, I turn to Karen Russell's novel *Swamplandia!*, which

⁸² For examples of this genre, look to any Hollywood film depicting an inner-city youth who finds his way out of poverty by following his dreams (such as *Hoop Dreams* [1994], *Finding Forrester* [2000]). Listen to nearly any presidential address that speaks to the hope located in hard work, such as those cited in Chapter 1. Look to the Oprah empire, which is built entirely on this assumption (see, for instance, *O's Big Book of Happiness*). One could even look at the narrative underlying 2012 documentary *Queen of Versailles*: a working class man works to build the largest time-share company in the world and his wife, a beautiful engineering graduate who goes from scraping by in the lower class to decorating the largest home in America. Of course, director Lauren Greenfield calls into question the unproblematic celebration of this narrative both through the ostentation of their consumption and through their subsequent implication in the housing market collapse.

poses these two modes—hope and cynicism—as attachments to a rendition of the American narrative of “the good life.” Russell’s novel explores a collective, American fantasy of the good life as it breaks down against the backdrop of an everglades-based alligator-wrestling theme park called Swamplandia!. Located on an island in the swamps off southern Florida, the park is run by the self-proclaimed-native Bigtree tribe (who are in fact a Caucasian family descended from Ohio settlers drawn by the offer of cheap land in the Florida swamps). The book is narrated, for the most part, from the perspective of Ava Bigtree, thirteen years old and the youngest of the three Bigtree siblings—her older brother Kiwi is seventeen and her middle sister Osceola is sixteen. When Hilola Bigtree, the kids’ mother and the park’s headlining act with her *Swimming with the Seths* routine,⁸³ dies from ovarian cancer, attendance at the already struggling parks drains first to a trickle and then to nothing. The Chief, the kids’ father and the park’s manager, devises an elaborate, and expensive, scheme he calls *Carnival Darwinism* to revive profits and pay down the park’s substantial and rising debt load (39). However, unable to fund the plan or keep the park’s creditors at bay, he leaves to make money on the mainland working as an announcer at a tired local casino and living in a room at the Bowl-A Bed motel. Kiwi, the family realist, is sceptical of not only his father’s *Carnival Darwinism*, but of the park’s viability as a revenue stream. Unable to convince his father to take more practical measures, such as selling the park, Kiwi runs away to seek fortune on the mainland, eventually taking a janitorial job at *The World of Darkness*, a recently

⁸³ Russell’s novel constructs a fantastical dialect that the family uses in outlining their own mythology and in everyday conversation. In this parlance, they refer to all alligators as *Seths*, named after the original *Swamplandia!* acquisition.

opened rival theme park. Left alone on the island, Ava and Osceola each retreat into fantasy. Osceola channels spirit “boyfriends” using a book called *The Spiritist’s Telegraph* that she finds on The Library Boat, a crumbling barge that serves as the kids’ homeschool library. Eventually, Osceola elopes to the underworld with the ghost of a 1930s dredgeman⁸⁴ named Louis Thanksgiving on an old ship that mysteriously runs aground on their island. Afraid that her sister will disappear into hell or die trying, Ava follows her into the swamp led by the Bird Man, an itinerant swamp-dweller who, like a pied piper, claims to be able to charm unwanted birds, and who also mysteriously shows up on the island the day before Osceola’s departure. The latter part of the book, which is made up of alternating chapters told from the perspectives of Kiwi and Ava, primarily follows the courses of action the two take to address their respective crises: for Kiwi the need to earn thousands of dollars quickly to cover Swamplandia!’s debts and for Ava recovering her sister and proving her ability to replace their mother in the park’s key gator-wrangling routines so she can both save their park and to keep the Bigtree myth vibrant and viable, intertwined objectives in her mind.

Swamplandia! rides a few different generic lines, from fable, to gothic fantasy to magic realism, to *bildungsroman* with each of these ultimately feeding into a larger allegory that takes up American, late-capitalist subjectivity in the context of a shaky

⁸⁴ Starting in the early 20th century, the Florida government hired teams of unemployed men to dredge the swamps of the Everglades in an effort to turn them into more a more viable space—an extreme example of misplaced optimism? *Swamplandia!* poses much of its action against snippets of the history of the swamps, which the novel suggests is lost in the mainland approach to education and history.

national economy.⁸⁵ The novel is posed largely as a narrative of good versus evil: the heroic underdog Swamplandia! *versus* the corporate monolith The World of Darkness (also posed as the “indigenous” Swamplandia! *versus* the invasive exotic species The World of Darkness [76]); the family of self-realizing oddballs *versus* the bland consensus of the suburbs; a squelching, prolific nature *versus* insidious grey concrete; the fervent hope of youth *versus* the pragmatic cynicism of adulthood). However, as I will show, Russell sets up these binaries in order to both showcase our adherence to and faith in them and to unsettle the ease with which we assign not only positive and negative values to their poles, but our hopes and fears. For example, the nobility of the Bigtree’s claim on the land is immediately called into question by their cooption of an indigenous identity in a region in which indigenous genocide was particularly thorough and vicious.

It is not (or not only) the rival theme park The World of Darkness that brings down Swamplandia!. It is not simply the creep of corporate profit mongering that undermines the family business (the Chief is also predominantly concerned with finance, even if he is less capable of generating huge revenues). Instead, these corporate ills are mixed into an already precarious concoction of fantasy, optimism, and myopia.

Swamplandia! tells the story of how good and evil become blurred and moot in the face of an anonymous structure that predicts success and failure based on a profit model that trades on heroism, courage, or tenacity. The novel suggests that the optimism and sense of self that can be built out of a vehement attachment to narratives of becoming that are

⁸⁵ Russell herself invites this interpretation of the novel. In an interview with *The Millions*, she says, “what happens in my stories is just an expanded vocabulary to talk about a way that everybody feels” (Gresko web).

ultimately out of sync with available opportunity can lead to dangerous or myopic decision-making and an overdeveloped sense of one's ability. As well and more broadly, *Swamplandia!* draws out a critique of narratives of opportunity for their exploitative effects on indigenous people, the poor, the land, and the capacity for life itself. In this, *Swamplandia!* explores our affective attachments to the narratives that currently make sense of the world, considering and reconsidering shared and engrained fantasies like the American Dream and how these shift (or fail to shift) to accommodate crisis, in particular, the kinds of crises that have been underwriting my own project here; that is, the crises of agency that attend the rise of neoliberalism in North America. The novel thus describes the scenario of a minor apocalypse, the dissolution of the entire way of life—the entire history and fantastical narrative—of just one family, framing this with a question that haunts each character but has no viable answer: “what are we supposed to do?” (24). Thus, the novel offers its readers what might be called a fantastical cynicism—a situation in which magical thinking butts up against frustrated or frustrating action, a novel in which a cynical view of the world is the spectre haunting the Floridian swamps.

Aligning the Bigtree family with the other figures I have addressed in this project, who also struggle to function in a structure predicated on the absence of assistance, Ava tells her reader near the beginning of the novel, “if you're short on time... the two-word version of our story [would be]: *we fell*” (9 emphasis in original). For all its epic resonances, then, the novel is ultimately one of coping, or failing to cope, with tragedy or crisis figured first in the death of Hilola, the park and family's “lodestar” (9). Though the park was facing financial shortfalls before her death, these could be ignored, obliterated

through a propulsive knit of family myth and an intimacy based on defiant difference.

While the Bigtree tribe defines itself in opposition to the anonymous mass of the American suburbs, they also embody the American Dream that subtends these spaces: self-made, rigorously individualistic, and unerring in their faith in their ability to triumph. With Hilola's death, however, the myth is suddenly missing its hero; the park loses its headlining act, the debts mount, the laundry doesn't get done. Suddenly the liminal straits that previously marked the family's difference from the mainland suburb-dwellers threaten to undo them. Their narrative cannot hold together, and the family is forced to determine a next course of action while facing the terrifying prospect of losing everything and moving to a concrete apartment in a suburb on the outskirts of Loomis, the unremarkable south Florida town across from Swamplandia! on the mainland. However, the family's collectivity, their intimacy, is based on the Bigtree myth, and without it, they have no way of coming together, and thus each flounders alone to find their way through grief, bankruptcy, and the pending dissolution of all that has been familiar to them. In the way three characters attempt to solve their problems, Russell considers various affective responses to crisis and their outcomes. In particular, she offers her reader an unflinching investigation of the corrosive and yet compelling effect of hope in happiness, or positive thinking in the face of disaster, posing alongside it a cynicism that, while it does not offer a clear-cut or even desirable solution, can act as a necessary temper.

Carnival Darwinism

First, the Chief. The male head of the household and park manager, Chief Bigtree is absolutely unwilling to confront the changed reality of the family's situation. Instead, he clings to the old story of victory over the odds, seeing any setback as merely temporary. For example, when his wife is dying and in the late stages of ovarian cancer, both parents continue to tell their children that her health is improving, that things will soon go back to normal, even as she enters hospice care. It is the doctor who eventually takes the children aside and warns them their mother's cancer will be imminently terminal (38). This sort of delusional thinking characterizes his view of the park's situation as well. Confronting more than \$50,000 in debt, zero revenue, and constant bills to keep Swamplandia! running, the Chief tells his son Kiwi, who is trying to demonstrate the enormity of the crisis to his father, "This is like bad weather, you understand? It's gonna blow over" (21), going on to tell him, "We are not abandoning your mother's dream here, do you understand that? We are the Bigtree Tribe, son, and we have a business to run..." (38). Russell makes clear that the Chief (and his father) constructed the "dream" of Swamplandia! and Hilola was only ever ambivalently invested in it. And yet, the Chief figures his dream as hers perhaps in an effort to shift its demand onto a figure that cannot protest and to turn the dream into a guilt-invested demand issued by the dead. Rather than address the conditions preventing the realization of his Swamplandia! fantasy, the Chief devises a more elaborate fantasy, Carnival Darwinism,⁸⁶ that involves

⁸⁶ Carnival Darwinism is based directly on Darwin's concept of evolution, which the Chief discovers reading an old textbook of Kiwi's. The book describes the concept of "island tameness," or "the tendency of many populations and species of animals living on isolated islands to lose their wariness of potential predators" (35). The complacency of Swamplandia!, and its inhabitants, must be overcome in the face of a

more spending on a new species of saltwater crocodile, wetsuits, lighting and “modernization” (39), rather than offering a solution to the existing debt crisis.⁸⁷ Thus, the response to the failure of fantasy for the Chief is to regenerate an approximation of the fantasy—an even more glorious version—as a point of orientation.

If the fantasy in question is the fantasy of happiness, as pursued in an effort to construct for one’s self an approximation of the good life, then the Chief’s character offers a caricature of the imperative of happiness in this pursuit. Specifically, as the patriarchal figure and decision maker in the family narrative, the Chief is emblematic of the integration of hope and happiness as they underwrite the normative discourse of a patriarchal capitalism. To illustrate this integration, I turn to an example taken from Jeffery Sachs’s introduction to the 2012 World Happiness Report, published by The Earth Institute at Columbia University.⁸⁸ In it, Sachs argues for a revision of metrics that focus solely on economic output to include notions of happiness.

The Anthropocene⁸⁹ will necessarily reshape our societies. If we continue mindlessly along the current economic trajectory, we risk undermining the Earth’s

“new predator” in the form of the World of Darkness. Carnival Darwinism is the Chief’s plan to evolve in order to win their survival-of-the-fittest competition with the World of Darkness.

⁸⁷ This solution sounds remarkably like George Bush’s much maligned directive to “go out and shop,” in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In part, it is the tendency to continue to shop in the face of rising debt crises that perpetuates the situation of the crisis itself.

⁸⁸ The notion of “world happiness” is indebted to the earlier notion of Gross National Happiness as a holistic metric by which to gauge national wellbeing, which was introduced in 1972 by Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the fourth King of Bhutan. Bhutan’s concept of GNH is based on four pillars: good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and environmental conservation. Lately the four pillars have been further classified into nine domains in order to create widespread understanding of GNH and to reflect the holistic range of GNH values. The nine domains are: psychological wellbeing, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards. The domains represents each of the components of wellbeing of the Bhutanese people, and the term “wellbeing” here refers to fulfilling conditions of a “good life” as per the values and principles laid down by the concept of Gross National Happiness. <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/>

⁸⁹ The term “anthropocene” is informal scientific nomenclature used to distinguish the period in geologic history in which human activity becomes the most dominant measurable influence on the earth’s

life support systems – food supplies, clean water, and stable climate – necessary for human health and even survival in some places. In years or decades, conditions of life may become dire in several fragile regions of the world. We are already experiencing that deterioration of life support systems in the drylands of the Horn of Africa and parts of Central Asia. On the other hand, if we act wisely, we can protect the Earth while raising quality of life broadly around the world. We can do this by adopting lifestyles and technologies that improve happiness (or life satisfaction) while reducing human damage to the environment. “Sustainable Development” is the term given to the combination of human well-being, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. We can say that the quest for happiness is intimately linked to the quest for sustainable development. (Sachs 3)

Sachs poses a problematically Orientalist solution to global environmental, social, and communal degradation in the form of a wisdom-based happiness—framed as “life satisfaction”—that, set as a goal, can, presumably, curtail mindless consumption (in the West), persuade developing nations to abandon their quest to claim a share of the benefits of capitalism in favour of the postmaterialist value of happiness, and thus promote better quality of life world-wide. Sachs assumes in this characterization of the current state of affairs that previous models of economic development have not also been premised on happiness, at least not the holistic form of happiness he assumes in his parenthetical reference to “life satisfaction.” He presumes a version of (Western) mass culture in which we are duped into overconsumption through slick advertisements and greedy corporate barons: though false representations of happiness.⁹⁰ Happiness, then, of the Happy Meal

ecosystem. The official adoption of the term in science remains under debate. Andrew C. Revkin offers a useful summary in his *New York Times* article, “Confronting the ‘Anthropocene’”:

<http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/confronting-the-anthropocene/>

⁹⁰ Sachs makes this presumption explicitly when he writes, “A further huge problem is the persistent creation of new material ‘wants’ through the incessant advertising of products using powerful imagery and other means of persuasion. Since the imagery is ubiquitous on all of our digital devices, the stream of advertising is more relentless than ever before. Advertising is now a business of around \$500 billion per year. Its goal is to overcome satiety by creating wants and longings where none previously existed. Advertisers and marketers do this in part by preying on psychological weaknesses and unconscious urges. Cigarettes, caffeine, sugar, and trans-fats all cause cravings if not outright addictions. Fashions are sold

variety is made suspect in his view of current global economic systems, while another more holistic, though equally ill-defined, happiness is offered in its place, a happiness tinged with the Buddhist-tones of the middle path and moderation (which Sachs cites towards the end of his introduction as a model by which to conceptualize new economic measures).

