Lost in Pleasure

Mad Joy in Images of Youth Culture

"Be happy!" is the title of Igor Samolet´s photo book. In terms of grammar, the Russian artist expresses an imperative, especially as the phrase is followed by an exclamation mark. Imperatives are appellative by nature and geared towards changes in the conduct of others. In this case, the artist, or rather the protagonists of his visual narrative seem to say, "Be happy! Be as happy as we are! Try or dare to be as happy as we are!" The "happiness" addressed here is definitely not what Oscar Wilde (1981) had in mind when he said, "Pleasure is the only thing one should live for. Nothing ages like happiness" (p.740). Samolet´s crew is young and, in Wilde´s understanding, happiness would make them look old. Instead, they are more likely lost in pleasure and most of their actions seem to be aimed at instant fulfillment.

Paul Kwiatkowski´s "illustrated novel," "And Every Day Was Overcast," providing a visual narrative of his youth in Florida, will feature as the American counterexample. Like Samolet´s book, it was published in 2013. Though each of the two books I will be dealing with was created in a completely different context and cultural environment, one in the US, the other in Russia, they share a comparable spirit and atmosphere and show their youthful protagonists in the pursuit of digressive and at times even repulsive pleasures. For Dick Hebdige (2008), to "exceed consensual definitions of the proper and the permissible" (p. 286) is one possible strategy for youth to become visible, "make their presence felt" (p. 286) and appear on the radar of social or sociological attention.

Methodologically speaking, the question will be how to approach the pleasure sensed in these photographs of young people and their unorthodox life-styles. How to furnish proof that "pleasure" is at play although some of the photographs contradict any conception of what fun looks like in our consumer society? How to bring out the subversive potential of these youthful attempts to get lost in pleasure? How to pinpoint "pleasure" in visual terms? In my reading of the photos, I will not try to falsely locate the phenomenon in the images themselves, but will closely tie it to the reception process. The enjoyment attested to others will not be presented as a pictorially verifiable fact, but as the outcome of a complex transference process in a psychoanalytical sense. Following the ideas developed by Robert Pfaller (2002) in his book "Die Illusionen der anderen. Über das Lustprinzip in der Kultur" (The Illusions of the others. About the pleasure principle in culture), I will try to get beyond the mere surface pleasure of these images.

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Imaginary Spaces Lending Themselves to Projections of All Sorts

At the beginning of his photo novel, Kwiatkowski (2013) undertakes a half-hearted mock attempt to provide the viewer of his book with some spatial coordinates of where the whole action takes place. On the second double page, an easily overlooked, seemingly shapeless pink form turns out to depict Florida, "America´s phantom limb" (p. 14), as he calls it. The white asterisk in this miniature map locates the narrator´s hometown as Loxahatchee in South Florida, the topography of which he describes as follows: "My roots were steeped in shallow earth, easily extracted from amorphous terrain – swamps and beaches, neither land nor water" (p. 14). The corresponding South Florida photographs accompanying the narrative do not help much to create a distinct idea of the setting. The photographer seems to have made an effort not to confirm any preconceived ideas the viewer might have had of Florida. In the photos, there are hardly any spatial markers, no street signs or identifiable views. Instead, the pictures show street scenarios that could be taken at a lot of different places, thickets, abandoned houses, ruins overgrown by nature, close-up views which cannot be easily contextualized. As a result of this strategy, viewers find themselves in a kind of no-man´s land, which facilitates projections of all sorts. The protagonists of the novel seem to be placed in a vaguely outlined and almost imaginary spatial setting where they pursue their strange rituals, segregated from the rest of the world, on a planet of their own. (Fig. 1)

The same holds true for Samolet´s book. The site of action is simply "City C." in Russia. Although the photos seem to work in a documentary tradition, the photographer refrains from specifying the particular area where the images were taken. Instead, the actions of the young protagonists are transferred to some real-life film set with changing props. In the first photos the tone of the narrative is set. The young people gather in a dilapidated, mysterious building, which seems to be offered as the potential site for the transgressions subsequently shown in the book. With this dark, mysterious building reminiscent of the famous house on the hill in Hitchcock´s "Psycho" or the demonized house in Patricia Highsmith´s story "The Black House" (2004), a master signifier is introduced which helps to fictionalize the space of action. In both books, the young people seem to have invaded an unknown territory to form an enclave there and establish a temporary realm of "happiness" that is not supposed to appear on the radar of conventional search engines.

