

Rezension zu

## Lauren Berlant: On the Inconvenience of Other People.

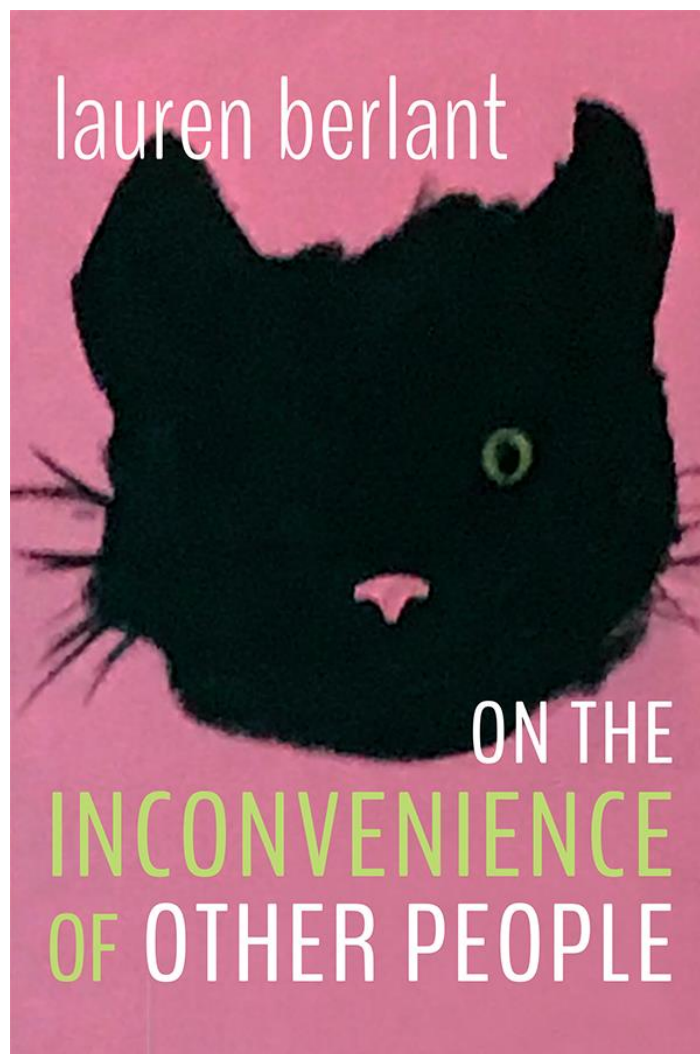
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von **Olivia Poppe**

Lauren Berlant, the late cultural theorist, is known for their deep cutting analysis of the intertwinings of sociality, ideology and culture, informed by critical theory as well as queerfeminist theory. Especially *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008) and *Cruel Optimism* (2011) are widely recognized. Their passing away in June 2021 has therefore left the community of critical cultural thought mourning for an exceptional scholar. Because they died shortly after finishing their latest book, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), the preciousness of this publication surpasses the mere contribution to critical queerfeminist discourse.

The word 'inconvenience' highlights the uneasiness of attachment as a threat to one's own concept of self. A threat both desired and feared, pointing to the ambivalence of social relations and politics. In their book, Berlant tries to answer the question whether we can "[...] think differently about the encounter with the inconvenience of other people: that we might desire not only them or any objects but also the inconvenience?" (p. 170) Inconvenience stands for "a feeling state that registers one's implication in the pressures of coexistence. [...] inconvenience disturbs the vision of yourself you carry around that supports your sovereign fantasy, your fantasy of being in control" (p. 3). This fantasy is not reduced to individual conditions but serves as a foundation for concepts such as the liberal colonial state and the citizenship subjectivity that derives from it (p. 3). In the scheme of supremacist subordination, Berlant argues, suppressed groups are both inconvenient and necessary for the supremacist fantasy (p. 4). This is experienced both in the private everyday contacts and on levels of national and inter-



national political discourse. To link the private and the public experiences of inconvenience, Berlant draws upon concepts of infrastructuralism. Here, infrastructure is understood as mediation; as a material process of binding, which subsequently is both material and symbolized (p. 20ff). It is a phase of constant world-making. In this sense, infrastructures of inconvenience tell us something about what connects people and their practices in their social fields (p. 20). Recognizing our surroundings as being implemented in infrastructures opens up the possibility of transformational action. Therefore, critical social forms, Berlant argues, should not only concentrate on criticizing the status quo or imagining alternative futures, but especially focus on the possibilities to intervene in these transitional, infrastructural motions (p. 25f). Infrastructures and their inconveniences therefore encompass both the pressure and fluidity of sociality. To analyze inconvenience as "the affective sense of the familiar friction of being in relation" (p. 2), Berlant once again turns to films, art installations and literature. By discussing

these cultural texts, they develop a theory which encloses both the question of what it means to be a coexisting human being *and* the questions directed at systemic violence derived from a fantasy of defensible sovereignty.