Though Sachs's introduction has nothing to do with *Swamplandia!*, we can hear in it echoes of the Chief's plotting of Carnival Darwinism—we cannot continue as is, so we must evolve; that evolution, however, will continue to employ the kinds of technologies and practices (sustainable development continues to rely on tropes of building, increasing resource acquisition and deployment) that have built this world in the first place and have contributed to its current untenability. This development is justified through a fantasy of happiness that imagines itself as holistic—the Chief repeatedly refers to the Bigtrees as indigenous, presuming a right to the resources of the swamp, and contrasts the family's authenticity to the rabid consumers who visit the park from mainland suburbs. In this construction of happiness, however, its costs are obfuscated, its value presumed (both in the case of Sachs and the Chief) through adjectives like “authentic,” “real,” or “true” happiness.⁹¹

Sachs relies on the individual (and in his model the individual in power) to distinguish the false from true happiness in his own life and in the lives of others:

“Asking people whether they are happy, or satisfied with their lives, offers important

through increasingly explicit sexual imagery. Product lines are generally sold by associating the products with high social status rather than with real needs” (4-5).

⁹¹ Martin Seligman uses similar adjectives in *Authentic Happiness* to differentiate the kinds of affects he's promoting from those that are performed by service employees, presumably under a feeling of obligation that negates their authenticity.

information about the society. It can signal underlying crises or hidden strengths. It can suggest the need for change” (Sachs 6). However, there are a few assumptions at work in this claim, beyond the very obvious one that assumes a governing body can determine and decide what might make a group happy. First, Sachs implies that, if the “happy” call center employee or flight attendant were asked, she might tell you she is not happy, despite appearances. In other words, though she may perform happily, if you asked the worker if she were *truly* happy, *really* satisfied, she might dissent. This assumes that people can distinguish how they really feel from how they perform while on the job, that they can determine boundaries between their public and private selves. However, as the example of the Chief makes clear, the performance of happiness can be entrenched deeply in one’s day-to-day fantasy—the fantasy that makes life bearable. The outward performance of happiness often demands what Arlie Hochschild terms “deep acting,” or a performance that “involves deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others” (33).

Second, Sachs’s belief that people would report unhappiness if asked assumes that there are no stakes in such a confession. In this, he contradicts himself, since he poses at least one of the consequences of unhappiness in his framing of this polling scenario when he suggests that a measured unhappiness can signal underlying crisis. To admit unhappiness is to admit crisis. While Sachs is most likely indicating national or social crisis, given his focus on national happiness, he assumes that one—whether that one is the nation or the individual—need only acknowledge crisis in order to act on it. In the context of a nation that has yet to coherently admit global warming, lacks strong social support, faces high unemployment and increasing cost of living, it is true that a

recognition of widespread unhappiness might acknowledge some of the ripple effects of these crises, but beyond a vague sense that change is necessary, it leaves the crisis-bound individual little recourse by which to address the personal effects of these social crisis situations. The Chief, then, is emblematic of a crisis-bound individual who cannot admit his own and his family's unhappiness because to do so would be to acknowledge the scope of a crisis that is beyond his means, beyond his reach.

In part, this feeling of ineffectuality at an individual level is built into the problem of happiness measurement itself. Third, then, seeming in some way to align with recent work in queer and affect theory, Sachs implies that a *social* crisis can be read into *individual* reports of unhappiness. In a somewhat similar move to Ann Cvetkovich, who argues for depression as a public feeling (2012), Sachs presumes that widespread feelings of unhappiness can indicate a social problem. However, where for Sachs this scenario is based on a simple extrapolation from individual to social, Cvetkovich argues for depression as a political affect, or a dynamic that develops between public and private structures of feeling. In Sachs' model, a happy society is configured as the function of a bunch of happy individuals, whereas Cvetkovich understands the social as entailing the ongoing negotiation of issues of inclusion and exclusion, capacity and incapacity, distribution and concentration, and the complicated and ambivalent sets of public and private affects that attend these dynamics. To date, reports of feelings of unhappiness have not been linked to wider social policies designed to mitigate public depression or cynicism—even as these are touted as symptomatic of faulty social and political

systems.⁹² Happiness as the measure of economic success is the responsibility of the individual, and thus, the Chief's optimistic attachment to the notion of "the good life" is the only way he can mitigate the threat of unhappiness, the threat of breakdown in his family and livelihood. Even if happiness or unhappiness is connected to the idea of social health, the enactment of happiness happens at an individual level.

Fourth, if we accept Sachs' assertion that we can measure the state of a crisis, for instance, a pending or occurring state or social crisis, through individuals' self-reported happiness, then to bolster individual happiness also becomes a means by which to disavow the crisis, or at least the sense of crisis. If we can impose positive psychology as a socio-cultural standard, as a personal project each individual should take on, then perhaps we can shift society in the direction of a greater reported happiness, and, if society were to report a greater sense of happiness, then we would find ourselves shifting away from the sense of crisis and thus avert the need for change, though without in fact addressing the underlying structural situation. In this sense, a corporation's insistence on its employees' happiness as an indicator of corporate policy and branding also becomes a means by which to present itself as socially or economically beneficial, or at least neutral; outside the need for reform—a corporate strategy that predates neoliberalism, but gains resonance in the heightened terms of the emotional labour the latter demands.

Finally, Sachs links unhappiness with a conventional understanding of precarity as synonymous with notions like a fragile earth and human reliance on tenuous

⁹² The notion that widespread cynicism indicates a faulty political system was made again in the spring 2013 Harvard Institute of Politics report which found "nearly half of all Americans under 30 believe that the politics of today are not able to meet the challenges our country is facing" (online). Sheryl Gay Stolberg reported the findings in the *New York Times* in an article entitled, 'For 'Millennials,' a Tide of Cynicism and a Partisan Gap' (April 29, 2013).

hydrologic and agricultural cycles, exemplifying his definition with familiar, near clichéd, images, such as a drought-afflicted Africa. This leap from the individual to the planetary disavows the mediations that occur at multiple levels and scales by politics, affects, affiliations, economics, etc. For example, a poor person relying on social assistance is not necessarily precarious in the same way as a polar bear living in the thawing Arctic, nor are these precarities received in the same way. Furthermore, without suggesting that global warming does not correlate with an increased environmental instability and thus precarity, I want to suggest that this reading of precarity as tied predominantly to tangibly deleterious (and notably environmental) conditions is out of step with the feeling and spread of precarity in the present moment. While Sachs attempts to get around the problem of assigning precarity primarily to so-called “developing nations” by holding up the United States as example of an economically robust country that is also rife with unhappiness, he also attributes this seeming contradiction to a growing gap between rich and poor. Precarity is aligned with economic means, but this argument also underscores his underlying assumption that greed or materialism leads to unhappiness, thus buttressing notions of moderation, of sustainable development, while taking for granted that such problems must be solved within the frames of capitalism and development. In this sense, Sachs does not challenge a dominant and unquestioned patriarchal view of culture, but merely attempts to mitigate the problems inherent within such a system through the language of moderation and sustainability.

“It’s hard to ever hear your own happiness as an alarm bell”

Ava is her father’s daughter in that she buys into the family myths and disavows their obvious fabrication when necessary. However, more than her father, and perhaps because the novel is told from her retrospective thirteen year-old perspective, in Ava we also see an underlying vacillation: she struggles between trying to make sense of fleeting evidence of her mother’s ambivalence and to reassert a stalwart faith in her father’s enthusiasm. For most of the novel, Ava remains fixed on the Bigtree fantasy as the happy ending she can achieve if she works hard enough and wants it badly enough. In this, she models for the reader a type of positive thinking ascendant in the realm of positive psychology. Initially, this optimism is effortless for Ava. As the novel opens, Ava tells her reader that despite threats like the invasion of melaleuca trees that drain the swamp at a staggering rate,⁹³ or the encroachment of suburbs and the sugar industry, “it always seemed to me like my family was winning. We had never been defeated by the Seths” (8). For the young Ava, the most tangible threat to her family is the alligators that are also an integral part of that family. She cannot conceptualize problems like foreclosure, bankruptcy, that suggest a lack of foresight or planning. To her, it does not make sense that a physically strong person who is courageous enough to face down an angry alligator and come out alive should be vulnerable to any kind of threat. Thus, the fact that her mother daily swims with alligators and emerges unscathed demonstrates the permanence and infallibility of her hope in their tenacity and victory. However, the verb tense of her

⁹³ Melaleuca trees are indigenous to Australia but were introduced in Florida in the 1880s in order to drain water out of swampy lands in the hopes of rendering the swamps arable. See the Agricultural Research Services page on the tree: <http://www.ars.usda.gov/Research/docs.htm?docid=3764>

retrospective narration adds a note of complexity and ambivalence, even to her initial enthusiasm: the Bigtrees had never been defeated, until...

Ava's reliance on an unexamined optimism is shaken when her mother succumbs to ovarian cancer. Faced now with the possibility of loss, not only in the form of alligators, but in invisible, insidious, and yet banal threats like cancer—significantly a gendered cancer—Ava begins to wrestle with the fear that she may lose the only life she knows. For much of the novel, Ava's recourse in the face of fear is to reassert, to reemphasize the narrative of triumph that has thus far sustained her family's success. Ava does not just reassert the triumph of the Bigtrees, but ventriloquizes her father's faith loudly and with emphasis, over-emphasis. Her language is peppered with exclamation points, as is the title of the novel. Exclamation points appear at strategic junctures of wavering in the novel, asserting a sense of certainty in situations that offer few other supports. For example, at one point Ava wonders about her father to the reader, "*Oh why aren't you trying? I thought in his direction. Why aren't you doing anything? Try. Pay attention. Be the Chief again*" (75 emphasis in original), yet, only paragraphs later, she channels this anxiety by parroting the outcomes her father has promised: "The Chief didn't go into much detail about his upcoming mainland trip, but I understood that it had something to do with raising more capital for his Carnival Darwinism ideas. He was seeking new investors. New partners. Men with the foresight to invest in our family's evolution!" (76). Itself an exaggeration of the American Dream in which achievement is in sync with (rather than injurious to) nature, Carnival Darwinism is the Chief's attempt to redirect the family's uncertainty into a viable—if unachievable—plan of action. Ava

seeks to mimic the tone of her father’s certainty, but her vacillation is marked by the exclamation point: the insistence of the punctuation attempting to stamp out her uncertainty—the uncertainty of the promise of happiness contained in the Dream itself—but instead merely drawing attention to the incongruity of certainty in her situation.

Throughout the novel, the exclamation point serves a similar function, underlining a faith in narratives of triumph and suggesting their linkage to forms of positive affect. In the book *Send*, which discusses standards for good online communication, Shipley and Schwalbe describe the exclamation point as “the ur-emoticon” and advocate its use to add friendly affect to the otherwise flat medium of e-communication.⁹⁴ Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* maintains that the excessive use of exclamation points is a sign of a writer “who wants to add a spurious dash of sensation to something unsensational” (569). While for Fowler, this choice indicates an “unpractised writer,” the question of sensationalism resonates with the feeling of frustrated agency underwriting this project. The choice to seek sensation when one cannot feel, or to pursue action or momentum when none seems available suggests that the exclamation point plays a discursive role in feelings of frustrated agency. Russell describes her choice to include the exclamation point in her novel’s title in similar terms, suggesting that

The title of the novel includes the emphatic exclamation point because it fits the high spirits of the novel. The Bigtree family members have created their own fantastical history springing from their alligator-wrestling tradition, but in reality they’re just the lowly operators of a shabby tourist attraction in a swamp.

⁹⁴ Several editorials have similarly noted a growing trend towards widespread use of exclamation points in everyday written communication, though are much more critical of Shipley and Schwabe’s advocacy for its use. See Rubin’s “So Many Exclamation Points!” in *Slate* (August 30, 2007), Jeffries’s “The Joy of Exclamation Marks” in *The Guardian* online (April 29, 2009), Fullenwider’s “Enough with Exclamation Points!!!” in *Good* (October 31, 2010), and Macone’s “Too Many Exclamation Points!!!” in *Salon* (July 28, 2012).

Including the exclamation point hints at the manufactured enthusiasm to be found in such a place. (NPR)

In other words, the exclamation point can be seen as a functionary of positive psychology: as a gesture that relays a sense of positivity, regardless of how one might feel. This is the sort of project in affect-construction Martin Seligman—leader of the positive psychology movement—sets out in his book *Authentic Happiness* in which he suggests that happiness can be manufactured through the cultivation of optimism and learning “the art of hope” (92). Not only does Seligman suggest that optimism can (and should) be cultivated in the pursuit of happiness, but he also views pessimists as “losers on many fronts” (178). Thus, according to positive psychology a project in the cultivation of optimism or hope is not only a path towards happiness, but is also the path that leads away from loss. In the character of Ava, we can read the work of such an affective project in her overuse of exclamation points which ultimately exaggerate her insistence on her family’s mythology in a way that makes it seem as though she is trying to convince herself of her own momentum towards a happy ending and disavow the possibility of the losses that have become a real and defining pull in her life.