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1

Paul Kwiatkowski, *And Every Day Was Overcast*
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2

Igor Samolet, *be happy!*, 2013

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What Happiness Looks Like

What does the "happiness" of Samolet´s protagonists look like? The young people are engaged in all kinds of pleasurable actions: eating, smoking, drinking, fooling around, having sex. There are obviously no restrictions in terms of sexuality. Sexuality seems to emerge from boredom, instant longing, or as the flip side of violence. There is nothing hidden or rarefied about it and it is not reminiscent of the solitary and charged act practiced in privacy and in designated zones. There are no recognizable social rules in terms of what is forbidden or accepted in the group, but the scope of the acceptable is far reaching. Samolet, the chronicler of the daring behavior of these young people with whom he became friends, bestows everything with equal importance. Violent actions co-exist with endeavors of utmost banality. The camera is present at the most intimate moments, but there is no sense of indignation, guilt, or shame. Their days seem to lack a familiar structure. (In fact, as Samolet told me, most of them were students and had their summer break when he took the photos) The care-free atmosphere conveyed by the photographs is also due to the fact that a sense of property seems to be entirely missing. It is all about sharing and serving oneself. (Fig. 2)

Kwiatkowski´s youth enjoy comparable pleasures, but seem to be more alert to what the camera will make of their performance. In a lot of cases, their transgressive behavior looks experimental and playful. They perform for the camera, rehearse, and seem to consider the effect on the viewer. They play with pre-existing poses and there seems to be an awareness of how easily their own forms of rebellious pleasure can be appropriated by mainstream culture.

Getting Rid of Oneself
"The Loose Footing I Had in this World Paled"

In his book, "Die Illusionen der anderen. Über das Lustprinzip in der Kultur," Robert Pfaller (2002) talks about the relief and pleasure of self-absorption. This often unnoticed mental escape can be one of the most agreeable things and ensure enormous pleasure. According to Pfaller (2002), there is a deep-seated need to recover from the demands any identity construct imposes on us and to be, at least temporarily, relieved from the self. While presenting a numb façade to the others and fooling them with one´s physical presence, one can escape into fantasies or even a state of total mindlessness. Pfaller (2002) compares this type of existence to feigning death. The others believe that you are alive and accessible, but in fact you are gone. In order to exemplify his idea, Pfaller (2002) refers to sport programs on TV. We watch these programs and make the others think that we

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3 / 4

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5

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follow what is going on, or even identify with some of the protagonists. In reality, we take time off and hide behind a publicly accepted activity to get rid of ourselves. Interestingly, in this state of self-oblivion, people have no distinct image of themselves while they maintain their visibility for the others who seem to be content with the deceitful image offered to them. Samolet (2013) depicts two young men in a kitchen. There is food in front of them and there are forks to eat the food, but they are strangely disconnected from this scenario. In Pfaller´s (2002) understanding, they would be perfectly legitimized as diners, while, in fact, they left the table unexcused. As Pfaller (2002) points out, one should not disturb or call on people in this state of self-oblivion because they are comparable to sleepwalkers, and every interaction with them may painfully remind them that they are "someone," namely, a certain person with a particular identity. Pfaller (2002) also addresses the socio-political implications of this phenomenon. His point is that this mechanism of self- absorption as a temporary recuperation phase can also restore individuals to their full work power and make them even more compatible with capitalist efficiency . The more escape roads to a world of blankness and fading out a society and its respective leisure industries offer, the higher the guarantee that the members of this society will function smoothly. (Fig. 3/4)

