



guil·ty plea·sures

The curious etymology of a phrase gone wrong

EVERY SO OFTEN, I look at the condition of the world and suspect that our most widespread problem is the ever-growing sentiment of anti-intellectualism that seems to permeate everything, particularly politics (where intelligent candidates are attacked for being intelligent) and advertising (where everything is designed to convince smart people they'll be happier once they agree to become dumb). However, this is something I'm wrong about. Anti-intellectualism is a dangerous problem, but it's not as annoying as *pretend* intellectualism, which invariably manifests itself as antipopulism. Which is why I always want to blow up my brain whenever I hear people talking about "guilty pleasures."

In and of itself, the phrase "guilty pleasure" seems like a reasonable way to describe certain activities. For example, it is pleasurable to snort cocaine in public restrooms, and it always makes you feel guilty; as such, lavatory cocaine fits perfectly into this category. Drinking more than five glasses of gin before (or during) work generally qualifies as a guilty pleasure. So does having sex with people you barely know, having sex with people you actively hate, and/or having sex with people you barely know but whom your girlfriend used to live with during college (and will now consequently hate). These are all guilty pleasures in a technical sense. However, almost no one who uses the term "guilty pleasure" is referring to activities like these. People who use this term are usually talking about why they like *Joan of Arcadia*, or the music of Nelly, or Patrick Swayze's *Road House*. This troubles me for two reasons: Labeling things like Patrick Swayze movies a guilty pleasure implies that a) people should feel bad for liking things they sincerely enjoy, and b) if these same people were not somehow coerced into watching *Road House* every time it's on TBS, they'd probably be reading *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Both of these assumptions are wrong.

I suspect that *Entertainment Weekly* semiaccidentally started all this way back in the twentieth century with its "Guilty Pleasures" issue. Initially, this was a charming idea. It allowed the magazine to cover things that would normally be nonsensical to write about, and it dovetailed nicely with the primary cultural obsession of all people born between 1968 and 1980 (i.e., profound nostalgia for the extremely recent past). *EW* still publishes this annual feature, although now it just picks crazy shit to confuse soccer moms in Omaha. (I question whether any contemporary person derives pleasure from—or feels guilty about—Mr. Rogers's puppet-saturated Neighborhood of Make-Believe, which *EW* inexplicably included in its 2004 installment.)

What's more troubling is the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Guilty Pleasures: 1,001 Things You Hate to Love* (Quirk Books). Ostensibly a reference guide for those who want to feel embarrassed about being en-