Ava wants to believe that she can conquer her fear through a constant project of strengthening herself, constructing an invulnerability both in herself and in her hope for the future. She tells the reader, “My heroic logic was as follows: if I was the champion, like her, our fame would be a perennial draw” (57). When Ava finds a bright-red alligator—the product of an unknown pigment anomaly—in an incubator of hatchlings, it becomes the focus of her hope for the park, for her family, and for herself; when she sees it, she thinks, “*The Chief is going to turn a backflip!... This alligator could save our park!*”

But when I thought about telling my family about her, my mouth turned to sand. I felt very certain that she was going to die” (60 emphasis in original). For Ava, salvation and death are bedfellows. Fear and hope attend one another. She does not tell her family about the red alligator. Instead, she nurtures it in secret, always telling herself that when it gets a bit bigger, a bit more invulnerable, she will share it and the life-saving and infallible hope it will offer. She tells the reader, “I felt a terrible hope begin to grow inside me, at pace with the alligator” (60). The reader, however, recognizes the descriptive parallels Russell makes between Ava’s hope and her mother’s ovarian cancer, which was originally mistaken for a pregnancy. Hilola’s cancer—which she could not acknowledge, even to her children, because of the terminal challenge it posed to the fantasy of heroism she and the Chief sought to maintain—and Ava’s terrible hope are positioned in parallel terms: an effort to ward off death that will inadvertently only hasten its arrival. Ava wants to keep the red alligator alive “long enough to prove [her] fear wrong,” but the risk she faces is the same vulnerability her mother faced: that her faith in a happy ending will prove fatal (61). The red alligator, as a rare and inexplicable genetic mutation, also suggests the statistical likelihood of the success story.

Repeatedly Ava faces situations in which she must confront the stakes on which she and her family have tied their hopes and repeatedly she is presented with the possibility that the narrative on which she relies may be faulty. For instance, Ava’s secret plan to save the park includes entering and winning the American Alligator Wrestling Association’s national championship, a championship her mother won when she was just eighteen. This championship was her mother’s most impressive accomplishment,

according to park lore, and thus, in Ava's mind, if she can enter and win the contest at age thirteen, she will be assured of becoming the same kind of star as her mother, the same kind of revenue draw. Ava composes a letter introducing herself, explaining her lineage, outlining Swamplandia!'s current difficulties, and asking for permission to compete. Since she cannot locate an address for the Association, she sends the letter to the Smithsonian (assuming such a prestigious association is likely to be located in the nation's capital), the state universities in Florida, and the Florida Wildlife and Gaming Commission requesting that it be forwarded to the appropriate bureau (58). Eventually Ava receives a response from Amalia Curtis, secretary to the president at the University of Loomis—the most local and unimpressive of her addressees—saying she'd done some research on her behalf, but that “no such Commission or Committee or alligator-wrestling competition has ever existed” (154). Immediately after reading this letter—one that suggests the fabrication of the heroic fantasies of her mother and family on which she relies—Ava tears it up and scatters the fragments into the gator pit. She returns to her red alligator and reiterates her plan to herself: “We were going to get famous and save the park. My dream kicked painfully inside of me, and I was surprised to find how easy it was to go on working toward it as if I'd never heard from Mrs. Amalia Curtis” (154). Again, Russell draws a parallel between Ava's hope and her mother's fatal cancer; again (and again), Ava manages to reconstruct or reframe her hope in the light of disappointment. However, each time she does so, she makes herself more precarious. This is not to blame Ava for her situation, but instead to suggest that Russell uses Ava as a lens by which to interrogate the costs associated with optimism and hope—the

objectives of positive psychology—particularly as these become attached to untenable or unsubstantiated fantasies of happiness, or “the good life,” however interpreted.

In this, Russell’s critique of a manufactured enthusiasm (perhaps aligned with what economist Allan Greenspan dubbed “irrational exuberance” in his critique of the U.S. stock market) parallels criticisms that have been made of positive psychology more broadly. Sara Ahmed (2010), Barbara Ehrenreich (2009), Heather Love (2007) and Duggan and Muñoz (2009), among others, have all pointed to the socio-cultural normativity reinforced by the drive towards happiness. We see this reiteration of the normative paralleled in the myopic Carnival Darwinism plotted out by the Chief in an effort to defer confrontation with the reality of his family’s bankruptcy and reassert his status as patriarch. However, in *Ava*, Russell offers another consideration about the pursuit of happiness: not only does it seek to reiterate a normative mode, but it also undermines vulnerable subjects in this pursuit. While an insistence on happiness can—and should—be read in terms of a reiteration of the normative, heterosexual family as the basic economic and relational unit (as Duggan and Edelman have separately argued) and a reiteration of a neoliberal and capitalist imagining of “the good life” as a life of unbridled consumption (as Berlant has argued), I suggest that an insisted-upon happiness—a kind of forced optimism that paints on a happy-face—also appears to offer a way out of crisis, even as happiness itself reaches a crisis point. As Ahmed explains,

The crisis in happiness has not put social ideals into question and if anything has reinvigorated their hold over both psychic and political life. The demand for happiness is increasingly articulated as a demand to return to social ideals, as if what explains the crisis of happiness is not the failure of these ideals but our failure to follow them. (7)

Ava demonstrates the way in which a crisis in happiness does not necessarily call happiness itself into question, but instead reinstates happiness as the hope, the promise that might lead us out of crisis. The crisis, as Ahmed suggests, is not located in the structural, but in the agent herself—in a *failure to follow*, a failure to be propelled. What Russell offers, then, is a critique of the propulsive effect of the desire for the possibility of happiness, not simply in its ability to reiterate a normative mode of social identification, but also in terms of its emphasis on propulsion itself, our emphasis on action-towards-happiness as the only or best means by which to exit a crisis.

In their article “Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue,” Lisa Duggan and José Muñoz note the correlation between hope and other markers of positive affect, such as happiness or optimism (276), linking these kinds of affects to race and class privilege and the production of what Duggan (after psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas) terms the “normotic,” or “those who... conform excessively to social norms, those who endorse domination and call it freedom” (276). I want to draw out here the way in which this reiteration of normative ways of being tightens its grip on action. Facing a set of precarious conditions, one is encouraged to hope, to remain optimistic, to squelch negative feelings and to have faith in modes of being and acting that are familiar, the way things have always been done. And yet, the pursuit of these tested lines of action can only ever reiterate existing patterns of exclusion and domination, thus entrenching or exacerbating existing precarities. Quoting Simone de Beauvoir, Ahmed notes that, “it is always easy to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place [others]” (2). While this assessment clearly underwrites the racist and sexist policies and practices her

book brilliantly outlines, it also describes the function of happiness more broadly as a cultural imperative. We not only want to place others in happy circumstances, but we also want to carve our own lives into happy grooves; we want to place ourselves in happiness, and so it is easy to describe the things we long for as “happiness.” It is easy to understand the movements we make towards those outcomes as positive steps in the pursuit of happiness.

As her future voice narrates her earlier experience, Ava seems to forgive herself for her vain and dangerous hope when she writes, “I think it’s hard to ever hear your own happiness as an alarm bell” (160). In fact, Russell’s novel suggests that the inaudibility of the warning inherent in the pursuit of happiness stems from the much louder and more insistent discourses that frame happiness as inherently desirable, beneficial, and positive. The founding narrative of the American dream is premised on the fact that happiness is a good, rather than a warning. However, for the Chief and for Ava, the pursuit of happiness produces casualties, not only in their environment, their family, their livelihood, but also personally in the case of Ava—a young girl with no recourse to even the kinds of liminal employment possibilities that provide the Chief and her brother Kiwi slim threads onto which to grasp.

Ava’s fear of the dissolution of her family’s narrative of triumph, her need to resolve the predicament of her family’s uncertain future, her faith in her own invulnerability, and her hope to save her family and the park leads her eventually to follow the guidance of the Bird Man as she goes after her eloping sister. The Bird Man promises Ava that he can guide her to the underworld—the destination of her ghostly

wedding—to save Osceola before it is too late. Alone on the island, not knowing what else to do, Ava is convinced by the Bird Man that no one will believe her story, that no one else can help her—certainly her experience to that point bears out that conclusion—and that she need not “risk all the fear and disappointment, when this whole situation might be resolved before noon?” She eventually concludes, “If I made the right choice now. If I acted *fast*, with the reflexive courage of a Bigtree wrestling a Seth...” (193 emphasis and ellipsis in original). In the span of Ava’s ellipsis, the Bird Man shifts registers, from talking theoretically about the possibility of pursuing Osceola into making plans for the trip and Ava is drawn into his “we”; she is pulled into the plan, she is pulled into action.

And yet, from the beginning there are signs that Ava’s expectation of the trip—the quick recovery of her sister and easy return home to pay the Bird Man for his services and send him on his way—are out of sync with the situation. As they begin preparations, she wonders at the quantity of supplies the Bird Man takes from their cupboards: “It seemed to me like we were overpacking; how long did a trip to the underworld take?” (193). Later, she notices that he also took things like a carton of her father’s cigarettes, a case of his beer, and his fishing knife. As the two are leaving in the Bird Man’s small skiff, she notices that he keeps “shooting looks at the coast.” Asking, ‘Listen, did you hear something? Did you see anybody following us?’ (197). She does not question his insistence that their mission remain top secret, that they are not detected leaving, believing it to be the secrecy demanded by the underworld, rather than a man’s attempt to abduct a child undetected. Once they are underway, Ava “for some reason” isn’t

“worrying anymore” (214). Developing a credo to give rhythm to their trip, she repeats to herself:

I believe the Bird Man knows a passage to the underworld.
I believe that I am brave enough to do this.
I have faith that we are going to rescue Ossie.
Every doubt got pushed away. Kiwi’s voice (*There are no such things as ghosts*) I ignored. Faith was a power that arose from inside you, I thought, and doubt was exogenous, a speck in your eye. A black mote from the sad world of adults. (247)

In the context of action underway, hope shifts into faith—the desire for something to be true has turned into a dogmatic attachment to that truth, even in the presence of evidence to the contrary, a hope against hope. The repetition suggests Ava is trying to convince herself of these truths; she associates faith with an inner strength, doubt is the stuff that comes from without to tear you apart. Again, in this Ava imitates the tenets of positive psychology, which encourage one to pay attention to optimistic evidence as eternal and lasting and to consider pessimistic eventualities as temporary and external.⁹⁵ And yet, the very repetition suggests the reverse is true for Ava: doubt is fundamental, faith is a thread to which she grasps. The interjection of the past tense here also suggests that our older narrating Ava has perhaps changed her thinking. She thought, in the past, that faith was a power that arose from inside you, that doubt came from outside, but perhaps her experience leads her to reconsider these positions. Later on this same page, future-Ava also remembers that, “At the time, I also had faith that my pet Seth and I would be champions—how could it be otherwise?” (247). Here the exclamation point shifts into a question mark; the fervent hope replaced with a question that suggests things can very

⁹⁵ See Seligman’s discussion of future-oriented optimism and pessimism in his chapter “Optimism About the Future” in *Authentic Happiness* (pp. 83-101).

much be otherwise than hopeful. That tenacious hope in the future is not only unable to will that future into existence, but also can precipitate much worse outcomes that were completely unthinkable from within the frames of hope.

As it turns out, Ava is wrong. It can be otherwise; you cannot will a desired future into existence merely by wanting it badly enough. Eventually the Bird Man leads Ava to the underworld, except, the underworld turns out not to be otherworldly at all, but merely a more remote part of the swamp, though it does ultimately prove hellish for Ava. As they pass through the purported entrance to the underworld, Ava comes to see that the Bird Man “could be anybody. He could blend quite easily into the crowd of panhandlers and businessmen” (307). The Bird Man begins to snap at her—or she begins to read anger into his responses—to keep quiet, at one point slapping her hard across the face when she believes she sees a figure and calls out for her sister. In the end, the Bird Man possesses no special power of guidance or direction; there is no talisman that will save Ava or her sister, their family or their home. Instead, Ava is alone in a very remote part of the Florida swamp with a pedophile that liked the look of her. Ava’s association with the Bird Man ends after he rapes her—to which she submits with a vague embarrassment, detachment, and a sense that she owes the Bird Man her body for failing to recognize his intentions earlier. When it is over and they are walking back to their skiff, she runs away, alone and with no food or water, deeper into the swamp.

For readers, Ava’s rape is shocking, if not unexpected. Though the passages leading up to the rape are full of suggestions of what is to come, since the story is narrated from Ava’s point of view, the reader is drawn into her faith and hope; we

believe, against the massive odds, and in keeping with the magical realism of the novel, that she will be safe and might even rescue her sister with the help of the Bird Man. Though we might feel a churn of queasiness at her choice to follow a strange man alone into a swamp, we are mollified by the force of her fantasy, the conviction of her faith in her own future success. Moreover, we are compelled by this myth because we have encountered it before. In Ava we see reflected back to us the spirit of the American Dream (which, as mentioned earlier, travels beyond the national borders that name it to infuse the narratives of self-actualization that reinforce other capitalistic societies), though cloaked in the novel garb of an eccentric and almost mythic figure; we understand the familiar myth of self-actualization and pursuit of opportunity her character embodies. And, yet, with her rape, we wonder, perhaps along with Ava, why did she follow the Bird Man in the first place?

