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Reading Political Fantasies with Berlant: Some Reflections

“Fantasy is an opening and a defense” (Berlant 2011, 49).

Even though not officially “in” political theory, Berlant’s work offers some of the deepest and most productive insights to understanding our political reality. I never knew Berlant, and was asked to contribute to this conversation based on my relation to their work. But what would it mean to eulogize from this place? How does one capture a debt—to one’s own personal thought, to a discipline, as a form of eulogy? I tried and failed several times to write this text. Partly, I failed because Berlant’s contribution to political theory is not simply wide and does not simply span over so many different domains. I have a sense that much of it operates beneath the surface and is therefore difficult to capture. Berlant’s writing infiltrates so deeply into the mind, the soul, or the fibers of one’s being that it is difficult to think without them once one has thought with them. So many of us have begun to read so much of the world through their words. I therefore decided to engage in a small gesture of reading with Berlant, in recognition of a debt in a different way, if you will. It is a very local reading of the role of fantasies in political lives.

One of Berlant’s main contributions to the understanding of politics has to do with their practice of taking fantasies seriously. Rather than an image of the world as governed by rational decision-making and structures, Berlant shows that so Critical Exchange many of our political relations, institutions, and ideologies are based in fantasies, in a mode of existence that resides somewhere between the real and the imagined. These are not grand fantasies, but small, ordinary ones. These fantasies help us deal with a world that is no longer fully bearable: through fantasies we can continue being in the world despite and amidst the continuous betrayals of the world (and more concretely, of so many of those around us) in its/their promises. Fantasy is thus the defense that makes life possible. But this means that how we see the world and give it meaning, as well as how we construct our relations to others, is often at least partially given within the realm of the imaginary. If “fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world ‘add up to something’” (Berlant, 2011, p. 2), then these meanings are often far from being rational or calculated.

This mode of being-in-the-imaginary can be an “opening”, a “projected possibility” (Berlant, 2011, p 25): it can create spaces of hope and action, but it can also end up destroying us. This is not just because the content of our fantasies is part of the impasse that has forced us to the phantasmatic domain to begin with (it is shaped by the same order and ideology that has created the unbearable of the world—shaped by the desire to accumulate, for example, or by similar visions of “the good life”), and therefore they are almost bound to fail to provide the expectations and fulfill the desires they create in us. It is also because ultimately, something about the attachments these fantasies form betrays the structure of attachment itself: they keep turning inward or meeting empty objects, dropping dead on empty floors, as it were (the neighbors are never there when one visits, the lover or child turns out to be imaginary, the other citizens with whose suffering we identify do not need or want our sympathy, or we sympathize with a wrong cause). When I teach Berlant, students often report being “shattered” by their texts. I think partly this is an outcome of this sense that even our hopes, our projections to the future, end up undermining our possibility to thrive.

But as mentioned, I limit myself here to a reading in one such fantasy, inspired by Berlant’s ways of thinking along an extended archive: the fantasy portrayed in *Frozen II* (2019, dir. Lee and Buck). I read this film, first, alongside Berlant’s cruel optimism, as a fantasy that reproduces the conditions of the very impasse it seeks to overcome. Second, I read it as providing a defense by opening a route for self exoneration and perhaps also offering a political opening. I end with some more general reflections can hopefully help to move beyond this reading to a more systematic inquiry.

At its core, *Frozen II* presents one of the most difficult political questions for the west. Indeed, it may not be accidental that the film opens with existential reflections on the meaning of transformation, the ephemeral nature of life, the fear of getting old, but also the fear of childhood itself. These are all represented by Olaf, the snowman created by Elsa, whom we meet at the beginning of the film as he fulfils the main fantasy he had in *Frozen I*: enjoying the sun without melting. *Frozen II*, then, seems to begin with a slightly less pessimistic point of departure than its prequel. Whereas *Frozen I* recognized that the content of our fantasies is often self destructive and ends up betraying not just its own promises, and with it our wellbeing, but also our very ability to survive (Olaf simply melts in the sun until Elsa’s magic saves him),

Frozen II seems to allow Olaf to enjoy the content of the good life, as he sees it, without having his very survival threatened.

Yet, the presumed material stability that Olaf obtains does not do away with the fear of change, which he comes to understand is inevitable and probably unpleasant. Being a childhood fantasy—a playful animated object—Olaf embodies the eroding conditions of life, if not the impossibility of living in the world, and certainly the impossibility of living our desires. This playfulness is itself a defense, yet one that allows us to get closer to what often remains buried in us.

