Theatre Survey 55:3 (September 2014)
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doi:10.1017/S0040557414000313

WHAT ARE YOU READING?

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In May 2010, a general election in the United Kingdom produced a coalition government headed by David Cameron's Conservatives and (nominally) the Liberal Democrats under deputy PM Nick Clegg. The coalition (still in power in 2014) quickly plunged the nation into a period of postcrash austerity the likes of which had not been seen for generations. When I landed at Heathrow in June 2012 to start a new job at Queen Mary University of London, the ground was thick with casualties—and getting thicker. Significant challenges to the U.K. welfare state have been launched before, of course: most visibly and famously under Margaret Thatcher, perhaps more insidiously and tenaciously under Tony Blair. Blair, having learned the lessons of Thatcher's blunt brutality, was a consummate salesman of the public–private partnership, but in 2010 the facade of "feel good" neoliberalism was almost instantly in danger of cracking. Shortly after the election, Clegg backtracked on his promise not to raise tuition fees, allowing the government to triple university students' annual bills to £9,000. By the end of that year protests had taken over the streets; Brits of all social classes were struggling, and angry.

It didn't take me long to work out that the contemporary United Kingdom is neoliberalism's perfect storm: a state so driven by finance capital that alternatives seem practically impossible, yet so embedded in a history of social welfare provision that the policies of creative destruction that neoliberal ideology foments can barely keep their grim masks on. Thanks to a public loudly and historically

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557414000313 Published online by Cambridge University Press

supportive of care for the disabled, ill, and unemployed, alongside a robust liberal press for which neoliberalism is not just a failed ideology but a uniformly violent one, every claim to austerity's benefits made by Cameron and his team has been subjected to intensive, skeptical, and often raging scrutiny. Brits well know that each year under austerity they are getting measurably poorer, and they know too that Cameron's policies are designed to protect bankers and the corporate interests who fund them above all. But struggling beneath the heavy burdens that come with austerity's realpolitik, many working-class Brits also don't know where to look for change. The most popular political leader on the national stage today is Nigel Farage, head of the arguably racist U.K. Independence Party (UKIP), who favors a split with the EU and strict immigration controls. With both the Labour (first under Blair, now under Ed Miliband) and the Conservative (under Cameron) brands tarnished, Farage may shortly charge up the middle, pushing the United Kingdom even further to the right as voters desperately seek relief from the most economically right-wing government in living memory.

Lauren Berlant would call this situation one of "cruel optimism."

Living in Britain and working in the British academy these past two years has altered my mood (austerity is depressing), but it has also reenergized my research and shifted its focus. Thanks to a rich and thoughtful political resistance pursued by my colleagues at Queen Mary in both their research and their activism, I've begun work on a project about contemporary realist performance under neoliberalism. The three recent books I consider below all examine the human costs of neoliberal (also called "finance" or "late") capitalism, but do so from various disciplinary perspectives and with different readerships in mind. I've grouped them together here primarily in order to assess not what they have to say but how they say it and to whom; in short, I am interested in how the alignment of content, form, and audience in each of these volumes works, or not, in support of a politics. As a performance scholar and a committed teacher, I believe that acts of resistance (performative; critical) to neoliberal realities need to be broadly accessible, without sacrificing the rigor of precise critique. Perhaps against the grain of (much generally excellent) work in our field that speaks to a very narrow scholarly audience, I am motivated by the urgency of communicating the complexities of these realities to the several kinds of public they impact daily, and I am interested in what forms of communication may support, and what forms may impede, that goal.

Jonathan Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso, 2013) is a crossover title written for savvy lay readers. It assumes readers have some (modest) knowledge of philosophy and political economy, but it doesn't really assume any particular political persuasion. Crary begins with a reader-friendly series of "hooks" that allow him to illustrate convincingly his major claim before stating it outright: while until now capitalism has been unable to commodify our sleeping hours, we are on the verge of a radical change that will see our traditional physical and social rhythms disrupted by economic interests that will not be satisfied until every moment of human life is directed toward the production and consumption of goods and services. The "inscription of human life into duration without breaks, defined by a principle of continuous functioning" (8) marks "24/7" as "a time of indifference, against which the fragility of human life is

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increasingly inadequate" (9); for Crary, 24/7 is the time of late capital, and it does *not* have time for anyone unwilling or unable to keep up with its demands.

24/7 has no grand designs beyond reinforcing this argument as thoroughly as it possibly can in four separately themed chapters of equal length. Some of these chapters are more effective than others: I found the second, focused on the drive to "upgrade" personal technologies and constantly manage our social identities online, too pedantic and off-puttingly technophobic at times; but Chapter 3, which reaches back to the Industrial Revolution before pushing forward to the Golden Age of Television, historicizes capitalist time nicely, producing insights that are genuinely disturbing. For instance, Crary explores TV as a light-and-sound-based technology we do not actively "watch" so much as find ourselves passively "exposed" to (86), an experience that, while making us feel generally worse, compels us to return again and again.

The book's own repetitive quality and lack of references frustrated me when I was reading with my pencil in hand and my researcher hat on, but when I accepted the book's polemic on its own terms, I often got genuinely excited by it. I suspect Crary's ideal reader is a management-class worker with a university education, perhaps soft conservative leanings, but also an open mind. At 128 pages plus only 5 pages of endnotes and no bibliography, it is not properly scholarly, but neither is it without scholarly merit; I will certainly use it for teaching, and I have already used it in an article. It is brisk, polemical, not intimidating, and clearly packaged for the commuter: the hardcover is affordable at under £10, it is small enough to fit comfortably in a purse or a large jacket pocket, and its dust jacket announces "24/7" in bold orange letters set against the pleasingly disorienting backdrop of high-rise windows lit up at night. Ultimately, *24/7* looks, and reads, like a smart, publically accessible discussion of late capitalism's purposeful takeover of our bodies, our social time and space, our networks and our rhythms, and it pulls no punches in examining the many ways neoliberal practices cause us real harm right now.

Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (Duke UP, 2011) falls at the other end of the accessibility spectrum. It is a long, dense book of high theory framed around its central problematic, which Berlant defines, in her very first sentence, like this: "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). As she unpacks and complicates the elegant simplicity of this statement over the next 267 pages, she focuses primarily on cruel optimism's affective dimensions, thinking its emergence in tandem with "the retraction, during the last three decades, of the social democratic promise of the post-Second World War period in the United States and Europe" (3). Anglo-Europeans have been—and still are—promised what she repeatedly refers to as "the good life"; all recent evidence suggests that this promise is bogus, and yet we hang onto it. The question that interests Berlant is why.

Cruel Optimism worries the same phenomena that engage Crary, but whereas Crary examines in relatively straightforward fashion our investments in neoliberalism's time signature and the technologies that support it, Berlant is interested in our social and emotional attachments to the behaviors Crary describes as increasingly automatic. In the world of "crisis ordinariness" (her preferred term

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throughout the book for what Crary calls "24/7"), "[t]here is barely time to reflect on belonging, and no time not to react to threat" (189). In this way, she writes, "the subordinated sensorium of the worker, whose acts of rage and ruthlessness are mixed with forms of care, is an effect of the relation between capitalism's refusal of futurity in an overwhelmingly productive present and the normative promise of intimacy" (189). We cleave nevertheless to that promise, a port in the daily storm, and in that clinging reinforce the superstructures that tease us with bare intimacy at best as rewards for our labor. We race to work so that we can race home and "relax" by buying TV on iTunes, forging tentative connections with the characters on *Breaking Bad* and *Girls*. 24/7 demands our buy-in; cruel optimism keeps us coming home.

Crary and Berlant's books make an elegant natural pairing, yet they don't really work as a team because only a very small substrate of readers will have access to both. *Cruel Optimism* is written for scholars competent in the languages of cultural theory, and especially in its peculiar syntactical structures, such as exceptionally long sentences and sometimes unnecessarily complex diction. It is divided into roughly 60% theoretical exegesis and 40% film, literary, and media analysis; in each chapter (or pair of chapters) Berlant builds upon her philosophical framework before extending it into an exploration of cruel optimism's appearance in contemporary artworks. This structure, though somewhat workmanlike, is effective; given the density of Berlant's theoretical terrain, extensive illustration enables readers to synthesize, internalize, and even quibble with her claims. The book is at times exceptionally clear and genuinely elegant in its prose; at other times, however, it is simply baffling and overwritten. As a keen reader of theory I do not make these claims lightly; I also wish to emphasize that *Cruel Optimism*'s complex, deeply felt engagement with a subject that Crary must needs oversimplify is its main strength. Nevertheless, this is not a book I would give to any but the most sophisticated student, let alone to my (university-educated) husband; if it tells a brutal and necessary history of the affective load of late capital (and it does), it speaks to far too few of us.

My final book, Jen Harvie's *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Palgrave, 2013), is this trio's "just right": a crossover book with real scholarly heft. Offering a blend of sophisticated but politically vigorous content, fluid and accessible prose, and a precise yet friendly tone that will be inviting to any reader who cares about the state of the arts in the United Kingdom today, *Fair Play* seeks to understand how performance and live art practice is both supportive of *and* resistant to the U.K. neoliberal status quo. The book offers profound respect for its readers, for the artists whose work it engages, and for the contexts in which many of those artists find themselves trapped, forced to make certain kinds of work even against their best interests. Harvie does not judge artists; she recognizes them to be participants in an imperfect social equation. What she *does* judge, however, is the gross injustice meted out every day by those at the levers of late capital. Her firm refusal of their terms and conditions, coupled with her clear explanations of why those terms and conditions benefit no one, make for a read as bracing as Crary's, but with more analysis and less polemic. Like Berlant, Harvie is driven by detail and nuance, but her rigor is never buried in specialist language; the result

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is a text that can easily join, and add much to, public debates about the arts under neoliberalism at a time when voices like hers are sorely needed.

The great strength of *Fair Play* is its thick research: working within Ric Knowles's "material theatre" model, Harvie musters theory, criticism, popular press materials, a vast amount of public policy documentation, and a good measure of sociology and cultural geography to her cause. She begins with an introduction that defines her key terms and lays out the scope of her project before moving on to four case-study-driven chapters, focused variously on labor, the artist as entrepreneur, space and access, and public-private funding models. Each chapter takes up the book's two basic but urgent research questions: In what ways do artists fall prey to reproducing neoliberal models as they make work under what Berlant might call the "crisis ordinariness" of arts funding today? On the other hand, in what ways do artists model different, more productive kinds of relation in the face of neoliberalism's false social contract?

Because Harvie is driven by the dialectic inherent in this pairing, the book is admirably balanced. It asks readers to weigh the evidence, and to think about how the arts are and are *not* better off—and how we, as humans living in a world made more humane by art, are and are *not* better off—under the status quo. *Fair Play* ultimately makes a strong yet never depressing case for the "not," and Harvie leaves us with real hope that something can be done. In fact, she demonstrates that artists and arts organizations, "by no means entirely 'neoliberalized'" (193), are the ones *already* doing it:

> It would be naïve to suggest that all contemporary art and performance practices resist neoliberal capitalism, or that they ultimately 'defeat' it. But it may be accurate to say that, at their best, they model ways of critically engaging with it, eluding it, critiquing it, repudiating it and ridiculing it, and they seek and model alternative ways of being which preserve principles of social collaboration and interdependence. (193)

Optimism: not cruel.

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