

Responses to Kateřina Kolářová

Heidi Helmhold

CRUEL OPTIMISM, CRIP EPISTEMOLOGY, AND THE LIMITS OF VISUAL ANALYSIS

Kateřina Kolařová's essay, "The Inarticulate Post-Socialist Crip," provides an interesting and terminologically dense reading. Overlaps with topics of my own research¹¹ covering visual arts, material culture, affect politics and space arise particularly in relation to terms such as 'structure of feeling,' 'affective attachments,' as well as the image-text relation in the context of visual arts. In the following, I will present three responses to this text. First, with reference to Laurent Berlant's terminology of 'cruel optimism,' as cited by Kolařová, I will present an argumentation differing from the one she follows. According to my understanding, no 'toxic attachment' to the cultural and contextual contingencies of the 'inarticulate crip' as described by Kolařová can be derived from Berlant's 'cruel optimism.' The second response refers to the neoliberal transformation processes in post-socialist Czechoslovakia, which Kolařová regards as responsible for the prevention of a crip epistemology. I believe, instead, that the university is accountable for such transformation processes, since academia should be understood as a place where epistemologies are included and excluded, hence it is also responsible for the formation of precarities. Third, my response deals with Kolařová's interpretation of Jan Šibík's photo "Chci ještě žít" from the series "Každý desátý! - Ukrajina, Oděsa. 2003-2004." Here I wish to defend the right of an artistic achievement in professional art (and the work in question is professional photo art) to be protected against misreading for the sake of supporting one's own argumentation.

First Response:

Cruel Optimism Describes Positive Processes

In Kolářová's line of argumentation, Berlant's term 'cruel optimism' is considered as a concept that is supposed to identify the strategic dynamics of post-socialist transformation processes and fundamentally to depict these in their cruelty. However, in terms of her own definition, Berlant's 'affective attachments' are only construed with reference to what she calls 'the good life,' which is unattainable for so many, but - and this perspective is decisive - still holds potential that principally offers everyone the opportunity to participate in it:

"As an analytic lever, it is an incitement to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call 'the good life', which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it. [,,,] Cruel optimism is in this sense a concept pointing toward a mode of lived immanence, one that grows from a perception about the reasons people [...] choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to, to syncopate with it, or to be held in a relation of reciprocity, reconciliation, or resignation that does not mean defeat by it." (Berlant 27-28)

Attachment as a 'structure of relationality' is linked to a wide range of ex-periences taking into consideration affects and emotions, so that Berlant concludes: "I therefore make no claims about what specific experiential modes of emotional reflexivity, if any, are especially queer, cool, resistant, revolutionary, or not" (13).

In order to dissociate from Berlant's notion of affective attachment, Kolářová establishes the category of "toxic attachment (232)," whereby cripness should become an "impossible location." (233) From my point of view, it does not really make sense to introduce this term. On the one hand, Kolářová convincingly illustrates that there exists a dis/ability semantics in the process of post-socialist transformation. But this does not explain that a crip epistemology was in actual fact prevented by this dis/ability semantic. Kolářová neither provides specific, empirical details nor does she present a direct addressee or an historical sphere of activity for this prevention. On the other hand, the term 'cruel optimism' seems to me fundamentally unsuitable in this context. According to my understanding, Berlant is interested in positive processes of change within neoliberal conditions. As cited above, "[c]ruel optimism is in this sense a concept pointing toward a mode of lived immanence" (Berlant 28), which means that cruel optimism ultimately aims to overcome the impasses. If this assumption of a positive dynamic intrinsic in the system is followed, then this constitutes a condition precedent that leads to the articulation of a language proper to 'crip expression' and definitely not to an 'inarticulate crip.' Rather, this inarticulate crip exists, precisely in the sense of Berlant, in "a relation of reciprocity, reconciliation, or resignation that does not mean defeat by it" (28).

In other words, a counter-culture can result in 'guerilla techniques.' The impact and power of these techniques should not be underestimated; intrinsically they hold a great potential for articulation. Berlant describes such guerilla activity with the example of "The Surveillance Camera Players," "a comic project with a DIY aesthetic, inspired by underground or guerilla activity" (Berlant 240). She relates how the group's book, *We Are Watching You* [2001], "provides rich documentation of their tactical, ephemeral, spectatorial events," events which involve actors confronting public surveillance cameras with cardboard signs displaying humorous messages that exemplify the "enactment of the body politic's refusal to be docile"

(ibid.). "This aesthetic project," Berlant maintains, "reconstructs the body politic as an institutional actor who addresses the state as an interlocutor, not a structure, and whose pleasure is not in an unconscious or random freedom but in the production of interference, noise in the system" (242).