In part, Ava is convinced that the Bird Man represents her only chance to act; specifically, she is drawn to act on the promise of magic, of novelty, of a supernatural power that surely must be victorious (thus we see in her trust in the Bird Man an echo of the same faith she places in the indomitable strength of alligator wrestlers). We can understand Ava's motivation in part through the lens of enchantment as explicated by Jane Bennett as a "state of wonder" that begins with "a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage" (5). In the mood of enchantment, Bennett suggests, one finds pleasure in "being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter," as well as "a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual

disposition” (5). *Swamplandia!* offers a dramatically different relation to enchantment. Russell describes Ava’s inner state as one of confusion and detachment: her mother, brother, father, and sister have all left her and if she chooses wrong, the Bird Man will do the same. She feels, “a grogginess and a terrible, terrible lightness, as if I might let go of the table’s edge and blow away” (189). Ava *leans into* her enchantment with the Bird Man as a means by which to secure her feelings of ungroundedness to something solid, and to give herself the idea of activity: that, like her family members, she will at least be doing something. In this, then, Ava’s character suggests that enchantment can respond to a feeling of disruption, rather than generate it. Ava’s experience also dramatically undercuts that more mainstream assumption perpetuated by Sheryl Sandberg that *leaning in* is an option predictive of success for women. The novel thus also raises the question: how do we disrupt a normative scene that is premised on disruption, instability and a generalized sense of, if not the uncanny, then at least the feeling of powerlessness in the face of monolithic forces? Bennett’s model implies a solidity that is disrupted by the novel interjection of enchantment, but this leaves the question: how does enchantment respond to crisis? How do we conceive of action in a social sphere in which movement, or agency morphs into adaptability or flexibility (Virno 13)?

Magical thinking is in some situations necessary and can be a means by which to cope with shock, to process information that seems unfathomable, or, perhaps, as Bennett suggests, a means by which to open up new possibilities.⁹⁶ However, Russell poses a

⁹⁶ Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* demonstrates the role “magical” or irrational thinking plays in navigating the disorientation of sudden grief. She describes her period of intense grief following the sudden death of her husband in the book, noting as she reflects on her period of mourning, “there had been

scenario in which enchantment can be over trusted, in which it gains an enthusiasm for hope that can mislead, can obscure clear and present dangers, and cause one to overlook less heroic, but perhaps viable options (Ava ponders calling her father or the search and rescue in order to find her sister, for instance, but is talked out of these options by the promise of heroism offered by the Bird Man). This is not necessarily the same thing as advocating disenchantment, so much as considering where a narrative of enchantment might take us—since for Ava, enchantment certainly propels her into choices that she is not in a position to understand clearly or even make for herself (the Bird Man largely talks her into their trip to the underworld)—or whether we might be better off staying put.

While I agree with Bennett on the need to interrogate sites of attachment to the world and not only to figure our subjective relation to it as one of detachment and disillusionment, I also wonder whether her characterization of enchantment in the binary terms of a minor positive affect triumphing over a dominant negativity is the only or even the best way by which to begin this work. While disillusionment may be a feature of modernity, recent decades in particular have witnessed the increasing prevalence of narratives of happiness, or positive thinking—not unlike enchantment—as the means by which to conceptualize hope for the world; if we can be happier, perhaps we can save ourselves. In this gesture, happiness is figured as the goal of a pursuit, it entails a set of necessary actions or adjustments, and it implies that passivity is dangerous. And yet, as *Swamplandia!* demonstrates, agency or action can be precisely that which reiterates the status quo, rather than challenges it. Furthermore, taking action in pursuit of happiness

occasions on which I was incapable of thinking rationally. I was thinking as small children think, as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome” (35).

can in some cases and for some people precipitate damaging or even potentially fatal outcomes. Though Ava's sense of enchantment models a familiar heroism, her experience raises the question of whether not action at all costs is really a heroic or happy goal.

Of course, Bennett's enchantment is not precisely one of happiness. Its mood, instead, is one of "fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged (5). She emphasizes the function of novelty in the moment of enchantment, wondering whether the exposure to the unexpected might encourage one to be "less defensive in the face of challenges to norms one already embodies" (29), or might make one more motivated to enact one's "ethical aspirations" (3). To be sure these are remarkable and important questions for ethics: how can we render ourselves vulnerable to non-normative ways of being? How can we be motivated to act on our ethical principles? However, in seeking responses to these questions through her careful parsing of enchantment, Bennett juxtaposes its mood to one of cynicism. Yet, I wonder whether enchantment really defines the inverse of cynicism, or whether the two share a set of relations. Ava's pursuit of enchantment, for instance, suggests that it can offer a point of focus in a situation of frustrated agency, which I have identified as the subjective experience at the root of cynicism. In other words, both enchantment and cynicism respond to a situation that questions our conception of action. Ava feels herself increasingly unsure how to act in the world—the affective and agentic routes familiar to her seem blocked, seem only to cycle around the edges of the unresolvable crisis that mires her family. Enchantment seems to offer a path into action, a means by which to mitigate her anxiety, and yet, in her case, it also aligns

dangerously with what Berlant describes as cruel optimism. Russell demonstrates enchantment as a mood in which the cruelty of optimism can be effaced. If we see enchantment as inherently positive, we risk ignoring the situational or structural conditions that position it as the only way out, or at least as the most compelling way out, when in fact it may not necessarily produce a viable escape and can in fact cause one to lower one's defenses in precisely the wrong situations.

Cynicism describes equally the quandary Bennett is trying to think through: that of how (or, I would add, whether) to locate motivation or movement in a system that seems to prevent this on all fronts. Thus, if we expand her question of enchantment beyond the binaries of positive/negative, desirable/undesirable, we might find a way to consider our attachments and detachments as part of what she describes as the “affective dimension of ethics” (3). In this, Bennett vitally differentiates her project in rethinking enchantment from normative discourses that celebrate happiness: for her positive affects can as well provide leverage onto ways of rethinking the politics of a public/private dynamic as an affective relation. However, it is in this space that I think Russell's novel offers an interesting range of characters by which to consider our affective investment in the ideological conditions under which we live and how these relate to our understanding of our own agency, both in terms of the frustrations we encounter, but also in terms of how we privilege action while dismissing moods and forms of inaction.

Before leaving Ava alone, I want to consider her investment in the mythology of Swamplandia! in terms of the popular investment in theme park mythology more broadly. To set a novel about a theme park (or about a pair of theme parks, really, in the inclusion

of the spectral presence of enemy park The World of Darkness, which I will come to in a moment) in the state of Florida is to draw inevitable allusions to that most famous theme park, the self-declared “happiest place on earth.” Indeed, the myth of Swamplandia!, while it does not declare itself the happiest place on earth, operates much as Disney’s own—as a blend of fantasy and reality, nostalgia and utopian longing, and pseudo-danger rides. Margaret King has called theme parks, particularly the Disney franchise, an “encapsulation of American myths and belief systems” (117). In their book *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (2005), Cross and Walton suggest that the particular myths concentrated in the Disney fantasy are those of positivity and happiness, particularly as these are borne out through the family unit (174). Moreover, they connect this perpetuation of happiness as collective mythology to the rise of consumer culture in a post WWII world. They write, “Disney’s ‘happiest place in the world’ created a new positive and vital form of wonder, middle-class perhaps, but also in tune with the broader consumer culture of the second half of the twentieth century” (175). Disney stands in as a pivotal site in which Americans (and indeed those around the world who can afford to make the trip) can be enchanted, or re-enchanted, with the collective, American fantasy of “the good life”—unpolluted, clean, fun, family-friendly (i.e. heterosexual), happily multicultural, in which consumption is not only sanctioned but essential to the experience.

King (1981), Cross and Walton (2005), and Willis *et al* (1995) have noted that Disney’s fantasy is based largely on effacing the effort behind its illusion: the workers (usually people of colour) are hidden from view underground, and those who work in the

park so effectively mimic the happy service model of Disney that their labour is largely invisible (or they wear costumes that efface their subjectivity and affect). In this, Disney functions on the basis of the same kind of “affective labour” illustrated by Arlie Hochschild in her seminal study of the emotional work demanded of flight attendants, *The Managed Heart* (1983). The emotional work demanded of Disney employees is not only to perpetuate the happy façade promised by the corporation, but in so doing also to extend the myth of the “good life” into their work life. Regardless of how they are feeling, they must appear to be pleased with their jobs, the stresses of working at a minimum-wage tourist attraction must be effaced in order to sell the fantasy of American happiness back to the country.

David Harvey talks about Disneyland in Louis Marin’s terms of a “degenerate utopia,” a supposedly harmonious space outside of the “real world” that in fact relies on authoritarian modes by which to maintain its non-conflictual façade and thus argues it should be called “degenerate” because it fails to offer a critique of “the existing state of affairs” (*Spaces* 164). Harvey goes on to wonder whether any built utopian space can be anything but degenerate (*Spaces* 164, 167).⁹⁷ Instead, Harvey connects Disneyland to the more ubiquitous space of the shopping mall, suggesting that these sorts of superficially non-conflictual environments—environments that I would add are designed to promote happiness as both an affective state and a product—are designed to foster a kind of consumption-based “nirvana rather than critical awareness” (*Spaces* 168). As spectacular experiences of commercial culture, both the mall and the theme park are designed to play

⁹⁷ Louis Marin gives a definition of degenerate utopia in his book *Utopics: Spatial Play*, though, as noted, Harvey challenges the notion that Disneyland is unique in its degeneracy (1984).

into an attitude of “political indifference” (*Spaces* 168). Disneyland, shopping malls, the degenerate utopias of North American culture “instantiate rather than critique the idea that ‘there is no alternative, save those given by the conjoining of technological fantasies, commodity culture, and endless capital accumulation’” (*Spaces* 168). I would add, as is particularly evident in the case of Disneyland, that this sense of indifference towards critique is channelled into the production of happiness such that critique itself comes to seem irrelevant and undesirable. If Disneyland is the happiest place on earth, then does it matter that it doesn’t foster political critique? Or, as a listener asks the authors of *Inside the Mouse*—a critical examination of the Disney parks—at their panel at an American Studies conference, “Why are you so critical? Wasn’t anything fun?” (1).

Disneyland is not a space associated with the generation of critique—it is the happiest place on earth—and so perhaps one seems the ultimate “killjoy,” to use Ahmed’s term, to take a stab at it. Or perhaps this question is less simple than one seeking merely to preserve the status of happiest place on earth. What if we relate to Disneyland in the same way Ava relates to Swamplandia!? In other words, what if the pleasures of Disneyland do not generate indifference, but instead we seek out its happiness in order to attempt in order to disavow feelings of helplessness or powerlessness? The danger rides on offer at Disneyland enact a kind of danger as heroism or adventure that always turns out all right—you are scared, thrilled, and you survive (typically). Thus, the park’s reiteration of collective American mythology fosters a shared faith in happy endings that follow from struggle. To critique Disney is to

question a foundational myth, not only undergirding America, but capitalism more broadly: that it can make us happier.

Furthermore, in Russell's *Swamplandia!*, patrons are drawn by a spectacle that promises the thrill of possibly watching a young mother clad only in a swimsuit get mauled by an alligator. Rival theme park *The World of Darkness* goes even further, offering rides that allow patrons to revel in the experience of their own annihilation. Of course, there is no *Swimming with the Seths* act on offer at Disneyland (*yet*, might be the qualification Russell makes with her novel), but the obfuscation of its employees' precarious labour in the production of a spectacular happiness suggests a similar theme might be latent within the narrative of the pursuit of happiness: that happiness while purportedly available to all, is doled out only selectively and in the process takes many casualties. Thus, the enchantment with the American Dream on offer at Disney—the pursuit of its happiness—is also a disavowal of the costs that dream entails.

“We Love the World!”

If Ava offers an example of a hopeful response to crisis that pursues the possibilities (and impossibilities) offered by enchantment, her seventeen year-old brother Kiwi figures the inverse: he is cynical and enervated; he relates to the world through his self-taught version of a “cold-eyed instrumentalism” (Bennett 13, 34). When the Chief proposes Carnival Darwinism to save *Swamplandia!*, Kiwi is openly scornful of the idea:

Kiwi chuckled. He could manufacture laughter as joyless as flat cola. ‘How are we going to adapt, exactly?’ he asked the Chief from inside the cave of his hat. ‘Are we going to hike prices again?’ ‘Cause if we only have two tourists in the

stands, Dad, it doesn't matter how much we charge them. We'll never break even... (36)

Questioning the Chief's math in determining their \$52,560* debt,⁹⁸ Kiwi goes on to suggest that they begin selling assets to pay down their debt:

'Dad? I've been running some numbers myself... Admittedly, I'm not privy to all your records here...' Kiwi's voice was as monotonous as a sleepwalk. 'For starters, you need to sell some of the equipment. Maintenance costs are going to crush us without tourists. The follow spot, the Seths' incubators....' Kiwi blinked, as if he'd woken from his sleepwalk on a cliff. 'Think big. You could sell the whole park.' (37)

Kiwi's sardonic wit could be sloughed off as merely the disaffection of a teenager; however, Russell's choice to include his narrative as a counterpoint to Ava's suggests his viewpoint is essential to the story.⁹⁹ Moreover, the adjectives she uses to describe Kiwi's affect—joyless, flat, monotonous—pose him as the inverse to Ava's hyper-enthusiasm.

Kiwi summarizes his position when he says to Ava, trying to convince her that leaving is their best option, "He's [the Chief] going to ruin everything. He thinks he's being optimistic or something but it's sick, Ava, what he's doing. We won't even have enough money to move" (71). While Ava agrees with Kiwi on the fact of the family's situation, his relation to it confuses her. She says, "I had thought that my brother and I were communicating from more or less the same neighbourhood of feelings, but I'd been wrong" (72). By describing Ava and Kiwi as existing in different "neighbourhoods of feelings," Russell suggests that affect can divide us in the face of a shared crisis, as is

⁹⁸ Russell suggests that even the Chief knows this figure is much higher. "When the Chief put an asterisk next to something, it meant that he was telling you only the best part of the truth. He wasn't being dishonest, he explained—he was only letting us know that our debt was 'evolving.' Just like everything else in this universe" (36).

