

Call for Participation

Workshop: Confessions of Bad Taste: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Guilty Pleasures

Date: June 2–4, 2027

Location: [Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities Essen \(KWI\)](#)

Performances of shamelessness *and* mechanisms of shaming define our contemporary world. Yet not so long ago, confessions of supposedly shameful activities were accompanied by a sense of glee. Enjoying rom-coms, reality TV, or fast food was framed as a "guilty pleasure" – and reflexively dismissed as trivial and self-explanatory. However, closer inspection reveals guilty pleasures to be a complex and contradictory discursive phenomenon. The workshop "Confessions of Bad Taste" sets out to investigate guilty pleasures as a specific speech act. What is at stake in the public performance of guilty pleasures? Where, exactly, does the desire to confess one's own guilty pleasures come from? And why do we take such delight in doing this?

We can distinguish several recurring assumptions regarding the act of confessing guilty pleasures: It is viewed as an innocent practice and topic of conversation; as the result of disciplinary regimes that suppress pleasure and joy; as a subversive act that destabilizes systems of cultural value; or as an affirmative act that reinforces distinctions by devaluing popular taste. In such approaches, guilty pleasures are tied to the globalization of consumer culture and thus understood as products of the 20th and 21st century. But similar discursive phenomena date back at least to the Enlightenment. They are linked to the development of overseas trade, colonialism, and the onset of bourgeois society, leading to the first so-called consumer revolution. For millennia, what was seen as superfluous consumption inconsistent with a person's status was the subject of moral condemnation, as discourses on luxury and greed widely indicate. This changed in the 18th century, giving way to more ambivalent stances toward consumption, which is why the workshop proposes to probe the longer and unwritten history of guilty pleasures. Are there other historical periods or geographical areas that might shed a different light on the phenomena?

Through interdisciplinary exchange, the workshop aims to explore the historically and culturally shifting relationships between consumption, status, value judgments, and affect that are articulated through performances of guilty pleasures. We welcome proposals from a diverse range of disciplinary, theoretical, methodological, and empirical perspectives. Submissions from media studies, social anthropology, global history, religious studies, linguistics, psychology, gender studies, ethnography, philosophy, economics, political science, and the digital humanities are encouraged.

Contributions may address, but are not limited to, the following thematic areas:

- How has consumption that is inconsistent with status, and the articulation of such consumption, been studied through **quantitative research methods**? What role do historical dynamics and shifts play here?
- Which **modes of expression and figures of speech** characterize the way people talk about guilty pleasures? Which cultural traditions do they originate from, and what can they reveal about the discourse surrounding guilty pleasures?
- How has the discourse surrounding guilty pleasures become the subject of artistic representation in **visual art, film, literature** and other media? Where has it become a question of **aesthetic theory**? Does the discourse on guilty pleasures say something about our understanding of art, and vice versa?
- In what ways do contemporary **digital infrastructures** alter the emergence, performance, and experience of guilt and pleasure? Does this constitute a continuation of pre-digital mass communication, or can ruptures and shifts be identified?

- What **psychological mechanisms** influence the appeal of supposedly inferior goods and guilt-ridden practices? In particular, what mechanisms influence the verbal declaration of such practices?
- How do varying forms of **economic knowledge, market dynamics and mechanisms** impact guilty pleasure discourses, and vice versa? Which historical shifts shape these relationships?
- How are discursively negotiated forms of pleasure in and shame about consumption linked to **colonial expansion**, racist politics, the extraction and circulation of colonial goods, or the transition to **postcolonial constellations**?
- Are guilty pleasures a phenomenon specific to certain regions of the world? Which concepts and discourses rooted in **different cultural contexts** function in similar and dissimilar ways?
- How do different **religious communities** negotiate questions of pleasure and guilt, shame, remorse, or related concepts? Which connections and differences can be drawn regarding **confessional and secular discourses**?
- To what extent do guilty pleasure discourses draw upon and produce **gendered dimensions** of experience today? How do speech acts and confessions of guilty pleasures operate as gendered behaviors? Which gendered imaginations and socializations do earlier guilty pleasure discourses evoke?
- How might the discourse on guilty pleasures be changing in times shaped by **populism and climate change**, where the notion of carefree pleasures is increasingly questioned while shamelessness is joyfully showcased by some?

The workshop is organized as part of the research project "[Towards a Genealogy of Guilty Pleasures: Performing Reflexive Consumption](#)" based at the *Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities Essen* (KWI) and the *Ruhr University Bochum* (RUB). It is funded by the *VolkswagenStiftung* under the funding initiative "Open Up – New Research Spaces for the Humanities and Cultural Studies". Travel and accommodation expenses will be covered.

Format: max. 20-minute presentation + 25-minute discussion

Language: English

Submission guidelines: Please send an abstract of no more than 250 words and a short biography to paul.buckermann@kwi-nrw.de by **October 15, 2026**

Organizing team: Dr. Paul Buckermann (KWI), Dr. Morten Paul (RUB), Dr. Roxanne Phillips (KWI)