In Kwiatkowski´s (2013) book there is a strong sense of enjoying oneself by taking a leave from the world of normality and its standardized norms. This is conveyed by the images as much as by Kwiatkowski´s narrative, which focuses on this aspect a lot. Right at the beginning of the novel, Florida is characterized as a place where people "come to vanish" (p. 14). In the narrative, escaping and disappearing are presented as highly desirable conditions. "I loved the freedom to disappear" (p. 242), as the narrator says. To disappear means to be elsewhere, to become inaccessible to the others. One of the author´s schoolmates, nick-named Cobain, practices this kind of withdrawal on a regular basis. He escapes via his walkie-talkie. Whenever the bullying and the humiliations of the others become onerous, he escapes to a world of ambience noise and random recordings of sonar waves. There is a way out. He "escaped through the mysterious transmissions" (p. 3) of his radio. "This clusterfuck of noise was Cobain´s safe place" (p. 174). Most of the time, though, the escape road is drugs, like the ones fabricated by a friend of the narrator. "[…] He´d siphon venom out of glands on their backs and mix it with Arizona Iced Tea to make a hallucinogenic mind fuck […]" (p. 70) that allows for a "sporadically going in and out of blackout mode" (p. 108).

In this connection, the motto of Kwiatkowski´s (2013) book is particularly telling: "Don´t cry. If you have become human enough to cry, then all the magic in the world cannot change you back." This quote seems to indicate that human consciousness and the corresponding subject status are no blessings. The process

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of becoming human will be irreversible, and your upgrading will be permanent. Several of Samolet´s photographs seem to represent an attempt to "change them back" and to show his friends in a state of almost unanimated passivity. There is this photograph of a young man sitting on the floor, fully absorbed by his smoking, smoke covering and clouding his forehead. The buckets of paint in the background give additional weight and some deep and solid gravity to his body. (Fig 5) In another image, a young woman is comfortably lying on the metal planks of a roof, strangely in line with the train wagons parked in a desolate train station. The juxtaposed close-up of a young man looking, one of his eyes disturbingly red, and subjecting her to the power of his gaze, additionally contributes to turning her into an object. One more example would be the image of a man peacefully outstretched in a puddle of water with an air of unearthly abstraction about him. He seems to have shed his skin in this shallow water while roaming elsewhere. As one of the photos suggests, at times, only a bucket of cold water may force some of these renegades back into humanness. (Fig. 6)

Blurred Versus Hyper-Real Vision

Everyone will agree that a blurred vision may be taken as an indicator of a lack of a straight and focused state of mind. In Kwiatkowski´s (2013) illustrated novel, a lot is said about distorted views, though mostly in the text part of the book. In the author´s written account of his youth, drugs and their influence on perception play a major role. The verbal images that he uses to describe this "cloudy mental slide show" (p. 208) have a vivid immediacy. "When I turned my head, the swamp smeared into a dirty green blur. (p. 71). Or "I hyperventilated for nearly an hour waiting for abstract fumes of colors to turn solid, for shapes to rearrange themselves into something familiar" (p. 71). With a few exceptions, though, the photos in Kwiatkowski´s book are in focus. The camera seems to have adjusted the distortions caused by drugs and narcotics. But the images follow a type of unfocused and negligent aesthetic in the tradition of Nan Goldin, Richard Billingham, or Jürgen Teller, to just name a few. The photos present random views and seem to be taken carelessly, without any consideration of composition and sanctioned form. One can feel the freedom and liberation that come from this care-free aesthetic, which also perfectly reflects the content of the book. The protagonists enjoy their lives outside of social norms; the author takes the freedom to arrange a fascinating conglomerate of images meant to puzzle the viewers and lead them off the track of conveniently composed coffee- table books. In fact, the visual material for "And Every Day Was Overcast" (2013) was assembled from a number of highly diverse sources. There are photos from Kwiatkowski´s family album, interspersed with popular culture collages, original photos from the time period the narrative deals with, found ready-

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6

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7

Paul Kwiatkowski, *And Every Day Was Overcast*
2013, p. 146 / 147

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made images, and photos that were staged and taken 10 years later when the photographer was working on the book. In this rich and densely woven network of fact and fiction, the whole project of reviving one´s youth becomes a delirious journey.