⁹⁹ From the point at which Kiwi leaves Swamplandia! the book is told in alternating chapters from Ava's first-person point of view (though as an older person looking back on a formative experience) and from a third person narrator describing Kiwi's experience.

certainly the case for the Bigtrees. Neither Ava nor Kiwi can feel from the other's perspective, each instead trying to impose his or her feelings on the other, trying to get them to feel what they feel and thus change their perspective. In this, then, the novel takes up a larger cultural narrative that distinguishes between happiness and cynicism in binary terms and thus disavows their fundamental relation to one another; to belabour Russell's metaphor, in fact the neighbourhoods of cynicism and happiness abut one another and are ultimately serviced (or left unserved) by the same parental, municipal, state, national, and global structures.

Eventually Kiwi's frustration with his father's untenable solutions leads him to run away from Swamplandia! in order to earn money working on the mainland so that he can begin to pay down the park's debt himself. He gets the only job he can as an uneducated youth:¹⁰⁰ working as a janitor at The World of Darkness, the enemy against which the Chief's Carnival Darwinism is poised and the space of cynicism, *par excellence*. The World of Darkness, which is shortened to "the World" by its employees and patrons,¹⁰¹ is patchworked into suburbia: "On its western edge, the Leviathan touched a green checkerboard of suburban lawns. A moat of lava lapped at carports, the houses at the World's perimeter looking small and vexed" (13). If Swamplandia!'s theme is

¹⁰⁰ The Bigtree children are homeschooled loosely. Most of their education consists of their grandfather's folk history of the swamps they live in and what they can glean from books they pull out of The Library Boat, a rusty old barge that ran aground on a nearby island in the 1960s. Of the three, Kiwi takes the most interest in his own education, reading extensively and teaching himself various subjects. However, his knowledge is partial and limited by the resources available to him.

¹⁰¹ Russell writes, "The World of Darkness got shortened to 'the World'—as in: 'Hey Kiwi, hook me up! Clock me out of the World, yeah?' and 'What do you fools want to do when we get out of *the World*?' Everybody did this, Kiwi included, although to Kiwi the abbreviation felt dangerous; there was something insidious about it, the way it crept into your speech and replaced the older, vaster meanings. 'The World' now signified a labyrinth of depressing stucco buildings that fed into a freezing airplane hangar" (79 emphasis in original).

captured in its jaunty and hopeful exclamation point, the World of Darkness threatens in the focus of its own exclamation: “escalator tours of the rings of Hell, bloodred swimming pools, boiling colas. Easy access to the mainland roads” (13). The World of Darkness, then, is not only designed to give visitors the experience of revelling in their own suffering—though it is that—but it is also a bizarre admixture of the apocalyptic and the banal. Where *Swamplandia!* is a world outside the world, *The World of Darkness* is readily accessible, just an exit from the freeway. If *Swamplandia!* thus expresses some version of the originary American Dream of self-sufficiency and individualism, then the novel also tracks the dissolution (or perhaps hyperbolic inflation?) of this narrative in the banal anonymity of the suburbs where crisis itself becomes a site of enchantment in the absence of any other locus of awe.

While Ava offers one example of a potentially misleading hope-based enchantment, Russell also poses a very different kind of enchanting experience as the product sold by *The World of Darkness*. Patrons of the World arrive to stand at the top of Leviathan’s tongue, a spongy slide that oozes them into the park’s bowels and central attractions. Kiwi notes that visitors have developed a habit of parroting the park’s television ads as they leap onto the slide: “We Love the World!” (120). In this exclamation, the energetic fantasy captured in *Swamplandia!*’s terminal punctuation is twisted around in a funhouse mirror: to claim love or attachment to the world in this hellish incarnation is to bear a strange relationship the sense of crises that have been wrought by humanity itself. *The World of Darkness* is premised on giving visitors an experience of an imagined or fantasy-based hell—the hell occupied by the monstrous

Leviathan—but this hellish fantasy creeps insidiously into the real world—becoming more Hobbesian than Biblical Leviathan—as indicated by the shorthand that turns *The World of Darkness* into “the World,” and perhaps next, merely the world. The park management has plans to foster this transition as well. Kiwi learns that a pending expansion will include a new experience called *The Four Pilots of the Apocalypse*, which, for a fee, will fly patrons out over the Florida swamps to witness and document (cameras will be provided) the real world environmental destruction rampant in the everglades (and thus, by extension, their own precarity as members of the human species). Thus, in an odd way, Ava’s fantasy of visiting the underworld is confirmed by a marketing ploy that equally views the space of the Florida swamps as hellish, though through a very different lens.

Kiwi is uncomfortable with this ill-logic of *The World of Darkness*:

The whole theme park was like a joke that someone had taken too far! The water fountains didn’t even work here—Vijay had warned him on the first day. They piped in a manufactured salt water.
‘Get it bro? ’Cause it’s Hell.’
‘Yeah, right, I got it.’ Kiwi’s throat burned from getting that particular joke. Why weren’t natal dolphins swimming around in the salt water? Why weren’t hospitals using the saline solution to save a baby’s life or something?” (90).

Kiwi’s discomfort sounds something like Horkheimer and Adorno’s much earlier critique of consumer culture—in which fun is described as a medicinal bath (112). One of Horkheimer and Adorno’s deepest discomforts with the culture industry is its ability to generate complacency as an affective and political byproduct in audiences. Later, Žižek would come to further complicate this contradictory relation between subject and

structure in terms of cynical ideology—a kind of lived joke in which one’s own life becomes the punchline (28). Kiwi experiences the joke of the World first hand not only when he tries to drink from the water fountains, but also when he receives his first pay cheque and finds that he owes the Carpathian Corporation—the owners of the World—\$187.57; his salary is not enough to cover the cost of his uniform, basement accommodations, and snack bar meals (123). Kiwi’s experience is not unique, as many who have held summer jobs in the millennial age can attest. The World of Darkness, however, far from disavowing their payment practices normalizes them—Scott, the payroll manager who walks Kiwi through the minutia of the various charges and fees applied to his pay—later reports to his boss that Kiwi does not understand numbers or basic arithmetic (181). These kinds of experiences of minor crisis—of bare survival and indebtedness—become the theme of the park more generally, rendering the enchantment on offer a cynical reveling in the joke of one’s own life and life lived in *the world* more broadly, to the point that using saline solution to provide non-potable drinking water makes as much sense as using it to save a baby’s life.

This is not to endorse, defend, or even decry the model of entertainment offered at The World of Darkness—whether it is a good or bad theme for a park is not really the issue posed by Russell or experienced by its employees or patrons. Whereas for Horkheimer and Adorno the entertainment model provided by Hollywood is something to be suspicious of, in the World of Darkness cynicism is ideological, part of the general ethos, merging with common sense—what Rancière calls the *sensus communis*—and gesturing to the inverse of Ehrenreich’s bright-sided ideology. Thus, the aestheticization

of this experience, while perhaps troubling, renders visible the absurdity of one's experience of modernity, particularly the absurdity one inhabits as a precarious individual operating within a Leviathan-like structure. However absurd, the familiarity of the feeling—which Kiwi can attest to through his bare survival on gas station pizza and a meagre salary that allows him to live nowhere but in the windowless employee bunkers in the bowels of the park¹⁰²—suggests it is shared, what Sianne Ngai might call, then, one of “our” aesthetic categories.

In fact, the World bears out a version of what Ngai has termed “zaniness” as a key aesthetic category in late capitalism. Located at the “politically ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupational performance” (182), “zany performers are constantly in motion and in flight from precarious situations in particular... zaniness is essentially the experience of an agent confronted by—and endangered by—too many things coming at her at once” (183). Ngai characterizes zaniness, then, not only as an aesthetic of action, but of too much action, of “action pushed to strenuous and even precarious extremes” (185). If one of the characteristics of the zany, as embodied by her central example of Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*, is also to be engaged in “affective service work,” then zaniness characterizes the strain associated with the (over)performance required by the emergent service industry of late-capitalism, a strain stemming not only from the pace demanded by the work itself, but also from its constant affective demand—zaniness, then,

¹⁰² Russell tell us that these bunkers built in a sub-basement below the already-underground park were originally intended to house foreign workers, but in the end, “the recruitment program had been suspended due to some ‘legal snag,’ a bit of ‘red tape with Immigration’” (85).

demonstrates the inflation of the affective demand articulated by Hochschild as work and leisure break down.

For Ngai, the zany is a character, an agent, and specifically a gendered figure: she begins with Ball and moves on to discuss feminized characters like Jim Carrey as the titular *Cable Guy* (1996), both of whom face pressure to appear friendly and respond to that demand with the over performance of positive affect. Ball's performance is in many ways tied to the precarious status of women in the post-war labour market and the multiple and insistent demands they faced in both in the home and the public workspace. As capitalism enters later phases, the precarity associated with these gendered positions bleeds out, such that male characters entering the service industry—and facing a similar set of insistent affective demands—are feminized as they do so. Russell draws attention to the feminizing frames of the service industry as experienced by Kiwi, who almost as soon as he begins working at The World of Darkness is dubbed Margaret Mead by his colleagues after the author of anthropology text book found in his locker featuring a dust-jacket photo of the middle-aged author posing in a grass skirt with two Samoan girls (79).

However, Kiwi is not himself a “zany.” He is confused by the nickname Margaret Mead and, more importantly, his labour does not stand out as overly active, but merges with that of the lazy and disaffected mass of teenagers employed at The World. Thus, I want to suggest that Russell's novel offers another way by which to consider zaniness: as an affective relation, as opposed to an aesthetic. Ngai's account itself supports this shift. In describing the characteristics of zaniness, she argues that the zany character is made “discomforting” for viewers (Ngai 189)—because of their “absolute adaptability” to the

demands of the situation. However, I would argue that this reading of zaniness shifts from an earlier to a later mode of late capitalism. For instance, Lucille Ball's character is funny, slapstick: an exaggeration that exceeds the boundaries of common sense. In the case of Ball, "absolute adaptability" exceeds the boundaries of what makes sense. On the other hand, a character like Kenneth's on *30 Rock* is perhaps less funny and certainly not slapstick.¹⁰³ His adaptation to the demands of labour is more unsettling because his absolute adaptability merges with the "common sense" of the corporation with which he is employed. In other words, he takes the demand made by a new form of labour—what Marxists have more commonly referred to as immaterial labour¹⁰⁴—to its extreme, over performing the demand of adaptation and thus rendering its physical and psychic demands—and costs—visible—but, importantly, never outside of the frames of common sense as articulated by the demands of the market. While Ball's zaniness stands out, Kenneth's fits in. The joke of Ball's slapstick has become the framing logic of the workplace.

In this sense, zaniness is registered as an affective demand made by labour in late capitalism generally, though not necessarily an aesthetic distinguishable from it. Kiwi cannot stand out as a zany character because the milieu in which he works is itself

¹⁰³ Kenneth Parcell is perpetually cheerful NBC page whose consistent affective buoyancy contrasts the rest of the cast of self-absorbed, delusional, and disaffected stars, writers and managers. Kenneth is devoted to television and sees his lowly position as a pinnacle achievement, happily remaining on-call to network star Tracy Jordan around the clock. As a result, Kenneth's masculinity and sexuality are often called into question by the show's characters (and writers). Kenneth also offers an interesting example of what Hochschild calls "deep acting" in that his character very seldom breaks the façade of his performance, though the show often hints that the conditions of his childhood and adulthood are far from happy-making.

¹⁰⁴ Ngai brings together theorizations of affect (generally considered the purview of feminist, queer, and gender theory) and immaterial labour (generally considered the purview of contemporary Marxist thought) in terms of their mutual concern around the subjective effects of shifts in the neoliberal economy.

zany;¹⁰⁵ it is *The World of Darkness* that is the zany element in Russell’s novel. Thus, zaniness in late-late capitalism perhaps less describes a type of individual response or aesthetic than a framing, infrastructural logic that nonetheless bears out an affective demand on the individual that she adapt. If the aesthetic of zaniness, as Ngai suggests, relies on hyperbole—evidenced through all-caps and exclamation points (184)—and a kind of gleeful anger that acts as a parodically inflated version of the happiness demanded by affective labour more generally (185), then an infrastructural zaniness normalizes these modes such that they manifest as the gleeful shouts of park patrons as they slide down a prosthetic tongue into the depths of hell. *The World of Darkness*’s exaggerated representation of hell might not be so different from the exclamation that girds Swamplandia!: both model a kind of zany demand that bleeds out into cultural norm. Though as readers we might be more sympathetic to Ava’s enthusiasm, attributing it to her youth and the familiar tropes of the *bildungsroman*, than we are to the exclamations of the World’s patrons, which revel in crisis, both modes indicate an affective response to a situation in which crisis has become ubiquitous, with no clear outside. As Russell writes, “inside the World of Darkness, Time happened in a circle” (82). The zany becomes too engrained in everyday life to be remarkable and is instead experienced as the only way of acting, of being in the world; or, as Ngai suggests, “‘zany’ loses its distinctiveness as an [sic] properly aesthetic judgment, becoming rather merely

¹⁰⁵ This argument aligns with observations Ngai makes at the end of her chapter on zaniness where she says the term, though not the conditions to which it responds, is on the wane in the present moment. “As a style of doing or performing one finds zaniness everywhere,” she writes, but the term zany “seems to be in the process of slowly vanishing from our lexicon of feeling-based evaluations,” is made “weak as a performative utterance, and particularly deficient in both verdictive and imperative force” (231). In other words, as zaniness becomes the mode that infrastructure adopts, then its distinctiveness as an aesthetic category breaks down and instead it becomes merely the way things are.

cognitive or descriptive” (231). The terrain of pumped up affect, frantic hope, and perpetual exclamation becomes the space of the everyday, an infrastructural norm. Thus Kiwi becomes odd not in his disaffection, but in his inability to normalize the logic of the absurdity around him—its structural logic—which seems so commonsense to his co-workers.

