# Uneasy Pleasures

## On Enjoyment and Discomfort

Erschienen in: Guilty Pleasures
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It smacks of Puritanism that we should consider ourselves "guilty" for seeking out pleasure, so to criticize the concept of "guilty pleasures" is more than fair. For centuries certain institutions have successfully stigmatized forms of enjoyment big and small, portraying them as moral offenses and demanding that people should feel bad for pursuing them. For instance, around 1800 the so-called reading addiction (*Lesesucht*), an "excessive, unregulated" consumption of books,[1] especially romance novels, was believed to cause unrealistic expectations of love and suspected of enticing masturbation, both of which supposedly threatened society.[2] Much effort was put into curtailing the dangerous pleasures of reading, and policing these delights was by no means limited to organized religion: pedagogues wrote volumes on the matter, detailing instructions on how to curb all kinds of desires.[3]

Funnily enough, exercising pressure on pleasurable actions or even curtailing them can have contrary effects. The German satirist Philander (1601–1669) reports that young women have ingeniously taken to hiding their reading materials – farces, picaresque novels, tales of romance and adventure – between book covers commonly used for devotional literature.[4] Attempts at monitoring pleasure thus give rise to practices that aim to not "be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them",[5] as Michel Foucault might put it. Just as the regulating and shaming of enjoyment continuously finds new methods and new sources of ire (from reading addiction to too much television, gaming, romantic comedies or social media), people repeatedly contest the condemnation of their pleasures and find workarounds to pursue them all the same. Disputes and conflicts surrounding pleasure, then, must be understood as important sites of cultural formation.

Sigmund Freud offers an explanation as to why societies seem so preoccupied with guilty pleasures. In *The Return of Totemism in Childhood*, he outlines the entanglement of guilt and pleasure, claiming that their intricate and dynamic relation establishes culture. He tells a "monstrous"[6] tale about brothers banished from the patriarchal horde: One day, they join forces to brutally murder and subsequently devour their mighty father, because he kept all the women to himself.[7] However, having satiated their lust for violence and women (their sisters and mothers), the brothers start to feel rather bad for

their actions. A “sense of guilt made its appearance”, the sons wish to reconcile with their father and to commemorate him; to that end, they start celebrating the totem meal.[8] Then it dawns on them that without a common enemy, brotherly solidarity will erode and every single one of them might end up on the menu. They decide on some rules to keep their desires in check (no killing of the totem animal/the father; no incest), and they punish those who selfishly pursue them. These rules lay the very foundation of culture for Freud. He even claims that the “two driving factors”, the sense of guilt and the rebellious will to seek pleasure, “never became extinct”.[9] From this point of view, culture is *perpetually* born out of guilty pleasures. While I certainly would not take Freud’s speculative tale at face value, his analysis of the strange amalgamations of guilt and pleasure raises the question of whether both are involved in bringing forth culture and cultural practices to this day. Do affects and feelings perform cultural work? And if so: how exactly?

Consider a person who enjoys dime novels or *WrestleMania*, but also feels uneasy about it, so they call their pastime a “guilty pleasure”. As Paul Buckermann asserts, the contemporary practice of touting guilty pleasures should be considered a twisted form of conspicuous consumption that aims to signify high social status. Displaying “cultivated taste in the art of the working or job-seeking class” while simultaneously “discredit[ing] lowbrow culture as shameful” and ultimately “legitimizing and reinforcing social inequalities”, Buckermann considers asserting guilty pleasures a form of distinction tinged with snobbism.[10] By authentically purveying interest in artefacts of low cultural value,[11] the practice dissimulates what it is doing, namely performing high social status. In other words, the publicly narrated mix of guilt and pleasure does cultural work: it creates (class) difference.

