

Drumming to the Beat of Sacrifice: The Cruel Optimism of *Whiplash*

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Abstract

Damien Chazelle's Dark Academia film *Whiplash* (2014) illustrates the concept of cruel optimism through the toxic relationship between the aspiring drummer Andrew Neiman and his university conductor Terence Fletcher, whose methods blur the line between mentorship and abuse. Drawing from Lauren Berlant's theory, cruel optimism is the attachment to the pursuit of one's desires that ultimately becomes a self-destructive force. In *Whiplash*, Andrew's ambition to become a famous drummer and Fletcher's obsession with creating a jazz legend form a cruel optimistic cycle of expectation and suffering. This article explores how cruel optimism manifests in the pursuit of passion within contemporary academic and creative environments.

Dark Academia

Keywords

Dark Academia;
Whiplash; Cruel
Optimism; Impasse;
Mentorship Abuse.

Introduction

The Dark Academia aesthetic usually brings to mind dusty libraries, ancient statues, and ivy-covered brick walls. Amongst the leather-bound books and old-fashioned stationery, a pair of drumsticks might seem somewhat out of place. Yet, in Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash* (2014), the world of Dark Academia is brought to life not through quills and parchment, but through the relentless rhythm of jazz drumming. While Dark Academia is mostly linked to the humanities, the genre's essence lies in the romanticization of academic life, achieving (academic) success, and indulging in education as a passion (see Mattila 1-2). The exclusivity of the cult-like classrooms and the pretentious yet much respected professors, cultivate an environment that may inevitably lead to violence. The award-winning film *Whiplash* visualizes the world of academia through gothic shots of the dimly lit rooms of the prestigious Shaffer Conservatory in New York City, modeled after Julliard. The movie focuses on the intense and antagonistic relationship between an ambitious young drummer, Andrew Neiman, and his ruthless jazz instructor, Terence

Fletcher. Upon discovering the young prodigy, Fletcher transfers Andrew into his still-more elite jazz ensemble, the best at their school. However, Fletcher's extreme teaching tactics soon drive Andrew into an obsessive pursuit of perfection. *Whiplash* explores the lengths one is willing to go to for the sake of success and the high personal costs associated with it.

Dark Academia is described to be “riddled by a decidedly contemporary ‘cruel optimism’” (Klepper and Glaubitz 2). The concept of cruel optimism, as explained by Lauren Berlant in her book of the same title, is the pursuit of one's desires that ultimately proves to be harmful to their well-being (see Berlant 2). Cruel optimism is built on the emotional attachment to the “good life” that is going extinct (3). In a similar manner, the Dark Academia literary genre romanticizes the search for a prestigious academic life, reflecting a pre-COVID-19 ideal. At the same time, the genre faces the inherent impossibility and inaccessibility of these ideals in contemporary “liberal capitalist society” (3). Dark Academia portrays a nostalgic longing for a scholarly ‘good life’ that is becoming increasingly unattainable. The genre, therefore, finds itself at an impasse, a temporal cruel optimism, in which it is unable to move beyond the nostalgia and longing for a past that cannot be (re)created.

In my article, I will discuss how cruel optimism is represented in Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash*. First, following Berlant, I will provide a detailed explanation of cruel optimism and explore its connection to the notion of the so-called ‘good life’. In the next step, I will briefly discuss how cruel optimism affects scholars and individuals in other creative fields, relevant to the portrayal in *Whiplash*. The following section will detail how cruel optimism manifests in the lives of the two protagonists in *Whiplash* and their complex relationship, highlighting the detrimental effects of the relentless pursuits of their respective desires. This article aims to illustrate how cruel optimism can be mobilized to read Dark Academic narratives, using *Whiplash* as a prime example. In doing so, I seek to demonstrate how cruel optimism can explain the often-destructive nature of striving for idealized goals within the context of academic and artistic ambition.

