

Interpassivity: Bonds of Pleasure and Belief¹

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Robert Pfaller characterizes the contemporary moment as beset by “neoliberal conditions” under which we encounter unprecedented forms of “pseudo-emancipatory politics, and even of self-exploitation” (Pfaller *Interpassivity* 79). According to Pfaller, an embrace of our pleasures may be our strongest weapon against these masochistic tendencies. In particular, Pfaller elucidates how under-appreciated psychoanalytic insights pave a path for combatting the hegemony of ascetism, in which societies zestfully pursue prohibitions and limitations to their pleasures. Such passionate surrenders 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 vital 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, an interpassive artwork “would observe itself, relieving observers of this task (or pleasure)” (19). Not

limited to art, similar practices occur in everyday life, often much to the surprise of their 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;” (Pfaller *On the Pleasure Principle* 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]” (28). There are even interpassive alcoholics who stay sober by filling their guests’ glasses, thereby delegating their consumption/enjoyment to others (114). In each of these cases a double delegation is at work: one delegates one’s *pleasure* to “a consumption machine” (i.e. camera, bookshelf, photocopier, friend); and one delegates the *belief* that the substitute consumer enjoys on our behalf. The inheritor of such a belief need not exist, but rather takes the form of a naïve “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 matter 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 pleasures.

In order to develop 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 (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” (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 obsessional neurotic and the interpassive subject know very well that their rituals are nonsense, but they carry them out devotedly. In identifying obsessional neurosis’s adherence to the logic of disavowal, Pfaller notes, one 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?” (164); and second, “how can there be such strong similarities between “obsessional neurosis and perversion if they are founded on...different mechanisms?” (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 characteristic of obsessional neurosis is dependent upon, and secondary to, the formation of disavowal. The repression at stake in obsessional neurosis, thus, refers to the pleasure gained via disavowal. As Pfaller explains, “the pleasure that [initially] comes about through disavowal is repressed” (172). Repression, in this case, is akin to Freud’s “neurotic unpleasure” in that it transforms “pleasure into unpleasure” (197). This “unpleasure” is then “pursue[d] as though [it] were pleasurable” (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” (204).

This argument that pleasure can be attained 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 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 18).

Consideration of this “problematic relation between individuals and their enjoyment,” provides insight into the role of pleasure in communal life. (Pfaller *Interpassivity* 42). Rather than conceive the relationship of interpassive subjects to their enjoying representatives via a mechanism of identification, Pfaller contends that they are linked by “disconnection” (43). We encounter a similar disconnection at the heart of the structure of belief. As Slavoj Žižek argues, belief maintains an objective status; subjects do not directly hold their beliefs, but rather delegate them to a non-existent, “subject supposed to believe” – one who is presumed to *really* believe, while *we* “know better” (*Interpassivity* 70).

The hitch, however, is that this very sense of disconnection gained through one's "better knowledge" *implicates*, rather than extricates, us from belief's binding grip.

The question of how we might understand the political role of this binding potential of belief points us to what, at first pass, appears to be a tension between the political projects of Pfaller and Žižek. Pfaller emphasizes the need for the big Other to play a powerful role in binding together a community. But such an agency, as we have noted, must take the specific form of a "naïve observer," which, by playing the part of the virtual "owner" of our beliefs, not only establishes our social, symbolic reality, but also registers our unacknowledged (and perhaps even un-felt) enjoyment. In particular, it provides the necessary fictional guise for us to engage together in shared pleasures, which put communal commitment ahead of individuals' ego-fortification. Žižek, in seeming opposition to Pfaller, argues that the "the task of radical politics" today is to "untie the social bond the big Other sustains" (Žižek *Lost Causes* 35).