In Kwiatkowski´s book, descriptions of blurry mindsets and sets of inconsequential images are balanced by a kind of hyper-vision of segments of reality. (Fig.7) Anything can take on the intensity of such vision: twigs of a tree breaking through the darkness like glowing thunder bolts, or illuminated green leaves revealing their downsides as visual enigmas.

> *At the beach, Kyle and I were laid out, burying our feet in the sand, taking note of the sky´s now apparent curvature, obscuring infinite blackness. The entire day passed languid as though I was asleep. Behind us were backlit palm trees, their silhouettes matte black and jagged against the hyper-colored setting sun." (Kwiatkowski, 2013, p. 276)*

In these images, certain aspects of reality achieve an almost hypnotic hyper-realism and an intensity that bespeaks the perceptual mind set of the Florida kids. Faded consciousness and radical illumination seem to signify the two poles in the lives of these young people. Flashing brightness and heightened awareness, which pose a challenge to normal vision, are followed by states of mind that border on oblivion and total escape. This heightened attention can, for instance, zoom in on an arrangement as banal as toilet paper and tampons scattered on the ground, or concentrate on a car wreck making its appearance in the light.

In Samolet´s (2013) book, the stark contrast between total darkness and illumination is even stronger. The scenes at the beginning of the book all happen at night. The images feature sparsely lit scenarios, forbidden and dangerous actions going on there, mysterious reunions around a camp fire, demonically lit faces that emerge from the dark. In this connection the layout of the book is particularly interesting. The book is arranged in corresponding double spreads. At the beginning and end of the book, all the photo pages are juxtaposed with seemingly black and blank pages. On closer inspection, though, one realizes that the black pages also contain visual data and are apparently totally underexposed photographs. When looking at them from a particular angle, they release some of their submerged information and one recognizes vague structures and forms. This concept gives the whole narrative an additional dimension. The images that are visible or gained visibility in the photographic process are especially poignant and precious because they made it into the light. All the information provided in Samolet´s book is basically prone to some radical kind of censorship. Consequently, the viewer gets the clear feel-

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ing that they are only provided with a glimpse of what is going on in this community. In the middle of the book, the corresponding double pages are white and the narrative seems to stabilize. For a while, the pictures are in no danger of being reclaimed by the blackness of photographic misfortune or moralistic disapproval.

"Interpassivity" and Delegated Pleasure

In the two photo-books, we encounter images of youths driven by the pleasure principle. They drift through their lives with apparently no disciplining super-ego structure in place. Their sudden fits of aggression appear as aimless as their phases "in the blackout mode." The photos expose them, and they expose themselves in their pursuit of instant satisfaction, while none of these extremes seem to be a source of shame. As already said at the beginning of this paper, my overall question concerns the reception of these images: Why are these images so appealing and what about the success of these books? To quote from one of the reviews of Kwiatkowski´s novel, "We finish the book in a delirious state, not unlike the kids whose lives it seeks to evoke" (Ulin, 2013) When "Be Happy!" was first presented at the *Vienna Photo Book Festival* 2013, it sold out within one day and people were fighting over the remaining issues. In the following, I would like to offer a possible explanation of this phenomenon by referring to Robert Pfaller´s (2002) concept of "interpassivity."