A different form of distinction can be found in the ironic consumption of goods deemed aesthetically inferior, like watching reality TV “unseriously” and thus keeping the pleasures aligned with the “masses” at arm’s length. This phenomenon is older than we might think – Henry James mentions a similar mode of consumption when he refers to a theatrical staging of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: “we attended this spectacle just in order *not* to be beguiled, just in order to enjoy with ironic detachment and, at the very most, to be amused ourselves at our sensibility should it prove to have been trapped and caught.”[12] To James, being caught up in the theatrical performance and experiencing it as pleasurable means that one has failed to keep the necessary distance. This detached attitude seems to have developed in response to the newly emerging mass popular culture of 19th century America, as Hugh McIntosh argues. To experience popular artefacts and, indeed, the world in a detached and unemotional way even came to signify Americanness – a society of estranged individuals that do not wish to form tight bonds as a national populace.[13] If a person subscribes to the aesthetic judgment that popular culture is a sensorial trap designed to ensnare the masses, as James suggests, then succumbing to the spectacle might well be experienced as a guilty pleasure. In this case, the strangely mixed feeling works toward denigrating popular culture and reinforcing the Western canon, yes, but also toward shaping nationhood.

Johannes Franzen talks about another related experience: guilty displeasures or the discomfort people feel when disliking a work of art that is deemed to be “good” (in a given context).[14] Recently on Bluesky, he asked: “Do you have ‘guilty displeasures’? As in shame about aesthetic displeasure, meaning: you should like a book, a film, a piece of music, but you just can’t.”[15] The first type of response consisted in people rushing forward to confess. And I confess: I confessed. I confessed that I do not like Goethe’s *Faust*. I can appreciate its significance for literature, for German literary history, for the conception of a national literature and, by extension, nationhood, sure, but I do not *enjoy* it. On the contrary, it really displeases me – and I feel uneasy about this. Why confess though, why take part in this strange unburdening on social media? Because the effects of power/knowledge have turned us into “confessing animal[s]”, as Foucault notes,[16] and because confession is a predominant mode of producing Western subjectivity? Professing unease regarding my distaste of *Faust* as an aesthetic experience makes the weight of the literary canon palpable; it gives the pressure shape. Might it make it easier to handle? The canon unfortunately seems tied to my subjectivity as a scholar of German literature. German Studies are not really preoccupied with *Faust* these days, so it has no impact on my career if I dislike the tragedy or never publish on it. I know this, but still, the guilty displeasure stays with me. It is surprisingly tangible. And then, another feeling arises in me. Pleasure rears its head: slight giddiness accompanies my disavowal of the canonical text, sharply followed by – you guessed it – another feeling of unease, because not liking *Faust* accomplishes very little in the grand scheme of things and confessing to this pitiful rebellion makes it even worse, etc., etc. Many feelings are enmeshed and at work here.

Then there is the other type of response to Franzen’s question about guilty displeasures. It was, to put it bluntly (and many did): “No.” No, I do not feel bad for my displeasures. Malaise does not take hold of me when I dislike something widely held to be aesthetically pleasing or culturally valuable. I feel neither discomfort nor shame, and certainly no guilt. The weight of a canon – any canon, even a subcultural one – has no power over me. This disavowal can come across as a putdown: how bourgeois of *you* to feel guilty and to confess entirely made-up sins. Now in the second type of response, people deny feeling uneasy about experiencing displeasure and, genuinely, they might feel nothing. But they also purvey this in a confessional mode. They confess that they have nothing to confess and in doing so, they shape their subjectivity just the same. Stating guilty (dis)pleasure is a way of producing distinction, yes, but so is its refusal; we cannot *not* perform subjectivity.

To be sure, the subjectivity performed here is different from the one connected to the first type of response. And “guilt” is indeed a strong word in the context of aesthetic preferences. Feeling guilty after committing murder – let’s keep it Freudian – hopefully is very different from feeling apprehensive because you dislike a work of art. So, alright, let us take it down a notch and call it uneasy displeasure.

