

Thursday 29 August

1pm Milgate Room, AD Hope Bldg, SLL



Katie Cox

Superpowered Security: Cruel Optimism in Marvel's *Iron Man* Films (Exit Presentation)

Over the course of the War on Terror, it has become commonplace to note that the United States and allies now exist in a permanent state of emergency, such that once-exceptional security measures are now the norm. Katie draws on the work of Lauren Berlant to argue that national security has become an object of cruel optimism: a fantasy that sustains the nation, like the promise of 'the good life', but which proves either impossible to achieve or "too possible, and toxic". Viewing security as a cruelly optimistic attachment allows us to untangle the ways in which constant escalation of security measures wears people down, even while it provides the nation with the "conditions of possibility" that guarantee its endurance.

Katie examines Marvel's Iron Man films, using the relationship between Tony Stark and the Iron Man suit to think through the cruel optimism in the logic of security discourse. As superpowered representations of United States national security practices, the Iron Man films demonstrate an affective entanglement between national security and optimistic fantasies of technological progress, prosperity, and freedom. Nevertheless, Iron Man's relationship with his technology is nothing if not cruel; his dependence on the Iron Man suit fosters a sense of *insecurity*, such that he begins to create the threats he seeks to prevent. I argue that the Iron Man films neither fully critique or endorse United States national security policy post-9/11, but instead reflect a public struggle to reconcile the optimistic promises linked to national security in the political imagination with the lived reality of crisis as an everyday norm.

Katie Cox is a PhD student in Literature at the Australian National University, specialising in speculative fiction, popular film, and critical theory. Her research has been featured on local and international radio, and in 2018 she won the People's Choice Award for the ANU 3 Minute Thesis Grand Final.



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