Second Response: Neoliberalism, University and the 'Inarticulate Crip'

My next response discusses neoliberal transformation processes with reference to academia. Such processes, which Kolářová reflects on with respect to post-socialist Czechoslovakia, have now become global instruments. They have also reached institutions of knowledge, in particular universities, and have resulted in the official restructuring of knowledge itself within these institutions. Again, I am drawing on Berlant:

"Speaking of cruel optimism, it may be that, for many now, living in an impasse would be an aspiration, as the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life - at work, in intimacy, politically - are crumbling at a threatening pace. [...] What Jacques Ranciere calls 'the distribution of the sensible' appears here not only in the class-based positioning of sensibility, but also in gestural economies that register norms of self-management that differ according to what kinds of confidence people have enjoyed about the entitlement of their social location. The way the body slows down what's going down helps to clarify the relation of living on to ongoing crisis and loss." (Berlant 4-5)

In this sense, I cannot follow Kolářová and her highlighting of cruel optimism as the agent of the prevention of a crip epistemology in post-socialist Czechoslovakia, because I understand cruel optimism as containing a rather positive, modifying dynamic. For me, the more relevant term - and Berlant also emphasizes this - would be precarity. Neoliberal transformation processes are immanently precarity-forming processes, which describe a global process and consequently a process relevant to society and social inequality as a whole. In Berlant's words: "At root, precarity is a condition of dependency - as a legal term, *precarious* describes the situation wherein your tenancy on your land is in someone else's hand" (192). Precarity designates managing systems which govern resources and capital, and which continually decrease temporal and spatial units of work and social participation. This process undermines and prohibits the formation of certain epistemic systems if they do not fit into the neoliberal administrative system of knowledge.

In the following, I aim to trace this dynamic by discussing the example of German academia in order to indicate how knowledge machines based upon neoliberal patterns function. Further, I will relate this discussion to Kolářová's assertions related to the 'inarticulate crip' and its connection to the neoliberalization of the university. Since the 1980s, the reorganization of 'university' as a place of knowledge and education has been conducted in Germany with a clear tendency towards a focus on achievement, following the motto 'strong academia results in strong achievement.' But how can strong achievements be established? In Germany, academic achievement is increasingly assessed according to quantifiable criteria that can be visualized in external and internal rankings and subsequently converted into financial and other forms of capital.

To implement neoliberal policies in academia, in its 1993 "10 Hypotheses On Higher Education Policies," the German Council of Science and Humanities suggested a stronger orientation towards employment and vocation as well as an alignment with the requirements of the economy, such as permanent evaluation, adherence to standard periods of study, and other measures (see "10 Hypotheses"). The tenth hypothesis demanded autonomous (i.e., non-state) institutions of higher education which are capable of acting on their own account; their destiny was to be placed in the hands of a "higher education institution management capable of making decisions" (ibid.; translation by author). The effectiveness of this neoliberal 'university' is reflected in particular in the raising of external funds: If individual faculties and departments are successful, they can gain external funding bonuses, which will enable them to engage in internal monetary allocations according to the principle of 'achievement-oriented allocation of funds.'¹² Thus, neoliberal university management relies on the measurement of achievement, which is published in university rankings - similar to the premier league rankings - in economic journals. The criteria for these rankings are devised in accordance with standards of quantifiable measurability. In these rankings, students are referred to as 'customers,' a terminology that has symptomatically been coined in the neoliberal higher education transformation process itself.

In the context of the Bologna Process starting in 1999, a further instrument of neoliberalising academia in Europe and therefore also in Germany has been developed: the two-tier BA/MA program structure, which aims at inter-European comparability of university degrees. Since then, the formats of university courses have been centrally predefined. To be established, a course needs to pass an accreditation process, which is controlled by private agencies. These accreditation agencies are appointed by a national accreditation council which, by way of a statutory mandate, monitors whether university courses consist of a corset of a specific length, examination performance and workload for students; output orientation plays an important role in this respect.

Last but not least, in 2005/06 Germany developed the "Excellence Initiative" instrument: An elite of top universities was created and endowed with an increased volume of equipment and financing. Professors who carry-out research in these elite clusters are exempted from teaching, while teaching is conducted by highly qualified, massively underpaid academics who are employed through precarious employment contracts. This formation of an 'elite' through the 'Excellence Initiative' has had exclusionary effects on the academic community as a whole: It outshines the rest of the faculty which now appears as underachieving and unattractive. Academics, who are not affiliated with the neoliberal formation of achievement, visibility (affective public), university ministration (curative positivity), excellence, and scientific potency (i.e. funds and personnel equipment) stay behind and do not face an optimistic future. Their forms of knowledge fall by the wayside in the prevailing mentality of quantifiable scientific achievement, orientation towards employability, and standardization of studies, or, to assimilate Kolářová 's terminology: They remain 'inarticulate.'

