

the politics of unmaking lives

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tuesdays, 4.30p - 6.50p
gilman 277



The political question is how to understand the difficulty of detaching from lives and worlds that wear out life, rather than sustain it... The hardest acts of changing are acts of breaking, even when desire is on the side of a break: they require being optimistic about loss and the undoing of an affect world.

Lauren Berlant

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores the politics of lives being unmade in impasses. An "impasse" is a situation in which your idea of the good life turns out to be harmful. For example, college graduates have faced an impasse since 2008: promises of job security and upward mobility in exchange for hard work and a good credential have been deferred, jeopardized, or revealed to be mere fantasy. Yet, many graduates still believe in those promises while being unemployed or underemployed and drowning in debt. From bad romances to consumer capitalist lifestyles that intensify climate change, impasses become pressing concerns when we remain attached to damaging ways of living rather than striving to reshape or discard them. In an impasse, we risk being consumed by toxic attachments.

This course focuses on three matters of the impasse: unmaking lives; attuning anew; and moving on(?). We will address these themes through questions such as: how are our lives unmade as we cling to attachments that no longer sustain us? How might we sense the chances and resources to craft better lives? And how might we detach from what is destructive?

Impasses are political even if they do not usually seem so. Although deeply personal, they involve impersonal forces (such as social norms, economic institutions, sensorial atmospheres, and everyday objects) that shape ordinary life as a site of struggle, endurance, and experiment. This course connects politics to ordinary life while addressing the politics of ordinary life itself. We will explore how political issues such as neoliberalism, racism, and sexism are refracted in ordinary life as feelings, bodily states, habits, and orientations to oneself and one's world. We will also consider how we endure change and try to remake our lives. In short, we will gauge what is political and impersonal about impasses to enrich our personal experiences of them.

The class has a theoretical orientation because an impasse is a complicated situation without readymade solutions that forces critical reflection. We will ask how the course literature might enrich, wrinkle, or inhibit our own engagements with impasses. You will likely leave the class with more questions than answers. Maybe with a few headaches too.

REQUIRED TEXTS

The readings hail from various academic disciplines (political theory, cultural studies, anthropology, literary theory, and philosophy) and are written in diverse genres (e.g. short story, poetry, theory-fiction, Greek tragedy, ethnography, and memoir). Accordingly, we will address both the content and form of the readings. Think of the course material as a toolbox of concepts and styles for engaging the impasse.



Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011

Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012

Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York, NY: Modern Library Edition, 1995

Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007

All other required readings are available on the library's eReserves
<http://reserves.library.jhu.edu/access/reserves/index.php>

FILM SCREENINGS

To enrich our engagement with the impasse, there will be film screenings throughout the semester. Attendance is optional. Screening times will be arranged during the semester.

La Promesse, dirs. Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne (1996)

Melancholia, dir. Lars von Trier (2012)

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, dir. Michel Gondry (2004)

Upstream Color, dir. Shane Carruth (2013)

My Car is My Lover and *Married to the Eiffel Tower*, BBC

The Future, dir. Miranda July (2011)



ACCESSIBILITY

If you are a student with a disability or believe you might have a disability that requires accommodations, please contact Dr. Brent Mosser in Student Disability Services, 385 Garland, 410.516.4720, studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu

ASSIGNMENTS

Participation

Our seminar will thrive on your contributions to discussion. I will be less a lecturer and more a discussion facilitator. Please come to class prepared to engage the readings, address your classmates' points, respond to presentations, and voice questions that further our discussion.

Presentation

You will make one 15-20 minute presentation on the readings for a week of your choice. You will also lead discussion while the class responds. Your presentation is an opportunity to focus on issues that you want to think through with the class. Rather than summarizing the readings, you should crystallize a few key concepts and points. Relate the week's readings to other texts and themes in the course. Quote a few particularly rich passages and explore them in detail to orient our conversation. Comment on the style of the texts and the affects they induce in you. Pose questions for discussion while elaborating what led you to those questions. Please distribute a handout or copy of your presentation. I encourage brainstorming ideas with me beforehand.

Midterm assignment

Your midterm assignment will be an 8-10 page paper that reflects on a specific impasse through the class readings. You will have about two weeks to complete the assignment. After reading your paper, I will meet with you individually to discuss it. More details on the midterm assignment will be distributed during the semester.

Final assignment

I will ask you to do something that is substantial to you. I encourage you to design your final project in a style and medium that suits you. In other words, you will not be confined to the scholarly paper (though that is an option). The time taken to complete your final project should be at least that of finishing a 12-15 page paper. More details will be offered during the semester.

GRADING

At the end of the semester, we will have an individual meeting in which you will assign yourself a grade for the course.



This segment elaborates the notion of the impasse where politics meets ordinary life. It explores how and what happens when people retain damaging attachments. Our guiding question is: how are our lives unmade as we cling to hopes and relationships that depress, exhaust, or harm us?

