

Guilty Pleasures as Conspicuous Consumption? – Blog des Kulturwissenschaftlichen Instituts Essen (KWI-Blog)

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Guilty Pleasures as Conspicuous Consumption? Cultural Omnivores, Snobbery, and the Distinguished Taste for Authentic Trash Erschienen in: Guilty Pleasures Von: Paul Buckermann

Only snobs should know guilty pleasures. Talking about having guilt from consuming lowbrow culture is an act of distinction because it implicitly refers to the guilty person's actual, more distinguished home turf of highbrow culture. In the case of guilty pleasures, "[t]aste classifies, and it classifies the classifier"¹ while it simultaneously discredits certain mass cultural goods by attributing shame to their appreciation. Only the snob, who aspires to or affirms high social status through expressively preferring superior art *and* punching down on the inferior, can have guilty pleasures, while the assumed masses themselves shouldn't feel too bad about enjoying what is aligned smoothly to their vulgar taste.

While snobbery itself may be a "guilty pleasure" in a world formally committed to equality, tolerance, and respect,² in this article I discuss snobbish aspects of guilty pleasures from consuming so-called trash and lowbrow culture. In doing so, I (a) limit myself to a certain *type* of guilty pleasure, (b) conceptualize it as a twisted form of *conspicuous consumption* in times of *cultural omnivorousness*, and (c) highlight the snob's thirst for authentic trash as a strategy for addressing *status insecurity* and countering threatened *high-status denigration*. My aim in reflecting on what I understand as a *re-snobization* of eclectic consumption is, however, not only to provoke Virginia Woolf's question, "Am I a Snob?", and subsequent reflections on one's own relational position in a harsh struggle for status.³ Sociological insights into the role of distinctions for reinforcing and legitimating social structures should also problematize the more ironic turns on guilty pleasures, because, as Theodor Adorno put it, "[n]ot even the subtlest snobbism has *dégoût* for its objective precondition, but rather insulates the snob from its realization."⁴

When it comes to a sociological link between social status, cultural and educational capital, legitimacy of taste of artistic categories, and power, guilty pleasures are not just any distinction. In a twisted way, these are what Thorstein Veblen⁵ has dubbed "conspicuous consumption": a *certain* mode of consumption of *certain* goods that, as a "means of reputability"⁶, mainly aims at demonstrating the abundance of resources and competent capacities necessary for consumption that goes beyond securing the "bare necessities of life".⁷ However, when it comes to the consumption of cultural artefacts,

guilty pleasures show stark differences to the classical understanding of conspicuous consumption. While in 1899 Veblen confined this consumption to “valuable”, “noble”, “best”, and “excellent”⁸ goods, the guilty pleasures of today refer to the exact opposite: affordable and easily accessible trash, industrially produced mass culture, lowbrow art, proletarian aesthetics, and vulgar entertainment. Here, a sociological riddle appears: How is it possible that the consumption of less favorable, cheap, and “ignoble”⁹ cultural goods serves as a signal of high social status?

The first answer lies, I think, in what since the late 20th century has been described in sociology of cultural consumption as the “cultural omnivore”.¹⁰ This eclectic cultural appreciation profile is found among high-status individuals and defined by preferences that cross vertical cultural classifications as well as branches of art and their genres. The initial sociological irritation grew from the difference to what was previously professed in sociology, namely that consumers with a high socioeconomic status are univorous snobs who exclusively prefer sophisticated highbrow culture. Venturing from this discovery, guilty pleasures could be one option to show an immense range of cultural interests even reaching the most infamous sectors of art and entertainment. But if omnivorousness is distinguished from two types of univore, the proletarian and the elitist snob, why do guilty pleasures still refer to a feeling of shame in dissonant taste preferences?

Early explanations for omnivorousness by Peterson et al. referred to broader cultural shifts of inclusivity and tolerance among Western elites, but the guilt in guilty pleasures makes these rather respectful interpretations unconvincing. Hence, I argue that talking about one’s guilty pleasures does not actually erode cultural classifications and social hierarchies, for instance by showing that high-status consumers actually do enjoy lowbrow (or even better: lowbrow and outsider) art, too. On the contrary, the performance of guilty pleasure functions as a contemporary form of distinction that proves cultivated taste in the art of the working or job-seeking class. The effect is far greater than it would be in the performance of taking pleasure in the so-called highbrow end of the arts. While this argument draws from the omnivorousness thesis, guilty pleasure seems to also show a re-snobization of cultural consumption because it equally discredits lowbrow culture as shameful. If this argument proves convincing throughout the text (and if Bourdieu was fundamentally right¹¹), guilty pleasures are a contemporary technique for legitimizing and reinforcing social inequalities. First, some clarifications need to be spelled out about which type of guilty pleasures can serve as snobbish distinction in times of cultural omnivorousness.

