

## How to enjoy a pandemic By Alma Krilic

For someone prone to anxiety and depression, I find it curious how calm and collected I have felt during the pandemic. Hopeful even. The usual waves of anxiety that my body detects before my mind does are virtually gone. I have not reached either for my chill pill or for the phone to call up a counselor even though the world as I know it seems crumbling. Strange times, indeed.

Danish film director Lars von Trier's therapist allegedly once remarked on this strange occurrence of remaining calm while the end of the world looms. The theory is that in times of impending doom in a depressed person's life, their depression appears to let up. This calmness in face of (literal) apocalypse is reflected in von Trier's character Justine played by Kirsten Dunst in the 2011 movie *Melancholia*. Justine's depression is so debilitating that she is unable to even walk or eat. But as she learns of the inevitable collision between a blue planet called 'Melancholia' and Earth, Justine seems to suddenly feel better and, at moments, she is now almost happy. One explanation for this sudden improvement in Justine's symptoms is that a depressed person tends to expect the worst and is thus better prepared for when the worst becomes a reality. She even 'sunbathes' naked in the blue light of the fast-approaching Melancholia, joyously accepting the impending catastrophe and its meaninglessness. Justine identifies with her symptom and is now in her element.

I too feel that I am in my element during this pandemic but for different reasons than von Trier's Justine. Today, everything we have been relying on to help us function in everyday life seems to have been suspended and this includes the superego's command to Enjoy!. I no longer feel the burden to seize the day and live my life to the fullest. Before the pandemic, I would see people (the Other) enjoying every moment by traveling, eating out, shopping, while I would play catch-up in my pursuit of happiness, berating myself for not going out more, for not having more friends or more sex, for not being happier. But now there is nowhere to go and nothing to do because everything is closed or canceled. Now I know that the guy 6ft away from me in the grocery store is likely spending his days the same way I am spending mine. The pressure to be happy is (temporarily?) suspended and it is a relief that I don't need to enjoy for the Other.

However, the superego's imperative to enjoy has not been rendered completely inoperable. There are still stories and advertisements circulating online about how to maintain our well-being and stay positive during the lockdown. It's as though we are being told that if there is nothing else to enjoy, then enjoy your lockdown! There seems to be little tolerance for suffering and for accepting pain as part of being human. This is not to undermine mental health issues. Mental health problems are very real. There are people who cannot afford any more suffering and need this kind of support. Perhaps I am fortunate enough that my symptom is not as severe as I thought so I can make room for uncertainty and discomfort in my life.

But if the Other cannot fully enjoy because of the pandemic, I now wonder: who is doing the enjoying for me? It is useful here to recall Slavoj Žižek's discussion on 'canned laughter.' When I come home dead tired from work, I turn on a sitcom on TV and do not need to spend that little energy I have left on laughing because the recording does the laughing for me. Žižek also gives the example of weepers hired at funerals to do the crying for me or the spinning Tibetan wheels that do the praying for me. Žižek describes this as an inter passive arrangement that we have with the Other, or stated differently, I am passive through the Other. The Other is literally doing the laughing, the crying and the praying while I can actively engage in my own activities. It does not matter that the subject directly laughing or crying is always deferred and absent. We just need to presuppose its existence. Same can be said about enjoyment: while the Other was once going dancing, traveling and living their best life for me, I would stay home and be anxious and depressed in peace and quiet. I suppose now the Other is enjoying their lockdown, coming up with reading lists and recipes while I can freely do absolutely nothing and actively engage in being miserable.

I do not to ponder my symptom for too long. Images of elderly patients clutching their oxygen masks and gasping for air always burst my bubble of self-involvement. The University discourse about COVID19 (the graphs, the charts, the statistics) do not seem to get to me the same way as watching a nurse take off her mask for the first time after a 12-hour shift, also struggling to breathe. The entire planet seems to be gasping for air. And when I do take a brief moment to think about my anxieties and depression, I can see a new anxiety on the horizon: that business will continue as usual after the pandemic.