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Jennifer Friedlander

Book Review Essay: “On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners” by Robert Pfaller

As the contemporary moment witnesses unprecedented levels of neoliberal horrors, Robert Pfaller makes the utterly compelling and refreshing argument that pleasure may be our strongest weapon of opposition. With uncompromising philosophical rigor, Pfaller brilliantly elucidates how under-appreciated psychoanalytic insights pave a path for combatting the hegemony of asceticism, in which societies zestfully pursue prohibitions and limitations to their pleasures. Such passionate concessions not only limit our capacity for experiencing pleasure, but also interfere with our ability to resist the increasingly repressive encroachments that threaten our social and political wellbeing.

In addressing this seemingly odd tendency for subjects to flee from their enjoyment, Pfaller develops the concept of “interpassivity.” In opposition to the much-lauded development in the 1990s towards “interactivity” in contemporary art, in which spectators are made to participate in an artwork’s production, interpassive artworks are “not only completely produced” without a spectator’s involvement, but are also “completely consumed as well.” (Pfaller, p. 18). Not limited to art, similar phenomenon can be discovered in everyday life, often much to the surprise of its practitioners. Occurrences of consuming and enjoying via a surrogate include tourists who “immediately hold a camera up to their eyes for protection when looking at a monument,” (p. 18) the “bibliomaniac,” a voracious book-buyer who displays or gives books as gifts, but never reads them, and the all-too-familiar academic who feels a deep sense of accomplishment after photocopying a stack of articles as if “the photocopier might have just ‘read’ the texts for [him]” (p. 28). There are even interpassive alcoholics who stay sober by filling their guests’ glasses, thereby delegating their consumption/enjoyment to others (p. 114). In each of these cases a double delegation is at work: one must delegate one’s *pleasure* to “a consumption machine” (i.e. camera, bookshelf, photocopier, friend); and one must delegate the *belief* that the substitute consumer can enjoy on our behalf. The inheritor of such a belief need not exist, but rather takes the form of an “observing agency.” Unlike Freud’s “omniscient” superego which can observe our unspoken wishes, this “naïve observer” confers the efficacy of the symbolic substitution solely on the basis of outward appearances. Only our observable actions count to this observer; intentions, thoughts, desires do not register in this realm. The gullibility of this observing agency is not a limitation to its efficiency, but rather an asset—and, as we will see, can open up possibilities for subjects to experience their own pleasure.

In order to consider this argument, first we must note that, among the wide-ranging psychoanalytic developments that emerge from Pfaller’s insights regarding interpassivity, is a radical suggestion regarding the relationship between obsessional neurosis and perversion. Pfaller offers a new dimension to Freud’s claim that obsessional neurosis constitutes the “negative of perversion” in the context of the subject’s ability to experience pleasure (p. 30). Pfaller demonstrates that the compulsive activities of obsessional neurotics

follow a structure of disavowal similar to the defensive structure at work in interpassivity. Interpassive subjects flee from pleasure by designating, against their conscious awareness, a mechanism to take the place of consuming an ambivalent pleasure—something that is “outwardly loved, but latently hated” (p. 115). In an analogous way, obsessional neurotics engage in symbolic rituals, which, against their better judgment, act as a defense against the intrusion of the Other—but a defense which winds up bringing the subject into relationship with what is being avoided. Both the obsessive neurotic and the interpassive subject know very well that their rituals are nonsense, but they carry them out devotedly. But identifying obsessional neurosis’s adherence to the logic of disavowal, Pfaller notes, risks contradicting a foundational psychoanalytic dictum: disavowal is the defense mechanism characteristic of perversion, whereas repression is the underlying mechanism of obsessional neurosis. This complication is deepened by an additional discovery—namely, that interpassive enjoyment is experienced by some subjects as pleasurable, but not by others. Although both obsessives and perverts engage with illusions of the other—illusions that they themselves do not believe in, but practice nevertheless—it is only perverts who are capable of enjoying this deception. It is not that perverts mistake the delegated pleasure for their own, but precisely the converse: because they are aware that a substitution is at work, they can derive a “mischievous pleasure” from it. The “better knowledge” contained in the first clause of the logic of disavowal [“I know very well...”] enhances the capacity for the pleasure implied in the second clause [“but even so...”]. Here we encounter the paradoxical situation in which our very knowledge of an illusion enables us to be more fully taken in by it.

From the homologies between obsessive neurosis and perversion Pfaller generates two provocative questions: First, given their structural overlap and the acknowledged pleasure experienced by the pervert, might obsessive neurosis also be “determined by the pleasure principle?” (p. 164); and second, “how can there be such strong similarities between obsessional neurosis and perversion if they are founded on...different mechanisms?” (p. 172). In Pfaller’s innovative reading of Freud, the first question leads to the explanation for the second.

The solution to the enigma of both the obsessive neurotic’s and the pervert’s adherence to a structure of disavowal lies specifically in the observation that the pervert experiences pleasure in the illusion, whereas the obsessive experiences displeasure. Pfaller ingeniously argues that the repression, which is characteristic of obsessional neurosis, is secondary to disavowal; the repression at stake in obsessional neurosis can be understood as referring to the pleasure gained via disavowal. As Pfaller explains, “the pleasure that [initially] comes about through disavowal is repressed” (172). Repression in this case functions in a similar fashion to Freud’s “neurotic unpleasure” in that it transforms “pleasure into unpleasure” (197). This “unpleasure” is then “pursue[d] as though [it] were pleasurable” (p. 198). Such a structure, Pfaller demonstrates, can be witnessed in the contemporary fervor of neo-liberal subjects to pursue “displeasure”—in the form of austerity measures, surveillance, restrictions, regulations, etc.—“as though it were joy” (p. 204).