The notion of zaniness as a normalized cultural condition also indicates a political problem. For Adorno and Horkheimer the political project demanded by what they saw as the cynicism generated by the culture industry was one of unmasking, of making visible its structural demands. On the other hand, Russell’s novel, while it draws attention to the absurdity of a cynical ideology in which one continues to act in accordance with a visibly unjust, illogical and damaging system, complicates this kind of response. Cynicism becomes not just overt but hyperbolic, cyclical, and self-generating in *The World of Darkness* to the point that it takes over the world and thus the attempt to draw attention to its flawed logic is moot, becomes an almost absurd gesture in itself. *The World of Darkness* effects a breakdown in the affective relation to structure altogether, the negation of affect and relationality, or, in other words it is essentially a space of death (and markets itself accordingly!). Russell’s novel describes both a structural or infrastructural cynicism and an affective one, though the two are ultimately related. *The World of Darkness* indicates an infrastructure in which affect itself becomes moot and garbled, one loves the experience of one’s own annihilation. Kiwi’s own cynicism, on the other hand, refuses to let go of the absurdity of this situation.

Kiwi's colleagues cannot grasp his discomfort with the World, attributing it to his obscure origins, eccentric mannerisms, lack of traditional education, and general naiveté. He is feminized, condescended to, treated like an idiot, and generally left out of whatever social circles might exist among co-workers of the World. Of his position in the World, Russell tells us, "Kiwi could feel his intelligence leap like an anchored flame inside him. His whole body ached at the terrible gulf between what he knew himself to be capable of (neuroscience, complicated ophthalmological surgeries, air-traffic control) and what he was actually doing" (84). While Kiwi's self-directed home-school education leaves questions as to the veracity of his estimation of his own intelligence (and aligns him with his sister in basing his expectations for the future on a fantasy unlinked to real world possibility), his insight into the nature of the World is importantly differentiated from the acquiescence of his colleagues. Whereas the approach of revelling in the feeling of precarity in which one exists is closer to nihilism—collapsing the gap of one's lack of agency into a structural demand—Kiwi's cynicism remains aware of the gulf. Kiwi feels the aching gulf between himself and the structure within which he must operate. He can see the illogic of that structure, and yet he must live within it, though in doing so, he does not give in. Instead, he retains a view of himself as an anchored flame: a force capable though constrained.

Kiwi's position within the infrastructure of The World draws attention to its entrenchment, the difficulty one faces in expressing critique, let alone effecting change. Bennett draws a similar critique of Horkheimer and Adorno's description of cynicism

when she suggests that their reliance of a politics of unmasking—a politics of critique—is not a reliable counter to the situation they describe:

Built into Horkheimer and Adorno’s project, then, is an Enlightenment faith in the efficacy of debunking, in the idea that clear sight into injustice carries with it its own impetus for undoing wrong and enacting right. This faith sits uneasily with their depiction of a commodity cynicism that has little practical effect. (129)

If cynicism is widespread, a characteristic of a shared common sense, then it is not enough to tell people what they already know: that the World is cruel and perpetuated on crises that extract human costs. Nor, I would suggest, is it enough to suggest that people pursue happiness instead of cynicism, since this demand itself folds into the enthusiastic terror perpetuated by the World; this demand becomes death in the World of Darkness.

As opposed to debunking the effects of commodification and spectacle on audiences, Bennett calls for attention to be paid to the other ways consumption might create value for individuals.

Horkheimer and Adorno interpret this remarkable fact [of cynicism] as the crowning glory of a culture industry bent on controlling the entire life-world. But this is not the only reasonable interpretation of the coexistence of commodity culture and cynical self-consciousness. The consumption that continues alongside knowledge of its manipulative intent could be a sign of just how deeply that manipulation has entered into us. But it might also betoken the presence of some non-commercial value that the consumer derives from consumption or from its aesthetic representation in advertisements, some pleasure whose force may be susceptible to ethical deployment. (129)

Thus Bennett advocates a view of culture that sees possibility in the engagement commodity enchantment can produce. She suggests, “an enchantment tale disrupts the apocalyptic tenor of the new and the despair or cynicism that it breeds” (160). While I support Bennett’s call for attention to be paid to the complexities of the pleasure we

experience in our engagement with culture, I wonder if cynicism is what needs to be disrupted. Cynicism need not merge with nihilism, as Kiwi makes clear. Instead, is there possibility inherent in the anchored flame that, despite its boundedness, continues to burn? How else might we interpret the coexistence of a seemingly monolithic commodity culture and cynical self-consciousness? Enchantment might be one answer; however, as we see in *Swamplandia!* the cultural imperative that drives a frenetic pursuit of happiness, the insistence on hope in the absence of a means by which to realize it, also demonstrates the ways in which enchantment can fail us. Whether the enchanted moment appears horrific or idyllic, the outcome it can produce does not necessarily address the roots that Horkheimer and Adorno identify: how do we live cynically? How do we live—as Kiwi does—within an infrastructure that does not necessarily permit us to act on our beliefs, or that guides us towards acting on only certain kinds of (positive) feelings, no matter how damaging these might be to us (this is also the key question asked in Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*)? In *Swamplandia!*, enchantment veers both into and away from apocalypse, disavows crisis as much as it appears to acquiesce to it. In the World, where “it [is] unwise to mention colleges, hopes” (87), enchantment makes a spectacle out of giving in to disaster; however, in the alternate space of *Swamplandia!* one can speak *only* of hopes, no matter how ungrounded, how farfetched, whereupon one finds oneself in equally hellish straits. This is perhaps a problem of theme parks in general: their inability to tolerate ambivalence. In the end, both enchantments reproduce versions of hell. Thus, when Bennett writes, “without enchantment, you might lack the impetus to act against the very injustices that you critically discern” (128), I think Russell would

caution us to ask whether the impetus that might be produced out of enchantment is the only—or best—way of responding to critique, and further, as I noted earlier, Russell raises the question of whether or not we should valorize action at all. Her novel asks us to question not only the propulsive forces that maintain our shared mythologies—like happiness—but also the call to action that underwrites the valorization of momentum in the first place.

For Russell, interestingly, it is Kiwi, the cynic, who in the end manages to effect a family reunion of sorts. He is given a dubious promotion from janitor to lifeguard when he asks his scornful manager to consider him for a position as one of the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse (a job that would pay a small salary and which he thus sees as better enabling him to pay down the family's debt). In this new role, however, he manages to save Emily Barton, a "Lost Soul" who may or may not have been drowning (Kiwi gets the distinct impression she was faking), in the indoor wave pool filled with roiling, blood-red water.¹⁰⁶ After this success, Kiwi is dubbed "Hell's Angel" in the local newspaper and gains a modicum of short-lived fame. Encouraged by the branding opportunity opened up by his new moniker, Kiwi is invited to begin training to become one of the Four Pilots of the Apocalypse. As it turns out, Kiwi is a decent pilot. On his first test flight, which takes him out over the swamps, he sees a small figure frantically waving on a beach, deep in the swamp. It is his sister Osceola. With an uncharacteristic ease, he lands the plane, takes her aboard and returns her to the mainland. At the same time, park rangers rescue Ava, dehydrated, hungry, and suffering an alligator bite on her calf.

¹⁰⁶ Employees and management at *The World of Darkness* refer to patrons as Lost Souls.

It may seem that in this conclusion Russell buys into the assumption that change can only stem from agency or action. Certainly action is part of the novel's conclusion and thus demonstrates the tenacity with which action and hope are knit. And yet the scene is hardly a straightforward endorsement of agency. Kiwi's brief success spirals out of a series of accidents and opportunities—most of which are opened up by the opportunism of others (the fame-seeking Barton, the revenue-seeking managers at the World). Ultimately, Kiwi is as surprised as anyone to find himself at the controls of a small aircraft. To psych himself up for the flight, he repeats his goal, “to get a pilot's salary you had to fly a plane. There was no way out but up” (372). Russell thus poses a solution not just in momentum or action, but also in perspective or scale. In the plane, Kiwi finds he is able to take a wider view of the scenario. Russell writes, “In a Cessna you were soaring, sailing above everything, and *a new sense* entered the world. All the irregularities retreated into surfaces” (373 my emphasis). Kiwi's ability, thus, stems not only from his ability to take action, but also from the “new sense” opened up by space and distance. From the sky, Kiwi notices the way in which everything fits together: the neighbouring city—“a uniform field of squares,” the “quilted” suburbs, the centre of the city made up of “eel flashes of steel and cement white” organized around the “tangerine rooftop” of a luxury hotel; cars move up the freeway like sluggish blood cells” (373). The islands of the swamp also look “different from this altitude:” green and blue and webbed in sunlight, each differently shaped by the current (374). He also notices the effect of human intervention, the invasive melaleuca trees look “like mildew on bread, gray trees grouped so thickly there was not a breath between them” (374). In this conclusion, Ava's

confusion over the different affective neighbourhoods from which she and her brother communicate gains a different resolution, one that wonders at the continuities that might be gained between them from a longer view. For Russell, perspective introduces clarity that, while it does not completely efface the notion of crisis, notices the connectivity within it. The language she uses to describe the view—eel-flashes, tangerine orange, blood cells, webbed sunlight, mouldy bread—places each of these components in relation, breaking down any superficial binaries between human/natural, urban/wild, etc. In this context, crisis is planetary, encompassing, and urgent, yet not cast in the hyperbolic tones of *The World of Darkness*, which overemphasize the notion of crisis until it is meaningless.

Russell suggests that Kiwi's cynicism sets him outside both his family's fantasy and the fatal attraction within which he is employed such that he can see them for what they are. It is his ability to maintain cynicism that eventually affords him a moment of distance that not only allows him to see connection in the world but to reform his family's fractured relations to each other. Kiwi is an unlikely savior and Russell's is an unusual view of cynicism, which is more often seen as antithetical to connection. For example, extending Horkheimer and Adorno's wariness of cynicism, Bennett suggests that it "supports not only complacency but active, right-wing agendas" through both its propensity to "reduce expectations of the state and thus diminish the will to respond collectively to injustices" and its mobilization on "behalf of antitax and get-tough policies that disdain liberal ideals about human rights, the power of education, and the legitimacy of a diverse array of social and personal identities" (129). On the other hand, Russell

shows in Kiwi a cynicism that is sceptical of fantasy in both its positive and negative forms, as either an untenable hope for the good life or an apocalyptic celebration of its destruction. In this, Kiwi demonstrates that the cynic need not lose his expectation of collective life—he continues to work for his family’s survival—but, rather he finds expression for the fear and uncertainty engendered by a world in which such expectations are moot, in which such promises are recognized and felt to be cruel, in which the hope of the good life becomes an absurd joke to all those who have to live in the World’s bowels.

However, Russell is also clear that the clarity of perspective is temporary, partial. Even as Kiwi is making the landing that will save his sister, something in him screams, “Pull up, pull up, pull up... wanting to recover the view from the cockpit windows” (375), but he cannot. Instead, he lands, saves his sister, and the three siblings are reunited with their father at the Bowl-a-Bed motel where Kiwi has to pay for a second room so Osceola and Ava will have somewhere to sleep. The conclusion of the novel is ambivalent, at best. The family rents an apartment in Loomis outfitted in tones of brown, “nothing,” Ava notes, “like the fire of my alligator’s skin” (395). Ultimately, the one regret Ava maintains is that she did not tell her siblings about the red alligator; she wonders, “where might she be right now, if she survived?” And in so doing, wonders where she would be herself, where the Bigtrees would be, had she shared the flame-red Seth. The image of the flame repeats once more in closing the novel as Ava describes her inability to recall the image of the red alligator in her mind’s eye: “it feels like trying to light a candle on a rainy night, your hands cupped and your cheeks puffed and the whole wet world conspiring to snatch the flame away from you” (396). In the infrastructure of

the mainland Ava and Osceola, like Kiwi, figure out “how to occult [their] own deep weirdness” in order to get by (396). Perhaps they become, like Kiwi, a family of anchored flames in a concrete jungle.

Giving Up on Happiness

In his book *The Power of Negative Thinking*, though it is predominantly concerned with literary critique, Benjamin Schreier offers another way to think about the place of cynicism in the current moment. He writes,

Something more complex than moral defeatism is at work. A cynic does not merely avow one thing and do another, as characterizes the hypocrite, nor has the cynic lost his belief in the continuity between norms and action, as the nihilist has. Least of all does the cynic simply not care about ethical prerogatives, as one who is apathetic might not. On the contrary, as I will show, the cynic doubts the normalized self-evidence of a situated ideal of knowledge tied necessarily to competence... *Rather than signaling an evacuation of normative concern, cynicism attests to the persuasiveness retained by norms even when they prove discontinuous with our attempts to navigate experience.* (3 my emphasis)

While Schreier’s interest in this book is ultimately in reading cynicism alongside modern literature in order to unravel the normative parameters that have come to define criticism in that field, his observations speak to a broader, cultural operation at work in cynicism, that is, cynicism calls attention to the deeply entrenched and repeated norms that construct and maintain current realities.