September 3

Barbara Ehrenreich, “Introduction,” “Smile or Die: The Bright Side of Cancer,” and “Postscript on Post-Positive Thinking,” 1 – 44, 195 – 206

Sara Ahmed, “Introduction: Why Happiness, Why Now?,” 1 – 20

September 10

Lauren Berlant, “On Her Book *Cruel Optimism*”

Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism” and “Slow Death” in *Cruel Optimism*, 23 – 49, 95 – 119

September 17

Lauren Berlant, “Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal” and “After the Good Life, an Impasse” in *Cruel Optimism*, 161 – 222

Said Sayrafiezadeh, “Appetite”

September 24

Ann Cvetkovich, “Introduction,” “Part I. The Depression Journals,” and “From Dispossession to Radical Self-Possession” in *Depression*, 1 – 23, 29 – 82, 115 – 153

Film Screenings

La Promesse
Melancholia

This section explores the recalibration of our senses and ourselves amidst the impasse. How might we sense the chances and resources to build new attachments and thus better lives? Might developing new attachments to an ever-changing, fecund world enable letting go of harmful ones?

October 1

Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1 – 129

October 8

Jane Bennett, "Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency," 237 – 269

Jennifer Egan, "Found Objects"

Charles Johnson, "Exchange Value," 27 – 40

Reread Lauren Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," 36 – 43

October 15 – No class :(
Midterm paper due by 7p



Tammy Lu
Untitled 11

Film Screenings

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
Upstream Color

October 22 – No class :(

Individual meetings this week to discuss midterm papers

October 29

Kathleen Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements"
445 – 453

Walt Whitman, "Sparkles from the Wheel"

Jane Bennett, "Preface," "The Force of Things," and
"The Agency of Assemblages," vii – xvi, 1 – 38

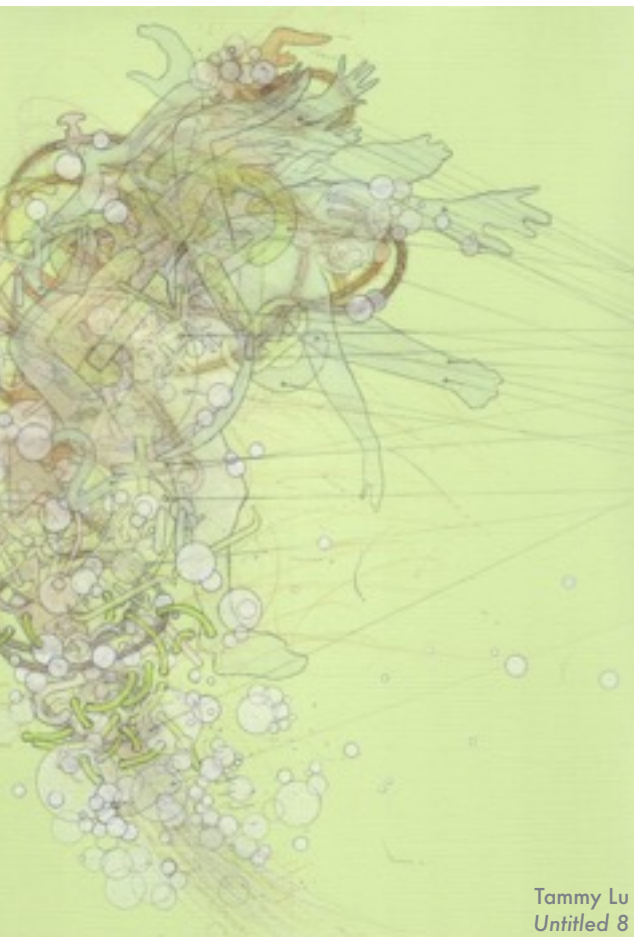
November 5

Sophocles, *Antigone*, 187 – 252

William E. Connolly, "The Theorist and the Seer," 148
– 175

William E. Connolly, "The Fragility of Things"

Walt Whitman, "A Song of the Rolling Earth"



Tammy Lu
Untitled 8



3 | moving on?

Lars Von Trier
Melancholia

The final section explores the process and question of moving on from impasses. Part of what makes moving on so difficult is its demand that we lose our anchors to the world. Even if an attachment has been damaging, it provides a sense of self and the world. Moving on involves losing that anchor, that sense, and heading into an uncertain future. The politics of moving on concerns how we work to unlearn harmful attachments (or not) and experiment with remaking our lives (or not). How might we undo harmful attachments and refashion our lives?

November 12

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” 547 – 566

Sara Ahmed, “Unhappy Queers,” 88 – 120

Judith Halberstam, “Introduction: Low Theory” and “The Queer Art of Failure” in *The Queer Art of Failure*, 1 – 25, 87 – 121

November 19

Judith Halberstam, “Dude, Where’s My Phallus?” and “Animating Failure: Ending, Fleeing, Surviving” in *The Queer Art of Failure*, 53 – 86, 173 – 187

Ann Cvetkovich, “The Utopia of Ordinary Habit” in *Depression*, 154 – 202

Friedrich Nietzsche, selections from *The Gay Science*

November 26 (reschedule?)

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Part 1: Prologue, Zarathustra’s Speeches, Sections 1, 3 – 5, 7, 11 – 12, 15, 22

Part 2: Sections 2 – 3, 5 – 7, 12, 18, 20, 22

December 3

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Part 3: Sections 1 – 4, 7, 10 – 13, 15 – 16

Part 4: Sections 10, 13, 19 – 20

Film Screenings

My Car is My Lover

Married to the Eiffel Tower

The Future