Frozen is a fantasy, and in what follows I will read it as representing a particular fantasy that shapes life within settler colonialism by drawing on and expanding on Berlant's analysis of life within or under late capitalism. *Frozen* is also one of the many materials from which fantasies are made, and the fear of change that Olaf's erosion both incarnates and phantasmatically overcomes, is not just the fear of death or growing up, but also the fear of coming to terms with one's place in history—a fear of a political world that is changing, in which “the bastards changed the rules” and accountability for ones' positionality becomes necessary. This fear concerning shifting positions and identities prepares us for the big question that drives the plot: how should one deal with the discovery that one is one of the bad guys? How can one deal with their own role in history as a dispossessor?

The movie tells the story of Queen Elsa and Princess Anna from Arendelle, who discover that they were raised on false historical narrations. In these narrations, their grandparents' generation was engaged in a defensive war against untrustworthy people from a nearby magical forest. Those people bear the iconography of Indigenous people (based, according to Disney, on the Sa'mi people of northern Europe, but to an untrained eye they can easily seem to represent Indigenous Americans): they have a tribal name (the Northuldra people) and are placed in a particular historical setting that resonates with a history of colonization (the opening song presents a Thanksgiving-like celebration, commemorating the settlers' placement). In what is being told to the young girls as the story of a brutal attack, the Northuldra killed Elsa and Anna's grandfather, started a war, and were punished by magical forces that sealed them in their forest. The truth, however, is that Arendelle's people, led by Elsa and Anna's grandfather, were the attackers and destroyers of both a peaceful tribe and nature itself. They built a dam that destroyed the Northuldras' livelihood and refused to demolish it. Echoing histories of settler colonialism replete with gestures of “peace” that are really selfinterested

acts which bring much destruction (cf. Idris, 2018), this dam is presumably a token of peace and friendship but was really necessary to protect Arendelle from flooding. Now, Elsa and Anna must confront history, and both are willing to do anything within their power to right past wrongs.

As a movie, *Frozen II* is a familiar fantasy for those who inherited the role of dispossessors or have various privileges that come from past atrocities. It is a fantasy concerning one's own position in relation to the past, and hence about the possibility of enjoying the fruits of past violence without being complicit in it. It is the fantasy that one never knew, and that the truth is a powerful political engine of change. I argue (2020), along with Gil Hochberg (2020) and Bruce Robince (2017), that the discovery of the truth is not a sufficient condition to promote egalitarian, progressive or of-the-left political change, and may even facilitate entrenchment of conservative political projects. In Berlant's terms, *Frozen II* represents an attachment of cruel optimism since such narratives affix us to a (phantasmatic) image of a future that can be opened by the power of truth. Anna says, for instance, that "Arendelle has no future until we make this right," and the trolls also comment that "the truth must be found; without it, [there is] no future." This presumes that the discovery of the truth will indeed set us free, correct the wrongs of the past, or lead to some reconciliation—as if one could really live without knowing (see Kotef, 2020). But this fantasy is linked to a more fundamental form of cruel optimism concerning the question of justice.

Elsewhere I read Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs* as offering two answers to the question of postcolonial justice when it is posed from the point of view of the colonizer or the settler. One could either leave or die (Kotef, 2020, p. 131): die because, Hansberry and Fanon tell us, the fight for decolonization must take a violent form if justice is to be achieved; or leave because, as Albert Memmi (2016) contends, once they understand the price that others pay for their very presence on the land, the only coherent possibility of refusing the structure of colonization available for the colonizer is leaving. Any other form of refusal ends up being either paradoxical or itself a form of self-negation. Indeed, Anna and Elsa each inhabit one of these two possibilities. Elsa dies in her effort to discover the truth. Anna understands that the dam must be demolished and that therefore she—and the people of Arendelle—must leave.

But as is often the case in fairytales, Elsa eventually comes back to life and a miracle stops the water just before it floods the kingdom. Moreover, we discover that Elsa and Anna do not belong to the "bad guys" but rather embody reconciliation, as it turns out that they are the

offspring of a union between the two peoples—their dad an Arendellian, their mom a Northuldras. Everyone lives happily ever after.