Thus, remaining inarticulate does not only apply to traditionally 'minor subjects' such as crip theory, but it concerns any epistemology which fails to find a place in neoliberal academia or cannot even be taught. This invisibility can *also* refer to 'crip epistemology,' but in my view, processes of suppressing 'other' forms of knowledge should be considered from the perspective of the neoliberal university system, rather than attributing it to 'crip epistemology' itself. Contrasting planned economy and market economy, as Kolářová (236) does in line with Elaine Weiner, does not, in my opinion, provide specific indicators for 'the inarticulate post-socialist crip'. Instead, it would have been interesting to be offered an analysis of *university* disability semantics during the period of transition in post-socialist Czechoslovakia.

Third Response: Social Creativity, Beauty, Visual Culture

My last response deals with the work of Jan Šibík, who I know as an internationally active photographer who intervenes in political and social contexts while applying professional methods, creating good and profound artistic work. In her essay, Kolářová discusses a photograph by Šibík called " Chci ještě žít " or "I Want to Live" from a series of photographs supporting people suffering from AIDS in Odessa, Ukraine, which Sibik photographed in the early 2000s. The series comprises 19 photographs, which are currently on view on Šibík 's website under the title "Každý desátý! - Ukrajina, Odesa, 2003-2004." The images document various spatial situations in an asylum for AIDS-infected people in Odessa, "where people with AIDS were left to themselves; those who still could cared for those closer to death"

(Kolářová 234). Disparately placed beds, tables and chairs on which sick people sit, lie, and sleep are depicted. The images show visitors sitting on beds together with residents and in one photograph also with a priest, who, unnoticed by the people in the room, seems to be reading a mass. They also show several people sleeping, being self-absorbed, or looking unemotionally into the camera. The pictures show roommates looking at people in the bed next to them or seemingly thinking about them. They show a nurse turning to a woman who is lying on a bed naked waiting to be taken care of. They show women talking or exchanging caring gestures. They show a deceased man being mourned by his wife. And they show another deceased man who, adorned with flowers, is publicly carried on the street, and people in the background, who are probably his relatives - although no specific mourning clothes can be seen here. In these photographs people's gestures are introverted, partly focusing on conversation, partly with long lingering gazes. Many of these photographs show physical contact - visitors touching patients who are lying on beds, a nurse touching another bed-ridden woman, patients touching each other, or people being engrossed in thought while touching themselves. Almost all of the photos depict instances of social interaction - humans, rooms and objects appear as *spacing* (see Low 108-115,158-161). There is one specific photograph that does not show a social interaction but a body segment: On a bed sheet we discern human legs 'bandaged' with plastic bags. The legs are marked by wounds, some of which are bleeding. Bloodstains can be seen on the bed.¹³

Kolářová chose image number 7 as an example of the inarticulate crip. Two women in their underwear sit facing each other, one of them on the bed, the other one on the floor in front it. The woman sitting on the bed carries out a nursing or cosmetic gesture on the woman sitting beneath her - a focused gesture of care that is received by the woman sitting below with equal attention. Kolářová describes this scene as follows: "The drab environment, the pills, used cups, and fashion magazines surrounding the women tell a story of sickness and an improvised/impoverished home. However, the women are so engrossed in each other that the markers of illness, death, and destitution seem to disappear in a momentous bliss of erotic and mutual care" (Kolářová 233-234). Put into context with the other photographs of the series, this description itself is a projection. Indeed, many of these photos show a "drab environment" that fits the description of "pills, used cups, and fashion magazines [that] tell a story of sickness and an improvised/impoverished home" (233). But this photo in particular *does not* show a story of sickness with regard to its tangible, spatial setting. In my reading, it is an attentive and intimate scene between two women who are engrossed in physical affection. The surrounding space is densely equipped and could therefore also be a small room in a residence hall - insignia of sickness and hopelessness are spatially eliminated if one compares it with the other photographs. And crucially: In contrast to Kolářová, I contend that the affection shared by these women is *not* of an erotic nature, at least not in an intentional sense. The gestures between the two

women are full of trust and tenderness, which corresponds with the seemingly mutual affection between them. To speak of a 'momentous bliss of erotic and mutual care,' as Kolářová does, projects, from my point of view, a (male or eroticized) gaze onto an intimate situation of devotion.