In popular accounts of cynicism, the association of nihilism with cynicism is seen to highlight cynicism’s undesirability. In Schreier’s account, however, cynicism is not nihilistic—reinforcing a belief that nothing has value—but instead works to short circuit the notion that we necessarily agree upon assumed sets of values, that we agree upon

desirable modes of thinking and doing. Such is the role of cynical Kiwi in the context of his nihilistic colleagues at *The World of Darkness*. Schreier writes that the willingness and speed with which critics, journalists and others dismiss cynicism as a form of dysfunction “rests, unsurprisingly, on a presumption of the recognizability of the categories and modes of normalized individual and social functionality” (xix). The merely cynical in this way is lumped in with a nihilistic vacancy in an effort to shore up the assumption that dominant social values are shared and desirable. Cynicism’s pause is reconfigured as a rattling emptiness without answer, and so the reiteration of normative values and function is assumed. In this way, critics of cynicism focus on its perceived ends, rather than allowing for its critical moment of pause, and in this instrumentalization dismiss it completely. However, if we want something other than the pursuit of happiness, if the propulsive gesture of hope steers us towards ends that are dangerous or damaging to some of us, then perhaps the place to begin is in a pause that recognizes the absurdity of the norms our momentum maintains.

In fact, Schreier wants to retain the cynic, perhaps as a figure to stand alongside Sara Ahmed’s “killjoy” as one who calls attention to the potentially exclusionary, destructive or detrimental effects of normative assumptions. However, like the killjoy, the cynic is a marginal figure whose marginality is assumed and entrenched through her willingness to contradict a dominant mode of being, but inability to necessarily live out an alternative to that contradiction. He writes,

The emergence of cynicism depends on an inability to recognize a way to address the problem of our corrupted democratic institutions. Cynicism, in other words, has everything to do with the authoritative hold and persuasiveness of the recognizable, with what is sanctioned and what is not, which what people feel

they can do, what people feel they are compelled to do, and what people feel they have a right to do: as a result, we should seek it out in the failure of competence.
(5)

We must maintain Hoggett's caution that reflexivity and hopelessness do not necessarily counter one another, while acknowledging that hopefulness is not necessarily the way out of this bind.

Cynicism registers a state of being in which failure is sanctioned, in which one feels perhaps barely competent to live one's own life, even as one recognizes that feeling of incompetence to be structurally driven. This is the quandary within which Kiwi bumbles in *The World of Darkness*. His knowledge, which perhaps is not as vast as he thinks, but is still more expansive than that of most of those around him, is contingent on its socio-political-cultural moment; it is not necessarily something he can leverage in order to pry open a position for himself. Instead, he comes to recognize that knowledge is itself embedded in culture, and though one may be able to recognize the limits by which one's life is sometimes painfully circumscribed, such knowledge does not allow one to excise oneself from those parameters: Kiwi must remain a janitor at *The World of Darkness* until he is offered a promotion and a momentary glimpse of the interconnection visible only when one can take a longer view.

Thus cynicism posits a different kind utopian longing, in which one might be unable to imagine a future in which one does not fail, and in so doing challenges the notion that such things as utopian longings should be transparent, clearly registered, and accessed through appropriate modes of critique. For Schreier, cynicism can maintain a counterhegemonic formation that does not necessarily describe and delimit a "viable

position from which to resist the dominant;” instead, cynicism offers, “only the fecund possibility which cannot yet be recognized, of changing the parameters of recognition” (29). One can thus link Schreier’s notion of a political orientation to something like Rancière’s distribution of the sensible, in which a shifting scape of aesthetic, affective, and attractive orientations shape and reshape political possibility. In particular, Schreier’s emphasis on the unknown potential elicited by cynicism suggests a reformulation of Rancière’s thesis to consider the distribution of those senses that we disavow in their relation to political possibility, or the implications of an ethics based on what one does not know, how one cannot act. In other words, I want to suggest that cynicism calls for the necessity of recognizing the precariousness that subtends our models of action and agency.

Judith Butler writes, “something about our existence proves precarious when... address fails” (130). The affects against which I’ve posed cynicism in this chapter: happiness, hope, positivity, optimism are, as Ahmed says, *pointed*, and as Edelman writes, *propulsive*, and, in the particularity of the movement they demand, they fail to address the conditions of cynicism. They direct and then propel individuals and society towards certain ends and away from an acknowledgment that those ends may not be open, or even desirable, to all. While we generally assume that positive feelings produce positive results, the current moment bears out a different kind of relation in which these attachments to positivity, with hope as a guideline and happiness as a perpetually receding goal, can also be cruel. Thus, we not only need to understand the ways in which we—or some of us—remain attached to narratives of the good life even in the absence of

a system that bears out their promise—as Berlant and Ahmed suggest, but also how we register feelings of failure, impasse, and anxiety opened up in the chasm between the promise we cling to and the ways in which we are able (or unable) to live every day. In this context, affects like cynicism, what Ngai calls ugly feelings, can figure as nodes that, if they do not reorient, at least pull back from the propulsion of happiness to ask whether or not we like where it is headed, whether or not we can get there, or, more problematically, which of us might be able to get there and which of us will be sacrificed along the way; in this lies the modest moon of what Virno (and after him Ngai) calls a “neutral kernel”—or that aspect of a feeling, even a petty one, that “calls attention to a real social experience and a certain kind of historical truth,” and in that sense is both affective and cognitive (Ngai *Ugly* 5). The neutral kernel of cynicism, then, might be contained in its refusal of the happiness narrative, its refusal to see the future as bright, or to remain attached to hope in the absence of a social structure that could bear it out; or, as Schreier writes, “cynicism points to legitimacy’s waning self-evidence precisely in its—cynicism’s—knowledge of its—authority’s—inescapability” (53). Translated into this work of this chapter, we might say that cynicism points to the waning self-evidence of the narratives of hope, happiness, and optimism on offer precisely by demonstrating their entrenchment. While Schreier determines that cynicism thus dismisses utopian longings, I would suggest that it in fact reframes a utopian orientation from one that hopes on a future happiness—in his reading such a utopian imaginary can only reiterate or extend normative modes of thinking—to one that emphasizes the “no place” quality of utopia.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ The Greek from which we take the word *utopia* translates as “no place.”

A utopian longing premised not on trajectory but on entropy, or a utopia that begins in a moment of waning and that, rather than telescoping into the future, remains with the fallibility and stuckness of the present. As such, cynicism orients us towards a politics of the *now*; an orientation in which we understand the current failure of notions of “the good life” as generalized, agreed-upon goals available to all.

Conclusion: Plausible Expectations of Hope

Together we organize the world for ourselves, or at least we organize our understanding of it; we reflect it, refract it, criticize it, grieve over its savagery and help each other to discern, amidst the gathering dark, paths of resistance, pockets of peace and places from whence hope may be plausibly expected.

—Tony Kushner, “With a Little Help from My Friends,”
Afterword, *Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika* (155).

I want to conclude with an argument for cynicism’s place as part of a set of negative affects that have recently begun to be explored in cultural, critical, and queer theory as valuable interventions into the way in which we conceptualize desirable modes of being and agency in the current moment. Several prominent queer theorists, cultural critics and even a growing minority of psychologists opposed to the dominance of positivity in their field have analyzed the way in which an overwhelming privileging of positive modalities like happiness (Ahmed [2010]), optimism (Berlant [2011]), and positive thinking (Held [2004], Ehrenreich [2009]) narrow the scope of subjectivity and personalize feelings of disaffection that are in many cases relevant to a larger social situation. Barbara Held summarizes as follows:

The tyranny of the positive attitude lies in its adding insult to injury: If people feel bad about life’s many difficulties and they cannot manage to transcend their pain no matter how hard they try (to learn optimism), they could end up feeling even worse; they could feel guilty or defective for not having the right (positive) attitude, in addition to whatever was ailing them in the first place. This is a possible unintended consequence of trumpeting positivity, whether in popular or professional circles (see Held, 2001, 2002a, pp. 969, 986-987). For according to the wisdom of our popular culture, what ails one in the first place might have been avoided, or at least ameliorated, with positive thoughts. (Held 12)

Not only are positive thoughts wrongly privileged as the exclusive site of positive personal and social growth, but those who take on a pessimistic or negative view are derided and excluded by the same popular wisdom that pumps up happiness. In his book *Authentic Happiness*, leader of the positive psychology movement Martin Seligman makes precisely this point when he says, “Pessimism is maladaptive in most endeavors... Thus, pessimists are losers on many fronts” (178). We see this assumption writ into the cynical characters I’ve explored here—from Greta whose teenage son calls her a loser, to Kiwi who embodies the social awkwardness associated with a more colloquial use of that term. Those affected by cynicism are overwritten with tropes of heroism and triumph, no matter how ill fitted to their current situation. Ahmed writes, “to pin hopes on the future is to imagine happiness as what lies ahead for us” (160); thus, conversely, to imagine ambiguity or complication as what lies ahead is seen to be giving up on the future. Or, as Ava mentally scolds Kiwi, “We were the Bigtree Wrestling Dynasty. Kiwi wanted to give up our whole future for—what? A sack of cafeteria fries? A school locker?” (37).

Lee Edelman’s book *No Future* summarizes the project behind the turn to negative affect by noting that an embrace of the negative allows us (whether that “us” includes queer theorists or indicates a more general sense of the cultural collective) to give “up on the constraining mandate of futurism” and calls for a refusal of “the insistence of hope itself as affirmation” (4). Affirmation leveraged through hope, for Edelman is always a *reaffirmation* of a (normative) order “whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, inhumane,” the “trump card” of which is the question “If not this, what?” While I agree with Edelman about the need to resist the urge to push the

negative into the positive by demanding that it translate its “insistence, the pulsive *force*, of negativity into some determinate stance or ‘position’” (4 emphasis in original), Russell’s *World of Darkness* poses a caution against the reverse: the celebration of nothingness or death as the pinnacle of human endeavour. Cynicism responds to the pulsion of happiness or negativity with inertia—this is not the same as giving in to it, nor is it equivalent with a gleeful celebration of one’s own annihilation. Instead, cynicism leans back from both of these. Similarly concerned with an overemphasis on constructive *action*, Adorno writes in his essay “Resignation” that “one clings to action because of the impossibility of action” (199). In an attempt to offer an approach other than a call to action, Adorno built his work on the articulation of a negative dialectic, a counter position that does not necessarily begin with the end or the alternative, but instead works through relationality and reciprocity. It is this scene of the negative that I want to claim for cynicism as a position that remains with the sometimes unanswerable question, *what is to be done?*, rather than seeking to efface that question through action.

And yet, even in the embrace of the negative, cynicism is often left aside precisely because of its inactivity. Jack (Judith) Halberstam begins his book *The Queer Art of Failure*—a book that examines failure’s negative affects for their potential to “poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (3)—by posing the binary underwriting this project—cynicism and optimism/hope/action—through the lens of the children’s television show *SpongeBob SquarePants*:

We are all used to having our dreams crushed, our hopes smashed, our illusions shattered, but what comes after hope? And what if, like *SpongeBob SquarePants*, we don’t believe that a trip to the land of milk and honey inevitably ends up at the

gift shop? What is the alternative, in other words, to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other? (1)

Halberstam wants to lose “the idealism of hope in order to gain wisdom and a new spongy relation to life, culture, knowledge, and pleasure” (2); he wants out of “the usual traps and impassés of binary formations” (2), but in doing so, he begins by asserting a binary that leaves out certain kinds of failures, certain kinds of negativity, that leaves out cynicism. I suggest that cynicism also marks the failure of subjectivity that he calls his reader to examine for its potential to “escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour” (4). Cynicism as well relieves one “of the obligation to keep smiling through chemotherapy or bankruptcy”; like the negative thinker, the cynic “can use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life in the United States” (4). Thus, what looks initially to Halberstam like a buying in to a “grim scenario of... ‘trying and trying again,’” which is how he describes cynicism (3), is as much a mark of the failure lived out by so many American subjects, though it may not manifest in the kind of anarchy he seeks, it may not manifest in a course of action, which is, of course, precisely why it remains undesirable.

Eric Cazdyn offers another way by which to understand the negative affect of cynicism in relation to the structural scenario outlined by Halberstam. In *The Already Dead*, he outlines the abyss opened up between shifts in economic and political realities occurring at a planetary scale and the smaller-scale mechanisms we have available to us to make sense of and cope with these new realities (103). He argues that our ways of making sense of the world are

institutions and ideologies suited to another moment of capitalism and unfit for the present. With transformations in immigration, labor flows, geopolitics, health care, biotechnology, media, family, views about life and death, and the future, as well as the operations and experiences of power itself, new spaces have emerged in which some of us—however fortunately or unfortunately—fall... this new predicament, this global abyss, is what a growing number of us are compelled to inhabit. (103)

Happiness depends on the invisibility of this gap between experience and structure; it depends on “staying out of the breach,” ignoring its scope and scale, and attributing falls into it as personal failings rather than systemic inevitabilities. However, Cazdyn goes on to note that falls and failures are precisely part of the system of capitalism (67). In his conception, happiness and its alternatives need not stand so much in opposition, but rather register different affective responses to the global situation of neoliberal capital; happiness is trying to stay out of the breach, though one might in fact already be in it, while cynicism is the feeling by which one acknowledges having fallen in, the feeling of cycling around in the breach. Thus, where Halberstam positions failure as an alternate mode of being, one must also account for Cazdyn’s notion that failure is part of a capitalist model functioning “precisely as it is intended to work” (67). If happiness is the promise held out by the capitalist dream of the good life, failure is inbuilt as what Anne François would term its “open secret.” In this sense, cynicism becomes the affective register of the imbrication of happiness and failure, an affective stance that recognizes itself to be part of a system that disavows its own feeling of failure.