The Light at the End of the Tunnel: Cruel Optimism

Conceptualized by Berlant in her much-discussed book of the same name, cruel optimism refers to a relation that exists “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (Berlant 1). The object of desire as described by Berlant is a “cluster of

promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us” (23). In other words, the object of desire encompasses not just the person, thing, or goal itself but also the various promises and potentialities it signifies. This notion implies that our desire is fundamentally connected to the expected benefits and fulfillments the object could provide. For instance, the desire for a new job extends beyond the job itself toward the broader promises of success, economic security, and personal fulfillment. Berlant clarifies:

To phrase “the object of desire” as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what’s incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us and good for us while others, not so much. (23)

Viewing these desires as a collection enables us to better comprehend the nature of our attachments. Rather than misinterpreting our attachments as a sign of irrational thinking, we can use them to gain insights into why we continue to pursue the object of our desires (Berlant 23). This is because being close to the object means being close to the various promises or benefits it represents (23). Notably, all attachments are fundamentally based on a sense of optimism. Optimism, in this context, is characterized as the driving force that compels us to seek fulfillment in the external world, pursuing what we cannot achieve independently (1). However, optimism does not exclusively elicit positive emotions. Due to its ambitious nature, optimism can manifest as a range of feelings, including dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity, or even neutrality (1). Consequently, not all attachments inherently feel optimistic. Nonetheless, the inclination to return to situations where the desired object, with all its potential benefits, is present, is motivated by an affective form of optimism (24). People generally tend to gravitate back to situations where the object of their desire, along with its potential benefits, is present. Even if the emotions associated with this attachment are not always positive, the hope or expectation of any positive outcomes, which motivates them to return, is a form of optimism (24).

Optimism is not inherently cruel. Berlant defines cruel optimism as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (Berlant 24). In short, cruel optimism is the act of holding on to a problematic attachment despite its harmful aspects, driven by the hope that the desire will ultimately be fulfilled, regardless of its feasibility (24). Although these attachments can threaten one's well-being, individuals might find it difficult to manage without them. These attachments offer continuity and stability, providing them with a reason to persist and keep on living (24). Cruel optimism involves being stuck in a situation where the very aspirations that inspire hope also hinder genuine fulfillment (51). These aspirations are bound to both unattainable fantasies and the hope they embody, resulting in incapacitating circumstances (51). While the assurances offered by the desired object encourage continued attachment, the fear of losing those assurances inhibits detachment, following the sentiment that one can only win the bets they choose to place.

The affective structure of cruel optimism arises from the "fraying fantasies" of what constitutes the 'good life' (Berlant 3). In the postwar period, particularly in America, the ideal of the 'good life' emerged, centered around meaningful assets and relationships (Crow 14-15; Berlant 3). Alex Lockwood discusses how a 'good life' is realized when a society enables individuals to balance work, family, rest, and leisure activities. This framework ensures a life free from anxiety, insecurity, and excessive worries about the future (1). Berlant similarly interprets the 'good life' as a set of fantasies that form the basis of a meaningful, sustaining, and sustainable existence (3). However, in our contemporary era, marked by ideals of "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy," (3) these fantasies are becoming increasingly unattainable. Cruel Optimism thrives in a neoliberal-capitalist society that promotes meritocracy, enforcing the belief that individuals will be rewarded based on their abilities and efforts (3). Yet, this ideal is increasingly unattainable. In our contemporary world, marked by constant crises and challenges, technological advancements, and economic restructuring, individuals are increasingly required to acquire new abilities to navigate various obstacles in order to sustain their livelihoods (8). During his critique of capitalism's sustainability, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek dismisses optimistic perspectives and their notion of superficial hope amid persistent problems, stating: "I

don't accept any cheap optimism. When somebody tries to convince me, in spite of all these problems, there is a light at the end of the tunnel, my instant reply is, 'Yes, and it's another train coming towards us.'" ("Slavoj" 1:11:28 - 1:11:44). Žižek thus argues that optimism about life improvements within a capitalist society is misleading, suggesting that any hopeful signs or solutions are, in reality, further dangers or challenges (1:11:28 - 1:11:44). While the desire for a 'good life' has become a form of cruel optimism, mostly attainable for those born into privilege, even the hope of merely getting by is becoming unrealistic. With constant ecological threats, outbreaks of war, and decreasing job opportunities for positions that barely pay minimum wage, the hope that things will improve seems far from reality. The standard of living has fallen from wishing for the 'good life' to simply trying to survive.