Moreover, with this interpretation Kolářová underestimates the narrative dimension of the entire series. I understand this photo as the most 'touching' photograph of the series - touching in a double sense: touching the beholder by means of the devotion between the two women and touching as an act of mutual physical contact. There is no visual reference to sickness, death or destruction in this image. It is - in all of the fragility of the place, the asylum, in all of the hopelessness of the situation - the most socially creative photograph in the series. Furthermore, it is significant that this social creativity is iconically carried out by two women, in contrast with the iconic hopelessness of individual men in other photographs of the series (see for example image number 4 on Šibík's website). Against this background I cannot comprehend why this photograph should show "a powerful clash between failure and sustenance," as Kolářová puts it (234). She sees the two women depicted here as embodying the failure of the ideologies of vitality and able-bodied health. And she goes on to say that the image

"attaches the woman's bodies to each other by acts of interdependent care, while their ambivalent positioning allows - even calls for and invites - sexual fantasies, turning the two women into subjects of (each other's) desire. In this they paradoxically embody a moment of careless sorority and of mutual care/pleasure." (Ibid.)

But there is no pictorial evidence to suggest a sexual phantasy constructed between the two women and/or which would evoke sexual phantasy in the viewer. Additionally, I cannot *see* that this photograph shows "[t]he ways in which the 'failure' of AIDS/illness can be turned into sustaining cripness," as Kolářová argues (ibid.). Since Susan Sontag we have known of the subtle but effective instruments which the photography of Postmodernism has introduced into photographic narratives:

"But notwithstanding the declared aims of indiscreet, unposed, often harsh photography to reveal truth, not beauty, photography still beautifies. Indeed, the most enduring triumph of photography has been its aptitude for discovering beauty in the humble, the inane, the decrepit. At the very least, the real has a pathos. And that pathos is - beauty" (Sontag 102).

With this ability of visual culture to 'beautify' the ugly, an implicit vehemence and horror is often amplified rather than taken away. But pathos occurs in the sense of affectivity and emotionality. However, there is one particular thing that is not accomplished in works such as Jan Šibík's (and works of visual art in general): They do not allow themselves to be instrumentalized. This photo, like the others in the series, is undoubtedly a statement about a time of political and moral re-orientation in East Europe, in particular in the Ukraine. But its iconic program has its own hermeticism which can illustrate a theoretical or cultural context only to a limited extent: "But photographs do not explain; they acknowledge. Robert Frank was only being honest when he declared that 'to produce an authentic contemporary document, the visual impact should be such as will nullify explanation'" (Sontag 111).

If this photo and some others in the series show something in *the image*, then they show gestures of affection in a hopeless environment (asylum, society, political re-organization). What they do not display is 'failure' or 'ambivalence' - there are definitely no signs and no iconographic program which would indicate these aspects in this particular photograph. In Šibík's photographs, the subject matter is the same as in all narrative images in critical documentary photography, namely humanity and the lack thereof. This is a lot and should not be underestimated; it has the potential to shape our views about political and social injustices. In this regard, the photo itself appears as a "dissociative point of intersection," as Susan Sontag (97) describes it, between the camera and the human eye, and it is therefore never congruent with what is generally called 'reality' or 'truth.'¹⁴ Consequently, we cannot derive a valid structure of a pictorial *crip signing* from the majority of the photos in this series by Jan Šibík. Kolářová's attempt to see this in his visual artwork appears inexplicable to me.

11 | See Heidi Helmhold, *Affektpolitik und Raum* (especially 9-33)

12 | In German: Leistungsorientierte Mittelzuweisung (LOMZ)

13 | See Photograph 12 on Jan Šibík's website:

<http://www.sibik.cz/reportaze/aids_odesa_ukrajina/index.html>.

14 | Also see: "Photographic seeing, when one examines its claims, turns out to be mainly the practice of a kind of dissociative seeing, a subject habit which is reinforced by the objective discrepancies between the way that the camera and the human eye focus and judge perspective" (Sontag 97).

References

"10 Thesen zur Hochschulpolitik" ["10 Hypotheses on Higher Education Policies"].
Eds. Der Wissenschaftsrat 1993. Web. 22 Juni 2015.
<<http://www.die-soziale-bewegung.de/hochschule/10thesen.PDF>>.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011.
Print.

Helmhold, Heidi. *Affektpolitik und Raum: Zu einer Architektur des Textilen*
[Affect Politics of Space: Architecture of Textiles]. Köln: Walther König, 2012.
Print.

Kolářová, Kateřina. "The Inarticulate Post-Socialist Crip: On the Cruel Optimism of
Neoliberal Transformations in the Czech Republic." This volume. 231-249. Print.

McRuer, Robert. *Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York
University Press, 2006. Print.

Šibík, Jan. *Každý desátý! - Ukrajina, Odesa, 2003 - 2004*. Photography Series. Web.
17 July 2014. <http://www.sibik.cz/reportaze/aids_odesa_ukrajina/index.html>

Löw, Martina. *Raumsoziologie* [Sociology of Space]. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp,
2001. Print.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. First Ebook Edition (2011). New York: Farrar,
Straus and Giroux, 1973. Kindle file.