What lies at the centre of the political problem facing subjects in contemporary cultures of neoliberalism, for Cazdyn, is cynicism. He writes,

...why are so few interested in any type of systemic critique? Part of the problem is that an older form of capitalist ideology is getting in the way. Even if we try,

many of us cannot help but take the system's pharmaceuticals, wear its sweatshop made clothes, and use its products and services (of course, this primarily refers to the minority of the world's population who actually have access to these goods and services). We can cognitively map the system and learn where our coffee comes from, how our shirts are made. In the end, however, we cannot avoid transgression. In an earlier Fordist moment of capitalist production, workers were bought off on the level of desire (tempted more by what type of upholstery to outfit their new cars with than by organizing revolution on the factory floor). Today, it is more about being bought off on the level of conscience, since it is impossible within commodity culture to be clean. Perhaps we no longer experience the old Fordist desire, with its accompanying moment of forgetting ('I would really like to have that commodity, no matter how it's made and how the workers are treated, and therefore I will let myself forget how the system works so that I can enjoy my new purchase'). Instead, we increasingly experience its opposite: we don't want to have that commodity, because we know (and don't want to forget) how it's made and how the workers are treated. Nevertheless, we cannot conceive of how to get by without purchasing it (because we see no alternative option) and we cannot prevent feelings of guilt over our participation in a loathsome system. Therefore, we let ourselves forget the vulnerability of the system precisely so that we can enjoy our purchase knowing that we could not have done otherwise. (79)

Cazdyn summarizes the crux of cynical ideology: that we do not want to consume (for instance) unethically because we understand the costs it entails, and yet we cannot conceive of another way of getting by; we cannot help but fail. For Cazdyn, cynicism is not necessarily tied to our inability to achieve "the good life," but to the expression of our inability to live any life without participating in a system of immense human and environmental cost.

Cazdyn suggests it is our attempt to assuage our own guilt that permits cynicism; that cynicism permits us to persist in the view that there is no alternative and therefore we must participate in such a system. Of course, in his view, there is always an alternative: there is revolution. He writes, "We let ourselves forget the vulnerability of the system precisely so that we can enjoy our purchase, knowing we could not have done otherwise"

(79). The radical action Cazdyn proposes, then, is not to “wake up” to our own duplicity, but rather “to *mobilize* our hypocrisy in a way that relies less on moral categories and more on an objective critique of the total system that has left us—via false choices—with ‘hypocritical’ lifestyles” (80 emphasis in original). However, in the context of a character like Kiwi—a character who barely understands the world but knows it to be flawed, one wonders how exactly one would move from barely subsisting on his unethically (probably) produced gas-station pizza to participate in a revolution of the entire socio-economic model. There is a problem of scale associated with revolution: it is a lone, spottily-educated and ill-equipped Kiwi versus a Carpathian Leviathan.

Cazdyn’s revolution does not address the more fundamental question of agency underpinning cynicism. We see into the machinations of the system, recognizing its costs, and, as I have been arguing, *feeling* its ideological demand as a demand. And yet, Cazdyn suggests that we accomplish such mapping only to forget it. But another response to a room full of Mark Lombardi’s sketches is to become quickly overwhelmed at the scale: one single corruption blooming out into a wall-engulfing set of power relations and negotiations. In this context, to say that a person uses cynicism to forget vulnerability is to overstate the availability of vulnerability: for Greta, for Kiwi, for Molly Stearns, the system appears invulnerable. One can understand corruption as a formative influence within the structure in which one lives, but one can barely read the multiplicity of desiring lines mapping out the intricacies of corruption and influence that shape global economic, political, and social realities. The question remains, what is one to do? One answer to this question is Cazdyn’s and that of Marxist theory more generally: revolution.

However, the problem of scale poses a question for how we consider the notion of revolution at all.

In articulating the political problem underwritten by cynicism and the question of scale, we can consider cynicism as the inverse of another feeling of subjective or psychic relation: that is, the feeling described in the notion of the sublime. Like cynicism, the sublime describes an encounter with one's inconsequentiality in the world. Kant describes it as a "negative pleasure" that "is produced by the feeling of a momentary checking of the vital powers and a consequent stronger outflow of them" (102). Though in his larger *Critique of Judgment* he distinguishes the feeling of the sublime from emotion while I have emphasized the affective ground of cynicism, I want to draw out of Kant's sense of curtailed agency in the momentary check placed on one's vital powers. In the moment of encounter with the sublime, one feels inconsequential. However, vitally for Kant, the experience of the sublime relies on the brevity of this experience of inconsequentiality, which is followed by an outflow of a sense of one's power. The sublime marks out a subjective feeling of inconsequentiality in which one's ability *to act nonetheless* feels miraculous. Though agency is curtailed, that limitation is momentary, and in fact agency or subjective power takes on even greater resonance because it persists even in the face of the dizzying prospect of the sublime encounter. Schiller summarizes this tension at the heart of the sublime by describing its simultaneous reflection of both the powerlessness and powerfulness of the human actor: "man [sic] is in its hand, but the will of man is in his own" (online). The sublime is thus not really about frustrated

agency, but the triumph of agency even against the spectre of its ineffectuality, mastery against the frisson of a failure that never materializes, though it threatens.

The gendered pronoun Schiller uses to describe the subjective experience of the sublime is not incidental or merely anachronistic. As opposed to the patriarchal narrative of inevitable mastery, cynicism registers a feeling of insurmountable inconsequentiality, a frustrated agency that is not redeemed by the glorious feeling of one's miraculous ability to act even in the context of the most dazzling and dizzying aspects of the universe, but instead is entrenched through one's inability to grasp agency even at the most banal level of the everyday. For instance, Greta in *Eine Flexible Frau* cannot make her plight heard, even to a friend over coffee. The use of the term "man" to describe humanity marks out precisely the erasure contained in assumptions of agency: a man might will his own action, even in the face of sublime phenomenon, but perhaps for a woman (or other feminized subjectivity) this agency is not inevitable. If the sublime is made both morally didactic and pleasurable through its evocation of the limits of rationality and the persistence of will (as Schiller and Kant suggest)—one cannot know and yet, one can act—cynicism is made uneasy or undesirable through its severing of knowledge from agency—one can know full well and still one must act in accordance with a punishing system. For those whose ability to act in the banal world of the everyday is already thwarted, the sublime encounter of seemingly infinite systems of power—as, for instance, precipitated the American housing collapse—does not necessarily offer the pleasure or release that comes with a presumption of agency. Instead, the sublime in this case threatens only to reinforce one's sense of one's ineffectuality, particularly as that

ineffectuality goes unnoticed. Moreover, in the face of a sublime encounter with the structure of mortgages, the patriarchal presumption that one can not know and yet still viably act in accordance with such a system is precisely the move that bound so many up in an ill-understood (in its entirety) but widely felt experience of foreclosure. This is not to blame those who took on mortgages larger than they could handle, but to underline the way in which such a choice is part of a system of neoliberal capital functioning as it will. In fact, to blame either the perpetrators or the victims of the mortgage crisis is to miss the larger structural problem that is the lies in the fact that a feeling akin to the sublime—in which one believes oneself to be able to act (and attain mastery) regardless of the scale of the challenge one takes on—is built into this system

If cynicism is the affective register of frustrated agency, then it makes sense that those whose agency has historically been frustrated are familiar with this feeling, or are useful as emblems of its affective form. It is not incidental that many of the figures I have used to talk about the position of cynicism as affective and agentive bind are young females, or feminized young workers: the young intern working the campaign in *Ides of March*, the unemployed architect in *Eine Flexible Frau*, the two young teenagers trying to save a theme park. Each is notably precarious within structures that might have otherwise offered support. This is not to argue that the precarious are without agency. As Avery Gordon reminds us “even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims, or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents” (4). Rather, my project attempts, through cynicism, to invoke some of the complexity

suggested here by Gordon by refusing the labels of both victim and hero. Instead, I work to understand subjectivity as forged (and reforged) somewhere between subject and structure.

This detour through the sublime demonstrates the tenacity by which an assumption of untroubled human agency undergirds both Western thought and our conceptions of viable politics: an agency that is either active and acting on the world (and thus desirable) or passive and acted upon by the world (and thus undesirable). Cynicism offers a means by which to approach the ambivalence and contradiction glossed over in that simplistic agentic binary. It draws attention to the way in which human inconsequentiality, registered as the inability to act, threatens “even those who haunt our dominant institutions” (Gordon 5); in other words one of the spectres haunting both neoliberal capitalism and its resistance is the possibility of inertia, and, further, the distribution of this feeling in greater measures among those who are not white males. Thus this spectral presence is, in part, exorcised through an overwhelming insistence on the (patriarchal) value of propulsion, of doing something against the threat of nothingness.

Though here the sublime also offers a means by which to complicate our more familiar notions of agency. Importantly, the feeling generated in the sublime encounter is *relational*, rather than merely individual. In this sense, if we move the ultimate triumph of the will to one side for a moment, the sublime offers a way of recasting what is often viewed as a subjective failure as systemic, built into the relations taken up in the system. In each of the texts I have considered in this project, the precarity of cynicism is

systemic: in three of the four cases it is directly tied to an inability or unwillingness to internalize norms one cannot live up to and in Ava's case stems from an over-reliance on a fantasy that no longer aligns with circumstance. In each case, happiness, hope, or positivity become impossible goals or dangerous lures, and, concurrently, cynicism opens up. Each of these characters takes up (or refuses) cynicism, though each differently: Kiwi in a way that alienates him from the binding (and blinding) myths shared by his family, Ava as a fearful void that propels her into a perilous fantasy of happiness, and Molly Stearns, the young intern in *Ides of March*, as the site of a self-effacing, fatal, agency—the only action left to her in a system that she believes is poised to destroy her. Greta comes closest to living cynically—she comes closest to embracing the spectre of cynicism—and she is made loathsome to friends, family, and audiences as a result. Each of these characters registers the proximity of cynicism to the ideology of cruel optimism with which Lauren Berlant characterizes the myth of “the good life.” If a persistent attachment to the fantasy of the good life makes a character “likeable,” as Ava's naïve tenacity endears her to the reader, for instance, the threat of cynicism thwarts our sympathy. However, if the cynical encounter is relational, then the likability of such a feeling is less important than its systemic embeddedness. In fact, the debate over likability draws attention away from precisely the structural embeddedness of the spectre of cynicism: it haunts from within, rather than without.

Their femininity, youth, or feminization, in part, marks those haunted by cynicism in this project, and it is the combination of this negative affect with their precarious subjectivity that renders them marginal within the normative models of “good life”

fantasies. When we dislike Greta for her cynicism, we dislike her also for failing to approximate the markers of successful motherhood—unpardonable in what Angela McRobbie calls the “new moral economy,” which prizes figures like the consumption-driven “yummy mummy” who can do it all in style while demonizing those who do not live up to this standard for their “failed femininity” (McRobbie “Yummy” online). A successful mother—like a successful citizen—is not cynical. Instead, she epitomizes good life fantasies regardless of whether or not they “result in disappointment, if not despair,” for other young mothers (or even themselves, I would add) (McRobbie “Yummy” online). I want to suggest our distaste for a character like Greta’s cynicism—our distaste for cynicism more generally—holds her accountable for a defect we mistakenly align with subjectivity, that we wrongly see as chosen instead of as relational. We assign cynicism to marginal subjectivities without considering that their cynicism is a feeling produced of marginality—a feeling that comes of understanding oneself as ineffectual in the first place. If the fantasy of the good life is fraying, as Lauren Berlant suggests, then those who are likely to first feel the effects of this fraying are those nearer the unravelling margins, those who can or will no longer pursue the perpetually receding promise of its fantasy, those who have encountered the spectre haunting neoliberal capital.

In this, the notion of the sublime again becomes useful for understanding the potential in cynicism. Though he equally locates in the sublime a triumph of the (white, male) will in the face of dizzying odds, Schiller also finds in the pain of the sublime the impetus for a form of social awareness. In his essay “On the Sublime,” he writes,

Let evil destiny show itself to us face to face. Not in the ignorance of the danger surrounding us—for this must ultimately cease—only in the *acquaintance* with the same is there salvation for us. To this acquaintance we are now helped by the terrible, glorious spectacle of all destructive and *again* creative and again destructive alteration—of the now slowly undermining, now swiftly invading ruin, we are helped by the pathetic portraits of humanity wrestling with fate, of the irresistible flight of good fortune, of deceived security, of triumphant injustice, and of defeated innocence, which history establishes in ample measure and the tragic art through imitation brings before our eyes. (online emphasis in original)

Schiller suggests here that salvation comes through acquaintance with the danger, and terror of the sublime. But, more than this, he suggests that we are helped to this salvation by paying attention to those who struggle and fail, by those who experience bad luck, insecurity, injustice and tragedy—by those who have fallen and are falling in the swiftly invading ruin. This is a different view of the zombie apocalypse in which we pay attention to those who will inevitably suffer in its unfolding, rather than pursue an “every man for himself” response. If we take the terrifying moment of the sublime to be the elision of agency, as Kant suggests, then through Schiller’s emphasis on the negative, we come to fellow-feeling through confronting the many moments in which human agency fails. In the context of neoliberal capitalism, this means paying attention to those whose agency is thwarted, to those who are pushed to sacrifice themselves for the good of the campaign, to those who pursue narratives of vain hopefulness in the absence of clear alternatives, to those who work in the underbellies to maintain the Leviathan-like systems of global pleasure. It means recognizing feelings of impasse as relational, rather than individual. Far from being a marker of a lazy subjectivity, cynicism marks out a feeling of frustrated agency, a feeling of one’s inconsequentiality within a system that consistently projects precisely the opposite orientations: optimism, happiness, hope, a

system that continually promises flourishing, even as many struggle, fail, and fall precisely through their pursuit of these promises. To pause to consider what cynicism might be telling us is to differently approach our subjective orientations to the neoliberal worlds of politics, labour, and structures of happiness. If there is a cruelty that attends cynicism, it lies not in the vigorous hold of an unattainable promise, but in the invisibility of inconsequentiality—the ease with which suffering is erased as the lone subject is made to bear responsibility for her failure in pursuit of that promise.

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