Martin describes survival as a deeply contradictory concept. Though it fails to offer solutions or relief to current problems, it provides context for why the present conditions feel "relentlessly contemporary" (193). Implying that the struggle for survival drags future hopes and possibilities back into the repetitive cycle of the present (193). Similarly, in *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant frequently refers to the concept of the "impasse." Typically, an "impasse" is a situation in which a person or a process remains stagnant (4). However, in Berlant's framework, the impasse is used to define a period one navigates in their life "with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic" (4). Amid everything feeling immediate and pressing, a pervasive uncertainty makes it difficult to predict coming events. This necessitates staying alert and engaged in spite of the lack of clear direction or resolution (4). In the context of cruel optimism, given the rapid deterioration of traditional life-supporting structures, the notion of the impasse might seem appealing (4-5). It offers a temporary sense of stability, maintaining the belief that the 'good life' is still attainable. On the other hand, living in an impasse by Berlant's definition, one must constantly adapt, and tread water, to move forward from a period of crisis, ensuring survival (4).

In academia, many scholars persist in their academic careers despite facing significant challenges and limitations, such as unsustainable working conditions (Thouaille 1). Their dedication can be attributed to the high job satisfaction that passion-driven professions offer, often outweighing the difficulties present in the labor market (Steiner & Schneider 226). For such professions, the 'good life' is redefined, focusing not

on professional and personal stability but on inner fulfillment derived from doing what one loves. Thouaille notes that arts and humanities research is driven by cruel optimism, where academics prioritize passion over financial security (2). This attachment to the object of desire, in this case, the passion job, even when achieved, can be detrimental. Individuals in these fields frequently face unemployment, inadequate wages, and job instability, leading to an untenable and anxiety-filled life. Moreover, the relationship between the artist and their art is a cruel optimistic one. Individuals in the arts and cultural sector frequently find it difficult to separate themselves from their creative pursuits, deeply investing emotionally and personally into their projects (Watson 35). This connection, while fulfilling on one level, also contributes significantly to burnout rates, as the pursuit of excellence through their work often takes a toll on their well-being (35). The link between identity and artistic pursuit exemplifies how cruel optimism manifests in the creative professions, where the pursuit of personal fulfillment and producing quality work can lead to both professional and personal strain.

Cruel Optimism in *Whiplash*

In *Whiplash*, cruel optimism is illustrated through its two main characters, Fletcher and Andrew, and their relationship. Andrew aspires to become a famous drummer and gain acknowledgment for his talent, while Fletcher is dedicated to discovering, or rather creating the next great jazz musician. Their relationship embodies both hope and mutual destruction as they pursue their respective ambitions through one another.

The opening scene of *Whiplash* sets the film's tone, foreshadowing the relationship between Fletcher and Andrew. In their initial encounter during one of Andrew's practice sessions, Fletcher begins his psychological games, a pattern that persists throughout the film. Offering Andrew a glimmer of recognition, Fletcher abruptly departs the practice room without a word of praise, effectively crushing Andrew's hope and confidence (*Whiplash* 02:20-04:00). Throughout the movie, Fletcher reveals himself to be a stern professor, regularly berating, humiliating, and verbally assaulting his students for their mistakes. His tough-love approach extends to physical violence, exemplified by his repeated striking of Andrew to emphasize the mistakes of his hurried drumming (25:39-29:40). However, it appears that Fletcher's extreme tactics are not applied equally to all his students; they are particularly intense when directed at Andrew. Recognizing

Andrew's potential, Fletcher is determined to bring him to his limits in order to mold him into a great musician. He manipulates Andrew's confidence, alternately boosting and undermining it. One of Fletcher's notable tactics is leveraging other students, particularly the other two drummers, to threaten Andrew's position in the band. His strategy, openly acknowledged later on (01:22:40-01:22:45), is intended to push Andrew to work harder and strive for excellence. Fletcher is willing to go to any lengths to shape Andrew into the next Charlie Parker¹, and Andrew is as equally determined to exceed expectations to meet Fletcher's demands. This further enables Fletcher, proving his manipulation tactics to be effective. Andrew's declaration, "I'd rather die drunk broke at 44 and have people at a dinner table talk about me than leave to be rich and sober at 90 and nobody remembers who I was" (46:11-46:20), illustrates his willingness to sacrifice a comfortable life for his aspirations, regardless of the hardships involved. This dedication manifests in his rigorous practice sessions, often straining himself to the point of making his hands bleed (31:24-32:21). Moreover, Andrew does not hesitate to sever ties that might hinder his productivity, ending his romantic relationship when he deems it will interfere with the realization of his goals (50:33-52:30). This is however only a fraction of the extent to which he is willing to go. Despite sustaining serious injuries from a car accident minutes before a concert, Andrew chooses to perform (01:06:14-01:10:27). His inability to play the drums properly leads to an outburst, during which he kicks his drums, tackles Fletcher, and then threatens to kill him (01:10:00-01:10:13). This incident marks Andrew's breaking point, where the intense pressure to perform combined with Fletcher's abusive methods and criticism result in a violent outcome.