But, I will argue, despite their apparent opposition, Žižek's and Pfaller's positions are complementary. Their compatibility can be appreciated in the context of Žižek's view that "the status of the Lacanian big Other *qua* symbolic institution is that of belief not that of knowledge." I suggest that the very distance attendant to belief that, for Žižek, is required for an ideology to take hold, can also be seen as the space of play, which for Pfaller, can prevent the beliefs of a cohesive community from hardening into faith. The seeming disparity between Žižek's and Pfaller's positions thus amounts to merely a difference in emphasis: Žižek's account of the political focuses on how to undermine unequal societies, while Pfaller's focus here is how to build and maintain solidaristic communities. When taken together, and thought in the context of the Lacanian dictum, 'the non-duped err,' a fuller sense of their combined efficacy emerges. Their insights, I suggest, help amplify Roland Barthes's vision set forth in his last set of lectures, aptly titled, *How to Live Together*.

Belief, as the mechanism which stitches together social-symbolic reality in a communal way, is movingly illustrated by the 2007 film *Lars*

and the Real Girl. Lars, a sweet but shy man, orders a life-sized blow-up doll that he pretends is his real girlfriend, whom he calls Bianca. The degree to which he believes in her reality remains somewhat ambiguous in the film, but what is significant is that *others* around him believe that he believes. Under the advice of Lars's psychologist, his friends energetically work to prop up the illusion that Bianca is real (one friend, for example, gives Bianca a job – as a model in her shop window). In fact, the community takes on the illusion so thoroughly that when Bianca is no longer a necessary prop for Lars's self-confidence to flourish, he is forced to sustain the ruse by arranging for Bianca's death. In so doing, he safeguards the big Other *qua* social-symbolic reality of the community to which he belongs, and which is built by belief.

For Pfaller, a figure such as Lars – in tandem with his therapist, who through her overt request to “follow along” acts as the guarantor that their belief is not subjective – might be seen as functioning to both bind together a community and “reconcile people with their pleasures” (Pfaller “Conversations”). Lars and his therapist, together, provide the necessary alibi for, what Pfaller describes as “allow[ing] people to overcome their hindrances against pleasure – by giving them a little command such as ‘don't be such a spoilsport.’” (Pfaller “Conversations”).

Both the filmic audience and the diegetic community within *Lars and the Real Girl* are left in some doubt about where exactly the illusion of Lars's girlfriend lies. We never can be completely certain whether Lars *really* believes that Bianca is real. From Pfaller's point of view, this doubt is necessary in maintaining a communal bond based upon belief. Doubt is not an impediment to belief, but rather its condition of possibility. Belief can be countered only by certainty, either of knowledge that contradicts the belief or of knowledge that confirms it. Thus, the temptation to replace doubt with certainty (as in the impulse to push for an answer to the question of whether Lars really believes or not) risks transforming the bond from one of belief (undergirded by doubt) to one of what Žižek describes as knowledge and Pfaller as faith. This is because the move from belief to knowledge/faith enhances the repressive function of the Other, which fuels the reactionary modes of both cynicism and

fundamentalism (for Žižek), and asceticism (for Pfaller). (Note that I am using the formation “knowledge/faith,” cautiously, since, for Žižek, unlike Pfaller, faith exists on the side of belief and is opposed to knowledge. We encounter this distinction directly in Žižek’s account of why the Church “is secretly absolutely afraid for, [the Turin] shroud to be proven to be the real thing” (“Liberation Hurts”). Scientific verification of the authenticity of the Turin Shroud would remove the doubt required for it to remain at the level of faith/“belief.” Without ‘doubt,’ faith in the Shroud shrinks into to mere, ordinary “knowledge.” “For this reason,” Žižek claims, “it is too simple to read the church’s reluctance [to seek verification] as expressing the fear that the shroud will turn out to be a fake... – perhaps it would be more horrifying if the shroud were proved to be authentic, since this positivist ‘verification’ of the belief would undermine its status and deprive it of its charisma” (Žižek *Plague* 108).