This suggestion that pleasure can be had without being experienced as pleasurable has wide-ranging implications for understanding both the foundation of the psyche and the contemporary cultural moment. Another recent book, Aaron Schuster’s *The Trouble with Pleasure*, has taken up the ways in which the ostensibly discontented practice of complaining might be understood as a pleasurable activity if we understand “that real joy has nothing to do with feelings per se but consists in the devotion” (Schuster 2016, p. 3). For “the truly gifted complainer,” complaining takes on an interpassive structure since, as Schuster puts it, “it is no longer the person who complains but the complaint that complains itself in and through the person” (Schuster 2016, p. 18).

An example from the BBC sketch comedy series, *Little Britain*, demonstrates how complaint can take on dimensions of both perverse and neurotic relationships to pleasure in the sense that Pfaller lays out. The character, Daffyd Thomas (created and played by Matt Lucas) continuously complains that he is “the only Gay” in his Welsh village of Llanddewi Brefi—a lament that he repeats to comic effect since we are shown that Daffyd’s community is populated with many other gay figures and the people he meets are uniformly unfazed by Daffyd’s sexuality. As Andrew Bolt, writing for the *Herald Sun* describes, Daffyd persistently “outs himself in a tiny Welsh village, only to be disappointed at meeting acceptance, indifference to his

sexuality, and more gays than he imagined or wanted...The fun is in recognising that Daffyd is out of time, protesting against a bigotry he can no longer find” (Bolt, 2008). But why might his complaint be a source of “fun” for viewers of the show, yet a “sad passion” for Daffyd? Daffyd’s incessant complaint, at first, appears as a perverse enterprise, in which the “hint of deviance” is not a message sent by real members of “a repressive societ[y],” but rather is the “intrinsic source of pleasure” (Pfaller, p. 140). As Pfaller explains, the pervert’s “contemptuousness rests on an illusion without an owner and not on the contempt of real members of society” (p. 141). “Self-contempt,” Pfaller argues, inaugurates pleasure through “undermining all ego-ideals” (p. 142). But for Daffyd’s complaint to follow fully the logic of perversion, his pleasure would come from inhabiting a “suspended illusion”—from committing to the belief that he was “the only gay in the Village,” despite his better knowledge that he encounters many gay people in the Village. Embracing the illusion *as* an illusion (without mistaking it for reality nor dismissing it as false) is required to activate the “psychic state” of “play,” in which the subject becomes gripped with fascination.

Spectators are invited to enjoy the suspended illusion, but for Daffyd, we come to see, the complaint manifests in an obsessive neurotic form. He seems at one with his illusion; “the self-contempt” that one derives from holding on to a belief or superstition, which one can clearly see through, has transformed into “the self-respect of faith” (p. 174). In this shift, Pfaller tells us, “the manner in which pleasure is experienced is transformed” from “joy” to “self-esteem” (p. 204). This narcissistic, ego-syntonic pleasure, which takes the form of a certain smug righteousness in Daffyd’s case, is experienced with the same intensity as object-oriented pleasure, but its roots in “happiness” must be concealed from the subject (p. 205). Daffyd, we may surmise, “is enjoying without noticing it” (p. 151). His staunch maintenance of the illusion in the face of increasingly absurd counter-evidence betrays “a passion so great” it would appear as though he were pursuing joy (p. 195). As Aaron Hicklin in *Out* describes, in the fictional Llanddewi Brefi, “even kindly church ministers and sweet old shop ladies talk about cock sucking and rimming as if they were chatting about the weather” (Hicklin 2008).

Like Daffyd, we, as subjects of contemporary neoliberal society, seem to be forgoing the pleasures of illusion and belief in favor of the ego pleasures of virtuous restraint and faith. Our enthusiastic affective displays for smoking prohibitions, for example, would appear to a naïve observer to be directed toward something that brought us delight. But this naïve observer does more than register our enjoyment through our performed acts; it also acts as an agency which confers a social, symbolic reality. As the virtual “owner” of our beliefs, the naïve observer plays a powerful role in binding together the social community. It provides the necessary fictional guise for us to engage together in shared pleasures, which put communal commitment ahead of individuals’ ego-fortification. Pfaller’s book, thus, offers nothing less than an antidote to the reactionary modes of asceticism and cynicism which threaten to rob us of both our pleasures and our public spheres.

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Bio:

Jennifer Friedlander is the Edgar E. and Elizabeth S. Pankey Professor of Media Studies at Pomona College. She is the author of *Moving Pictures: Where the Police, the Press, and the Art Image Meet* (Sheffield Hallam University Press, 1998); *Feminine Look: Sexuation, Spectatorship, and Subversion* (State University of New York Press, 2008); and *Real Deceptions: The Contemporary Reinvention of Realism* (Oxford University Press, 2017). She has published articles in *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*; *CiNéMAS: Journal of Film Studies*; *Subjectivity*; *(Re)-turn: A Journal of Lacanian Studies*; *Journal for Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*; *Subjectivity*; and *International Journal of Žižek Studies* and in several edited volumes.

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