As mentioned above, Fletcher's driving force is an undying determination to create the next great musician, a new Charlie Parker. To achieve this end, Fletcher maintains a tight control over his band, as indicated by his overzealous insistence on his tempo being followed. Fletcher's demand goes beyond typical musical direction. It creates a high-pressure environment where his drummers must constantly strive to meet his unrealistic demands, effectively placing them in a frame of temporal survival. By having them practice his tempo for hours on end (*Whiplash* 56:23-01:01:32) the students are kept in an impasse where nothing truly progresses. This state requires them to

¹ Charlie Parker, also known by his nickname "Bird", was an American jazz saxophonist and composer. Widely regarded as one of the greatest jazz musicians, Parker's role in the development of bebop in the 1940s, revolutionized jazz. His legacy continues to inspire jazz musicians across the globe.

remain constantly alert and assertive, competing against each other to secure the position of core drummer. One could argue that the conductor will always be in this position of attachment, as he directs the tempo that the musicians undoubtedly must follow. From the beginning of the movie, Fletcher bluntly warns Andrew about the path ahead, stating, "You know Charlie Parker became Bird because Jones threw a cymbal in his head. See what I'm saying?" (23:37-24:15), suggesting that a gentle approach is not on the table. Fletcher is willing to test boundaries, even risking Andrew's well-being, in order to make him an exceptional musician. Suggesting a pattern of abusive behavior, Andrew is not the first student in whom Fletcher had seen potential and drove to their breaking point. Despite Andrew's predecessor finding success through Fletcher's guidance, this success came at a high price. Traumatized by Fletcher and his teaching methods, the student eventually took his own life (01:10:45-01:10:58). This, however, does not raise any concerns for Fletcher. His commitment to creating the next great jazz musician remains intact, despite being fired for mishandling students, in part due to Andrew's confidential testimony. Afterwards, in a chance encounter with Andrew, Fletcher justifies his harsh methods by referencing once again Jones's tough discipline, which Fletcher believes is what drove Charlie Parker to greatness. He explains, "I wasn't there to conduct... I was there to push people beyond what's expected of them" (01:19:00-01:19:11). Fletcher admits he never succeeded in creating his own Charlie Parker but had tried to do so. Consequentially, Andrew once again grabs onto the hope that Fletcher sees him as his potential Charlie Parker (01:17:50-01:22:00). Fletcher then invites Andrew to perform at a critical concert that could significantly impact his career. In spite of his initial hesitation, Andrew agrees, influenced by the hope Fletcher had previously inspired in him. However, moments before the performance begins, Fletcher discloses to Andrew that he knows he is the one responsible for getting him fired (01:28:09-01:28:15). Shortly thereafter, Andrew confronts the harsh reality that Fletcher's invitation was actually a ploy to sabotage his career. Fletcher deliberately gives Andrew the wrong setlist, causing him to embarrass himself on stage (01:28:46-01:30:24). Yet, Fletcher's intentions go beyond mere humiliation. It stands as another test of Andrew's abilities, and Fletcher coldly states, "I guess you don't have it" (01:30:52-01:30:54).

Andrew's object of desire is his recognition as a great musician. His attachment to Fletcher represents his pathway to realizing this ambition. Fletcher's occasional affirmations of Andrew's potential reinforce this attachment, as Fletcher is perceived as