An example from the BBC sketch comedy series, *Little Britain*, demonstrates the importance of belief in binding a community as well as how the intrusion of knowledge/faith prevents the possibility of a communal bonding via the structure of externalized belief. 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, *Herald Sun*). 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 *On the Pleasure Principle* 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" (141). "Self-contempt," Pfaller argues, inaugurates pleasure through "undermining all ego-ideals" (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. As we learn from *Lars*, for belief to bind a community it is necessary to embrace the illusion *as* an illusion, without mistaking it for straightforward reality [as Daffyd seems to do] nor dismissing it as patently false [as his fellow residents of Llanddewi Brefi seem to do]. 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" (174). In this shift, Pfaller tells us, "the manner in which pleasure is experienced is transformed" from "joy" to "self-esteem" (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 (205). Daffyd, we may surmise, "is enjoying without noticing it" (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 (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" (*Out*, Hicklin).

In short, unlike *Lars*, Daffyd does not become a figure around whose "belief" a community bonds. The community refuses not only to uphold Daffyd's illusion, but also goes to lengths to correct his mistaken impression. What is missing from the world of the skit is doubt. Both Daffyd and his main interlocutor, Myfanwy, the bartender in the local pub

(who we later learn is a lesbian), stridently commit to certainties: Daffyd holds fast to the reality that there is homophobia and judgment – an indisputable reality even if, in Llanddewi Brefi, it does not appear to the case. And Myfanwy maintains the also impeccable reality that in their Village, there appears to be no homophobia and judgment³. Without doubt, both Daffyd and the Villagers are unable to form a community around the fictional guise necessary for them to engage together in shared pleasures—one which puts communal commitment ahead of individual ego-fortification, which for Daffyd takes the form of righteous pride and for the community members, open-minded fairness.

My final example aims to bring together the opposed cases of Lars and Daffyd in order to explore the how exclusionary or “pseudo-solidaristic” communities can also thrive on the bonding pleasures that come from the belief of the other. Through this illustration, I hope to point toward the additional possibility that solidaristic communities require the logic of what I call following Jacques Lacan, “the dupe.”

In his last set of public lectures, *How to Live Together*, Roland Barthes suggests that the existence of what he calls an “integrated” or “incorporated” “reject,” may be the lynchpin of all unequal societies. He explicates this notion of the reject via the figure of “the Sponge” – a term he develops from a story by Palladius, “The Nun who Feigned Madness,” detailing the early Christian monks who lived in the Egyptian Desert. The story centers on a nun who “never sat down at the table or partook of a particle of bread, but...wiped up with a sponge the crumbs from the tables” (Barthes *How to Live* 82). This nun, the exemplar of the Sponge, was ridiculed and abused by the other nuns in the monastery, but she never became angry with them. This dynamic was altered by a visit to the monastery from Saint Piteroum, who announced that he was told by an angel that among them existed “someone more pious than himself.” His visit irrevocably and perhaps disastrously – for both the Sponge and the community – displaced her from the position of Sponge. After the sisters learn of her extraordinary piety, they confess to their maltreatment of her and begin to treat her as their “spiritual mother.” “Unable to bear

the praise and honors of the sisters,” the nun disappeared from the monastery, and “nothing more of her was ever known.”

Barthes instructs us that the lesson of the Sponge is “‘be a fool, so that you may be wise.’” We may understand what he means by this in terms of the Lacanian assertion that the “non-duped err.” According to Jurgen Pieters and Kris Pint, Barthes “valorized Lacan’s dictum that ‘the non-duped err’ – an instruction regarding the importance of being taken in by the fiction of the symbolic order. Or, as Žižek puts it, “the social mask matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears it” (Žižek *How to Read Lacan* 3).

Barthes’ account of the Sponge echoes a structure similar to his earlier concept of inoculation: a strategy for neutralizing threats to and stabilizing the hegemonic order. In both cases, the very thing which is ridiculed as a snag in the smooth running of a social system turns out to be key to its success. But rather than consolidate the system, the public recognition of the Sponge’s fundamental role makes her presence in the community untenable and threatens the cohesion of the community more generally.