*On the Inconvenience of Other People* contains three chapters and an additional coda. In each of the book's chapters Berlant takes on an infrastructural interruption (p. 170), arising from scenes of misogynist and racist violations in the day to day. The first chapter, which is called "SEX Sex in the Event of Happiness", investigates how anarchic relational infrastructures are carved out from sexual revolutionary practices (p. 32) by discussing the films *Last Tango in Paris* (Bertolucci, 1972) and *Happiness* (Solondz, 1998). "DEMOCRACY The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times" traces the infrastructural ambivalence between the status of the commons as a concept and its "theory-cosmopolitan context" (p. 77) along the works of Thomas Hawk, Stephanie Brooks, Robert Lowell and R. W. Emerson among others. In "LIFE On Being in Life without Wanting the World: No World Poetics, or, Elliptical Life", Berlant conceptualizes a poetics of dissociation as rendered by an "openness both to self and to world reorganization" (p. 145). The film *A Single Man* (2009) directed by Tom Ford and *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, a collection of essays by Claudia Rankine, serve as material to reinforce their thesis. In the book's coda called "My Dark Places", Berlant not only recapitulates the preceding chapters, but also turns to James Ellroy's *My Dark Places* (1996) and Bhanu Kapil's *Ban en Banlieue* (2015), both working through topics of sexual violence and murder, to distinguish between the inconvenient and the unbearable (p. 151).

While the search for transformational potential in inconvenient infrastructures is worth pursuing, it seems necessary to comment on the traps along the way: The chapter "SEX Sex in the Event of Happiness", feels like such a case, where the infrastructure has not been completely recognized; where shortcuts have been made and therefore some intends have backfired. One of the main arguments Berlant puts forth in this chapter, is that inconvenience is not only something that happens to a person - it can also be sought out as

a means of self- and life-disturbance. A revolutionary act of unlearning traditional reproduction of being in the world (p. 32). They recognize sex as a scene where the ambivalence between violence and world-making potential is of utmost intensity (p. 32). After briefly discussing queer theories on sex and sociality, as well as noting the absence of sex in recent social theory (p. 41f), the author points to sex as the "desire for the inconvenience of other people" (p. 42) as a key aspect of social relations, which, in the ambivalence between closeness and alienation also encompasses the possibility for social transformation. As a "museum of [the '60 revolutionary] qualities and gestures" (p. 59), *Last Tango in Paris* occupies the chapter's largest part. While the already much discussed film of Bertolucci may still bear some uncharted aspects for Berlants arguments, *Tango* nevertheless seems a somewhat odd choice for a queerfeminist discussion of ambivalence. The film's scenes of sexual and revolutionary curiosity barely overcome the narratives and aesthetics of male dominant fantasies. And while Berlant discusses the film's infamous rape scene at length, they barely spend a footnote on the actual assault of the 19-year old actress Maria Schneider on set that led to the scene they use to illustrate their theory of inconvenience in sexual intimacy. In fact, they even downplay the incident (see footnote 53, p. 188). The near absence of a feminist analysis of gender related hierarchies in both the film's diegesis and its production suggests the authors own uneasiness with encountering the chapter's inherent inconvenience.

Apart from this section, in which certain complications seem to be overlooked in order to make a clear point on ambivalence, the book develops a productive way of thinking about the ethics of reference and queering in social relations and infrastructures. It tries to understand subjectivity as something that derives from the pressure of the world; a subjectivity as brokenness and therefore brokenness as a constitution of being rather than a disruption of it (p. 171). Simultaneously, objects, scenes and infrastructures can be broken in order to be transformed. The challenge is to stay with the uneasiness and ambivalence of the transformational progress (p. 150). Using cultural texts, Berlant points out these possibilities of rupture that either lie in the material

itself or in the way of their reading whilst weaving in queerfeminist and decolonial theory.

The breaks in the book are palpable. They can leave you with unease, at times even irritated. They also open up hardened positions, feelings of hopelessness

and impasses of thought concerning social change. *On the Inconvenience of Other People* invites the reader to sit with the desire for and inconvenience of sociality and its transformations both in the private and the political. It is very worthwhile to accept this invitation.

## Autor/innen-Biografie

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