Yet precisely in this resolution lies the fundamental political impasse. The opening it presents is but a reproduction of a fantasy of justice in which the correction of past wrongs and violence does not really come at the expense of the wrongdoer. It stokes a fantasy of justice with no real price, which is also a fantasy about ourselves as people who can be invested in justice-making without undermining the very grounds of our (unjust) existence. Such phantasmatic “openings” of shared life and even shared indigeneity entrench attachments to the present and are hence part of the present impasse itself. They foster the sense that we can keep on holding to the present conditions of life when we project ourselves into the future. Moreover, *Frozen* offers us the ultimate settler-colonial fantasy of indigenization, wherein Elsa and Anna can ultimately emerge as part natives themselves, never fully colonizers, always of-the-land. There is a fantasy here of self-transformation that is but a return to a presumably pure past. One does not need to abandon who one is, only rediscover it. As such, it is a political fantasy of justice which cannot fulfil its promise and itself becomes an obstacle to justice.

Yet perhaps *Frozen II* offers us a different ending. The rapture between Elsa’s death and her resurrection, accompanied by the rapture between Anna’s reckoning that Arendelle must be destroyed (or at least evicted) and the last-minute magical saving of the kingdom, haunts this good ending, as if questioning its very possibility. Moreover, this image of self-transformation as ultimately harmonious and peaceful is questioned by Olaf’s fear of change that frames the adventure. I therefore suggest we read this ending alongside the endings of movies such as Spike Lee’s *The 25th Hour*, Tony Scott’s *True Romance*, or, differently so, Tarantino’s *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*: an ending in which cinema presents what it explicitly recognizes to be an impossible fantasy; a good ending that can never take place in real life.

In this very recognition of its impossibility, the ending moves from being “a defense” to being a real “opening.” Or perhaps this rupture within the fantasy allows *Frozen II* to be both: a defense against an unbearable reality in which one must die or leave their home for justice to be made, but also a small aperture wherein what may seem like the ultimate impasse (death) is also a springboard to re-imagining an alternative politics. Could we think of such alternatives not through physical deaths and projects of mass-destruction but through figures of social dis-existence that can open new modes of being in the world that are themselves less destructive?

Could “death” be symbolic or otherwise not final—indeed a transformation, as the film keeps reminding us, rather than an end? Can it show that eventually people may find ways of sharing the land, even if at a particular historical moment this seems impossible? Or does the film merely show the phantasmatic nature of the image of priceless justice? Even if *Frozen* only does the latter, it thereby nevertheless urges us to see the need for crafting other visions.

Part of the power of Berlant’s work is that they refused to settle questions of interpretation and instead called us to inhabit the unsettled. In a way, if one thinks of undoing settler colonialism, this is precisely the mode of inhabitation at stake. Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* to a great degree is about the erosion of collective fantasies. It is about fantasies that can no longer fulfill their function: they can no longer provide the comfort that the world indeed “add[s] up to something” Olaf stated at the beginning of the film that “nothing is permanent” and shedding leaves marks the change of seasons, *Frozen II* is also about erosion. The good life with which it opens is clearly and explicitly ephemeral.

But *Frozen II* is not just about eroding fantasies: it is also a symptom of such erosion. A fantasy in and of itself, the movie addresses a certain erosion of the fantasy of enlightened colonization—the fantasy that settler societies can just push away the reality of settlement. *Frozen II* is the outcome of a colonial society whose collective fantasy about its own self-identity is no longer sustainable and must come to terms with its violent past. Yet its way of coming to terms with this past is a replication of its phantasmatic self-image. The question of justice can thus be reconstructed in relation to both past (Did we know? Did we not know? rather than: Did we commit a genocide? Is this land stolen?) and future (How can I transform myself to become a better person? rather than: What is the material future of this land?), in ways that enable one to take responsibility, albeit in incredibly convenient terms (not unlike land-acknowledgements at the beginning of well-funded academic conferences, for example).

Berlant calls us to see ideological, material, and affective frameworks that attach us to the idea that we can thrive to preserve a system in which we can barely survive. We become attached to objects and ideological schemes that can never deliver on their promises and that we can never fully obtain or inhabit. I am not sure this carries well from the analysis of modern capitalism to that of settler colonialism, although elsewhere I tried to propose that in some way it does. But at the very least, what is at stake in both cases is a set of impasses that betray both our image of the good life and the set of relations between us and others—a system (material

and ideological) that holds us captive by continuously attaching us to a future that can never come. At stake is a trajectory toward the future (in capitalism it is the promise of accumulation, here it is the promise embedded in self-transformation) that ultimately hinders change in the present.

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