the key figure who can guide Andrew to greatness. However, these aspirations become cruel as Andrew's attachment to Fletcher subjects him to both psychological and physical harm. As mentioned in the previous section, regardless of the threat these attachments pose to one's well-being, individuals often struggle to escape them due to the comforting aspects of continuity and stability they offer. In artistic professions, the separation of the artist from their art is particularly challenging, as they often associate their identity with the product of their work. When Andrew fails to perform after his car accident, he loses all aspiration and adopts an all-or-nothing mentality. If he could not be one of the greats, then he would rather be nothing at all. Thus, he decides to quit playing despite his years of practice, opting instead for a mundane, purposeless life, as he had lost all hope in himself. On the other hand, Fletcher is willing to pressure Andrew to extremes to bring out his talent, even if it means driving his student over the edge and risking his own career in the process. Andrew's resilience and ability to bounce back repeatedly fuels Fletcher's hope that his vision for Andrew as a future jazz legend is achievable. Regardless of all the pressure inflicted by his mentor, Andrew's resilience reaffirms Fletcher's belief in his potential to become a truly exceptional musician. In turn, Fletcher's conviction that his tough teaching methods, including the constant mind games, are deemed effective in violently leading Andrew to greatness. Their mutual attachment becomes a binding force and feedback loop that makes it difficult for either of them to break free. In the final scene, fueled by the humiliation inflicted by Fletcher, Andrew defiantly interrupts and takes over leading the next song (*Whiplash* 01:32:21-01:36:48). As Fletcher attempts to regain control by conducting the rest of the band, the song concludes, but Andrew continues to play. His solo, an act of defiance, is his final attempt to prove himself. Surprisingly, Fletcher embraces this outburst, turning the solo into a conversation between the two. Andrew, once again under Fletcher's influence, follows his instructions throughout the solo (01:36:48-01:41:28). Upon the end of the song, Fletcher gives Andrew a smile and a nod of approval, leaving both musicians ecstatic with the outcome. At this moment, they revert to their previous dynamic. For Andrew, this momentary triumph reinforces his devotion to music but also bolsters his dependency on Fletcher's approval. Meanwhile, Fletcher resumes his pursuit of shaping a great musician. Their previously lost hopes re-emerge and become entangled once again, moving from the impossible to the too possible. Both are unable to decouple from their attachments as their object of desire appears to be closer than ever. Fletcher and Andrew's relationship itself is characterized

by cruel optimism. They are interlinked, as they depend on each other to achieve their dreams. Escaping this dynamic appears nearly impossible as it would require them to give up on their desires. Both are willing to ignore any risks they pose each other, remaining trapped in this relationship, until they either both achieve their goals or one of them is forced to forfeit.

Conclusion

In Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash*, the concept of cruel optimism manifests through the relationship between Andrew Neiman and Terence Fletcher. Set against the backdrop of an elite music conservatory, the film departs from traditional notions of Dark Academia by focusing on musical performance instead of the literary or classical. Regardless of the substitution of books for music sheets, *Whiplash* follows the traditional notions of the DA genre, utilizing the Gothic as well as romanticizing (elite) campus education. Andrew's aspiration to become a renowned jazz drummer and Fletcher's obsession with creating the next great musician drive them both into a toxic relationship of cruel optimistic attachment.

Cruel optimism reveals the complex dynamics where our desires for fulfillment can paradoxically hinder our well-being. Moreover, it is a state where individuals remain attached to aspirations despite them being ultimately harmful. Pressed further by the promises and possibilities an object represents, one finds themselves in a state of impasse remaining stagnant and simultaneously in a constant fight for survival. Cruel optimistic attachments reflect what has become increasingly unattainable, particularly in professions like academia and the arts where passion often outweighs stability. In *Whiplash*, Andrew and Fletcher's respective pursuits of their desires become entangled in a toxic cycle of expectation and disappointment – one of cruel optimism. Andrew's attachment to Fletcher as a mentor and pathway to success serves as a double-edged sword, providing both cruel suffering and the motivation to sustain his attachment. Fletcher, in turn, pushes Andrew to extremes in the belief that greatness requires sacrifice and suffering, putting in danger his own livelihood. Their dynamic illustrates how optimism, intertwined with unrealistic promises of fulfillment, can result in harmful outcomes that can outweigh any potential benefits. Andrew's relentless pursuit of Fletcher's approval and validation leads him deeper into a state of temporal survival, while Fletcher's uncompromising demands push Andrew to the brink of his physical and

mental limits. The two, bound by their mutually beneficial yet destructive relationship, struggle to depart due to it being the most promising path toward success. Finding themselves back in the same impasse feedback loop, even at times when the attachment appears to be severed for good.

Discussions on cruel optimism within academia, both in the literary and real world, commonly highlight the unfavorable conditions created by neoliberal capitalist systems that prevent any glimpse of the 'good life'. The trope of the 'crazy' artist, driven solely by passion, is well known, nonetheless, this discourse often misses what leads the artist to their inevitable madness. Relating this question to cruel optimism, one can begin to address how the pursuit of perfectionism, unrealistic standards, and empty promises of success for those in creative fields can lead to cycles of dissatisfaction and harm. This discussion however does not need to end in despair. By directly confronting the darkness in Dark Academia, we can brighten the halls of the Academy, or even our own ones, making it a bit less cruel and more optimistic.

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