The non-feeling of something (unease) about another feeling (displeasure) is reminiscent of James' ironic detachment, with a few shifts. 1) The aesthetic object that affects the audience has been switched. What is kept at bay here is not popular culture as such, but rather artefacts that belong to any canon; it could be the canon of popular culture (think Taylor Swift or Marvel films), it could be highbrow literature or simply the stuff your in-group likes. 2) While James decidedly spoke of an ironically distanced "we", the subjectivity produced by this version of detachment is highly individualistic. Its pleasures and displeasures are its own, they do not adhere to norms. Personal taste is what makes this subject unique, what makes it distinguishable from others. But not complying with norms has paradoxically become the new norm today, and this is intimately connected to the paradigm of flexibility. 3) There is a shift from first- to second-order feelings. James was guarding himself against sensational pleasure *tout court*. The reservation these subjects display, however, does not refer to pleasure or displeasure as such, instead it relates to feelings about feelings. These are much messier to deal with on a personal level, more unclear, and, from the perspective of research, more difficult to pin down and trace in their cultural effects.

Uneasy pleasures and displeasures, then, might be connected to "the inherently ambiguous affect of affective disorientation",[17] as Sianne Ngai puts it, adding that certain feelings "become maximized when we are most uncertain if the 'field' of their emergence is subjective or objective".[18] Is this the case for uneasy pleasures? In certain areas, they crop up because subjective and objective dimensions simply collide: think of the subjective pleasure of flying on holiday, marred by the objective knowledge that aviation speeds up climate change. Where these two facets of the feeling come from seems clear enough, though maybe not how they get mixed up with each other. Things are even more complicated in the aesthetic realm, since there are no objective criteria for enjoyable or disagreeable art, and personal preferences are never wholly subjective. Instead, individual taste is shaped by a myriad of external factors like (ir)regular exposure to a specific aesthetic, historic changes, processes of canon formation, cultural pressures of all kinds, etc. Uncertainty about where feelings about works of art emerge from is inescapable. Maybe uneasy pleasures are best located along the tension between "a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about *what* one is feeling"[19] and the "feeling of feeling uncertain *about* what one is feeling".[20] Or, more precisely, they shuffle around somewhere between the first-order feelings of unease and pleasure, the second-order feeling that emanates from the fact that I cannot tell whether I am feeling unease or pleasure or both, and finally a third-order feeling that emerges because I do not know how I feel about not being able to tell what I am feeling. Those are a lot of shifting and overlapping feelings with varying degrees of intensity.

Affects, feelings, emotions, passions. They are social in nature, shaped by media, subject to historical and cultural change. And they are inherently productive. Consider the prevalence of resentment today, which unfortunately guides how too many people make political choices. Or think of the explosion of cringe discourse[21] in the last ten years: sure, even before it was called "cringe", you could experience embarrassment for another person, and this was sometimes accompanied by a hint of malicious glee –

*Fremdscham* combined with *Schadenfreude* (German seems to have developed two words to pinpoint this feeling's "mix"). The advent of the term "cringe" to name this specific affect and to locate its impact on a corporeal and an emotive level, however, has expanded our capacity to describe a cringe-worthy moment. We probably even *feel* cringe more frequently, and because it crops up more often, it invites us to reflect on how and why we experience cringe at all. By slipping into our vocabulary, this term has made us more attuned to awkward situations, to when and how they arise and dissipate.

Feelings are productive in the sense that they shape lived realities. If we do not attend to resentment, cringe, uneasy pleasures and other feelings in their baffling nuances, it only obfuscates the cultural work they do. Some questions we might ask when mapping these feelings and their impact: when and why do they appear? How and by whom are they produced – by which institutions and media, which affective economies – and where do they go?[22] What effects do they have on individuals and collectives, and on situations? How do they enable us to navigate social interactions? How does their circulation cause conflict, or the opposite? Which practices do they bring forth? Which functions do they perform? What might they aim to regulate or irritate, and what do they strive toward, be it strategically or unintentionally? Finding methods to elaborate on these questions will entail a certain discomfort. But feeling uneasy about what we encounter in the world is a driving force of research – and it can give way to pleasure, too.

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