A formal difference between the role played by the Sponge and that of the target of inoculation may account for this disparity. In the process of inoculation, when there is a public accusation that an element in the system is flawed, those in power do not claim otherwise. Instead, they parade the weakness as an advantage. As Barthes famously describes: “Yes – you’re absolutely right – margarine IS just artificial fat! But “What does it matter, *after all*,...when it goes further than butter and cost...less?” (Barthes *Mythologies* 42). Or in the contemporary version: when it was widely publicized that many leading pizza chains use fake cheese atop their pizzas, some clever marketers boasted: “Yes – you’re absolutely right – our cheese IS artificial! But what does it matter! Our pizzas are vegan!”⁴

Within the framework of inoculation, the nuns would say, “Yes! You’re absolutely right – this nun IS so pious – that is why she has

sacrificed herself to act as an object of ridicule in order to keep the community together.” But, instead, the nuns take St. Piteroum’s revelation as transformative: they now see themselves as having been mistaken and undertake to show remorse. This move can be seen as retrospectively justifying their earlier mistreatment of the Sponge – the implicit message here is that if she *really* was crazy [rather than holy], it would have been okay to ridicule her.

It turns out then that, unexpectedly, the conservative strategy of inoculation helps point toward a more progressive lesson for living together – a way of highlighting a radical acceptance, regardless of one’s “true” status. To be specific, despite its conservative role, inoculation has a radical political potential, which lies in its recognition of the constitutive role of appearance, which allows one to belong, whether one is holy or nuts. By allowing oneself to be duped by appearance and by appreciating the role of appearances in creating reality, we see how an unequal society might transform into a solidaristic community.

In sum, the nuns fall into the cynical trap of thinking that they can correct the Symbolic order’s deceitful rejection of the Sponge. By contrast, the subject who allows herself to be duped, inhabits the truth that, deceitful or not, it is the symbolic fiction that structures reality. The cynic (or non-duped) follows knowledge even when it contradicts what one sees; the duped, by contrast, follow appearances, even when they contradict what one knows. For example, for the duped, it would not matter if the nun is indeed the holiest among them: as long as she wears a rag on her head and mops up all the crumbs, she fulfills the consolidating role.

As the residents of Llandewi Brefi demonstrate, the endeavor to step outside of the symbolic fiction in order to look at reality objectively, fails to bond a community. Rather, as the case of Lars shows, it is only by submitting to the authority of the fiction that we can live together in shared pleasures and solidaristic bonds.

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 is 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 insights, thus, offer 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.

¹ I want to thank the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* for permission to re-use and expand upon my recension of Robert Pfaller’s *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners* in this essay.

² I develop this analysis further in *Real Deceptions: The Contemporary Reinvention of Realism* (Oxford UP, 2017).

³ This is similar to the phenomenon that Žižek describes from Claude Levi-Strauss’s *Structural Anthropology* in which native inhabitants of a South American village are asked to draw a map of their village. One group depicted the village as having houses arranged in a circle and the other group drew two housing areas divided by a border. The “reality” of the layout of the village could easily be determined, Žižek points out, by viewing it from above in a helicopter. But hiring a helicopter to adjudicate the situation would be the mistake that the cynical non-duped subject would make. By endeavoring to look behind (or above) the fiction in order to “obtain the undistorted view of reality,” the cynic misses the truth. It is only the duped subject who, by entering into the fiction of how the village is laid out, can arrive at the truth--the Real of the distortions that shape how reality is perceived. As Žižek tells us, “This is what Lacan has in mind when he claims that *the very distortion and/or dissimulation is revealing*: what emerges via the distortions of the accurate representation of reality is the real, i.e., the trauma around which social reality is structured.” (Žižek *Interrogating* 232).

⁴ I owe this example to Klemens Brugner.

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