Public and Private Cultural Guilty Pleasures

The act of sleeping naked with a hairdryer blowing on your face at home seems not worth reflecting on, let alone talking about. Nevertheless, a young woman in Berlin does express feeling guilty for experiencing a “weird” pleasure in the sensation of sheet-to-skin-and-warm-air-to-face. Compared to, say, causing thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean, such an innocent joy should not really be capable of producing

serious guilt. From a relative perspective, the basic idea of guilty pleasures can easily be rejected. Asked about her guilty pleasures in her Netflix portrait “Pretend it’s a city”, directed by Martin Scorsese in 2021, Fran Lebowitz answers in this manner:

I think it’s unbelievable that there’s a phrase such as “guilty pleasure.” Unless your pleasure is killing people. My pleasures are absolutely benign, by which I mean, no one dies. No one is molested. No, I don’t feel guilty for having pleasure. We live in a world where people don’t feel guilty for killing people. People don’t feel guilty for putting babies in cages at the border. I should feel guilty, for what? For having two bowls of spaghetti?

This comparison may reduce some moral pressure from the unhealthy, frivolous, or unproductive little joys that we keep in secret. However, killing, on the one hand, and binge-eating pasta while binge-watching *Netflix* documentaries, on the other, are in fact incommensurable in regard to their sources of guilt, as Dalton recently pointed out with respect to guilty pleasures:

The origin of the kind of “guilt” at issue [in the case of guilty pleasures] does not stem then from anything which is morally transgressive in their content, nor is it the allure of the forbidden which draws us to them or makes our indulgence in them somehow shameful. Instead, the kind of “guilt” in question here [...] is, oddly, epistemological [...]. [T]his “guilt” stems from an expectation we have concerning the proper function of our aesthetic experiences; namely, that they should do more than merely entertain, distract, or delight us, but should instead confront us with some “truth” about the nature of our existence, and/or guide us to some “reality” concerning the state of our world.¹²

Even if guilty pleasures are confined to cultural consumption in this sense, another distinction is important: Is the act done in secret or is it publicly narrated? Regarding Lebowitz’s spaghetti, this is a crucial question when pasta becomes genuinely public, like in the case of high-end gourmet food writing celebrating *mac-and-cheese* as an “authentic” dish.¹³

Narrowing down guilty pleasures to public narration of cultural consumption, there is another aspect that needs to be considered: the distinguished mode of consuming trash. Take Slavoj Žižek’s prelude to his list of guilty pleasure movies for *Film Comment* in 2006:

The problem is that I never feel guilty about enjoying films that are generally dismissed as trash. I would have felt truly guilty only for enjoying pretentious art frauds like Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* or Bergman’s *Cries and Whispers* – two candidates for the worst film of all time. So the films listed here are not only films that I enjoy immensely, but films that – although considered as insignificant commercial trash, political propaganda, artistic failures, or, in the best case, charming commercial films not to be taken seriously – are to be taken seriously.¹⁴

Here, the intellectual not only assesses certain mass cultural products as themselves enjoyable and “serious” (as in *ernst* vs. *Unterhaltung* [entertainment] in the German distinction between *E- und U-Kultur*) but he even considers enjoying certain highbrow culture as embarrassing. Different from the pleasures of lower classes, the philosopher makes a public statement that, I argue, has to be considered as a contemporary form of conspicuous consumption. This particular form is only possible because it builds on the distinction between omnivorous elites (who expressively cross classifications and genres) vs. univorous snobs (who exclusively and expressively prefer highbrow culture). But still, the question remains as to why consuming a cultural product considered to be of low aesthetic and intellectual quality should display (a real or aspired) high social status?

Guilty Pleasures as Conspicuous Consumption?

Let’s look again at Veblen’s original introduction of the term conspicuous consumption. Often related to practices framed as leisure, a certain competent consumption displays an abundance of means and time, which are not immediately required for labor and reproduction: “the means of showing pecuniary strength [in highly organized industrial societies], and so of gaining or retaining a good name, are leisure and a conspicuous consumption of goods”¹⁵. Such a “waste of time and effort”¹⁶ is obvious in the idea of guilty pleasures, which likewise turns them into a sign of abundances: “in order to be reputable it must be wasteful”¹⁷ – and what could be more wasteful than spending money and time on so-called trash (musicals, TV, literature, film, music) instead of seeing the latest staging of Hamlet?

In such classics, Veblen wrote, the “standards of virtues – archaism and waste” meet “scholastic respectability”.¹⁸ Classic work of art (and the proficiency in certain foreign languages, too) “serve the decorative ends of leisure-class learning better than any other body of knowledge, and hence they are an effective means of reputability”. In the case of guilty pleasures, not classics but the opposite function as vehicles of reputability. But, remembering Žižek’s list, it is not only about the object of consumption but rather the way of consuming it. For Veblen, conspicuous consumption is fundamentally based on a distinguished mode of consuming: “Closely related to the requirement that the gentleman must consume freely and of the right kind of goods, there is the requirement that he must know how to consume them in a seemly manner.”¹⁹ An interpretation of, let’s say, Buffy the Vampire Slayer as radically feminist mirrors this extra layer to guilty pleasures that increasingly indicate a waste of time and abundance of intellectual means: “The cultivation of the aesthetic faculty requires time and application”²⁰.

The Re-Snobization of the Cultural Omnivore

The cultural omnivorousness thesis claims that “omnivorousness is replacing snobbishness among Americans of highbrow status”²¹. This shift “from snobbish exclusion to omnivorous appropriation” doesn’t mean that everything is consumed “*indiscriminantly*” but rather “signifies an openness to appreciating everything.” Again,

after Bourdieu it cannot only be about the object but also the way of appropriating it. Compared to the lower classes, the high-status omnivore “contrasts unreflective consumption for personal enjoyment with intellectualized appreciation.” Understanding popular culture as serious or radically feminist, for example, is conditioned by an advanced “aesthetic understanding”, and this is why omnivores still “appreciate and critique it [here, country music] in the light of some knowledge of the genre, its great performers, and links to other cultural forms, lowbrow and highbrow.” When omnivores “mark symbolic boundaries” through this type of conspicuous consumption, guilty pleasure adds yet another layer because the respective product is put in a realm of guilt due to not meeting demands (see Dalton above) regarding “what art is actually good for.”²²

While early studies on omnivorousness explained the new openness in consumption through a general Western trend in inclusivity, tolerance, and respect at the end of the 20th century, several questions have been since posed (and Bourdieusian answers given) about where omnivorousness or “dissonance”²³ in cultural practices actually come from.²⁴ For example, it is assumed that cultural eclecticism shows “cultural mobility”²⁵, a competence considered to increase employability in certain job markets.

However, taking “guilt” and “pleasure” seriously into account, sociological questions on the role of authenticity²⁶ in omnivorousness are to me a suitable key for the intricate riddle of guilty pleasures as a form of twisted contemporary conspicuous consumption. The high-status thirst for “real” lowbrow culture, indifferent to elite assessment, can be rooted in a fundamental insecurity inherent in highbrow consumption today. Consuming high-status cultural products is risky because of a quasi-sociological awareness of conspicuous consumption: Someone may understand the performance of distinguished taste as a mere instrument “to gain the extrinsic rewards (social and material) attached to the status attained”. This fear of “high status denigration”²⁷ can be countered with a search for authenticity and disinterestedness. After I have developed the problem of guilty pleasures to this point, Hahl et al.’s argument supports the explanation of why guilty pleasures are based in a general trend towards omnivorousness but also show signs of re-snobization: “public demonstration of appreciation for authentic (lowbrow) culture can help address lurking suspicions of authenticity. Because such culture was not developed to impress elite audiences, the elite consumer who appreciates such culture appears to be authentic as well.”

Real pleasure found in trash culture then indicates authenticity and disinterestedness, because “insofar as low-status culture is produced without any awareness that it might impress elite audiences as aesthetically sophisticated, elite audiences can generally assume it was produced in a spirit of disinterestedness with respect to highbrow standards”. However, guilt still mirrors a feeling of inadequacy or insecurity in regard to one’s (real or aspired) social position and taste. When “from the snob to the parvenu it is only a step”²⁸, talking about guilty pleasures is not only a form of conspicuous consumption and snobbish distinction enabled by widespread omnivorousness but also a technique to fend off suspicions of elitism and instrumental snobbism.

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