Pfaller describes what he calls "interpassivity" from a psychoanalytic point of view. According to Lacan´s notion of the decentralized subject, feelings and convictions can be externalized, located outside, and lead to an "objective" existence there. This act of externalization requires an agent who then becomes the carrier of the outsourced feelings. In "interpassivity," the subject delegates pleasure and manages to enjoy via the other. Pfaller (2002) gives the example of the video recorder which spares its owner the tedious job of watching all the movies and programs he/she always wanted to see. The recorder enjoys in my place and frees me from my own desires, or rather the super-ego command to do so. The idea that all these films have already been watched by a substitute creates relief and is pleasurable. This happens by way of self- deception, in a type of magical thinking, as Pfaller calls it. Those who delegate the pleasure of watching films, of course, know that this is nonsense and will not work, but at the same time, there is this undeniable experience of relief which resists any rationalization of the phenomenon.

My point is that, regarding the reception process of these images, the concept of "interpassivity" can be applied to Kwiatkowski´s and Samolet´s photographs. The question is whether these images of young people in precarious conditions and dilapidated environments justify any talk of an outsourcing of imagi-

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8

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nary pleasure or why these youths should qualify as agents of delegated pleasure? Let me take the example of Samolet´s images of a group of young people in a kitchen. They talk, argue, embrace, kiss, serve themselves from the refrigerator, but most importantly, co-exist in a room that does not seem to be structured to accommodate individual epicenters. They share the available space, the food, and collectively fuel the unrestricted energy prevailing in this room. There is a lot of joy in this unregulated social trafficking in a kitchen space. No one seems to be concerned with distance or control. Moving through this space may lead to unforeseeable libidinal encounters or pleasurable collisions of all sorts. (Fig. 8)

Another telling example would be one of Samolet´s photos of two, probably three adults and one child in what looks like a living room. Despite the considerable chaos in the room, the space resonates with relaxation and enjoyment. The figures almost blend in with their cluttered and messy environment. Piles of clothes, food left-overs, junk, an old, a torn-up sofa, etc., obviously cannot diminish the ease of the situation. The fact that the things around them take up most of the space they inhabit does not seem to bother them and they indulge in this mass of surrounding items. There is no indicator of an attempt to establish order and, by way of doing so, increase their self-esteem and sense of command. Such self-assertive measurements are not needed. If, as Freud (1989) points out in his essay on Narcissism, object libido may thrive at the cost of super-ego structures, then these people in the messy living room signify the ease of a lack of self- control and discipline. (Fig. 9)

I guess we all agree that images we commonly associate with pleasure look slightly different. They work with the promises of the consumer society, and advertising bombards us with such images on a daily basis. In comparison, Kwiatkowski´s and Samolet´s photographs are unappealing and depict scenarios that are sometimes hard to bear. They offer nothing to identify with in a linear way. Still, my point was that the artists´ photographs allow for a kind of delegated pleasure. As the model of "interpassivity" suggested, the workings of desire are slightly more complicated when it comes to psychic transactions that imply liking and disliking at the same time. A brief recourse to Lacan sheds light on the deeper roots of "interpassivity," and exemplifies that what Lacan calls "jouissance" is not necessarily bright and positive, but dark and even painful. For Lacan (1991), "jouissance," the pleasure principle of the subject, is structured by the "sinthom." The symptom is a kind of generative substance at the core of the subject´s existence. It is inaccessible and resists dissolution because it borders the "real" or is a piece of the "real" which can never be integrated into the symbolic order. In the state of "jouissance," the subject enjoys the fundamental, inaccessible passivity at the core of his/her existence that also contains the keys to the specific dysfunctionality and deformation of the subject. In order to function in the symbolic order, we have to defy this experience, but are at the same time drawn to it. The records of the

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radical attempts of the young to gravitate towards something that has to do with deep and self-absorbed pleasure and some inert, denied passivity let us partake in something we are well-trained enough to ward off. When Kwiatkowski and his friends in South Florida embarked on an alternative life style in exploration of unknown pleasures, of course "Everyday Was Overcast"; how could the days have been bright, considering the fundamental ambivalence at the heart of this project?

9

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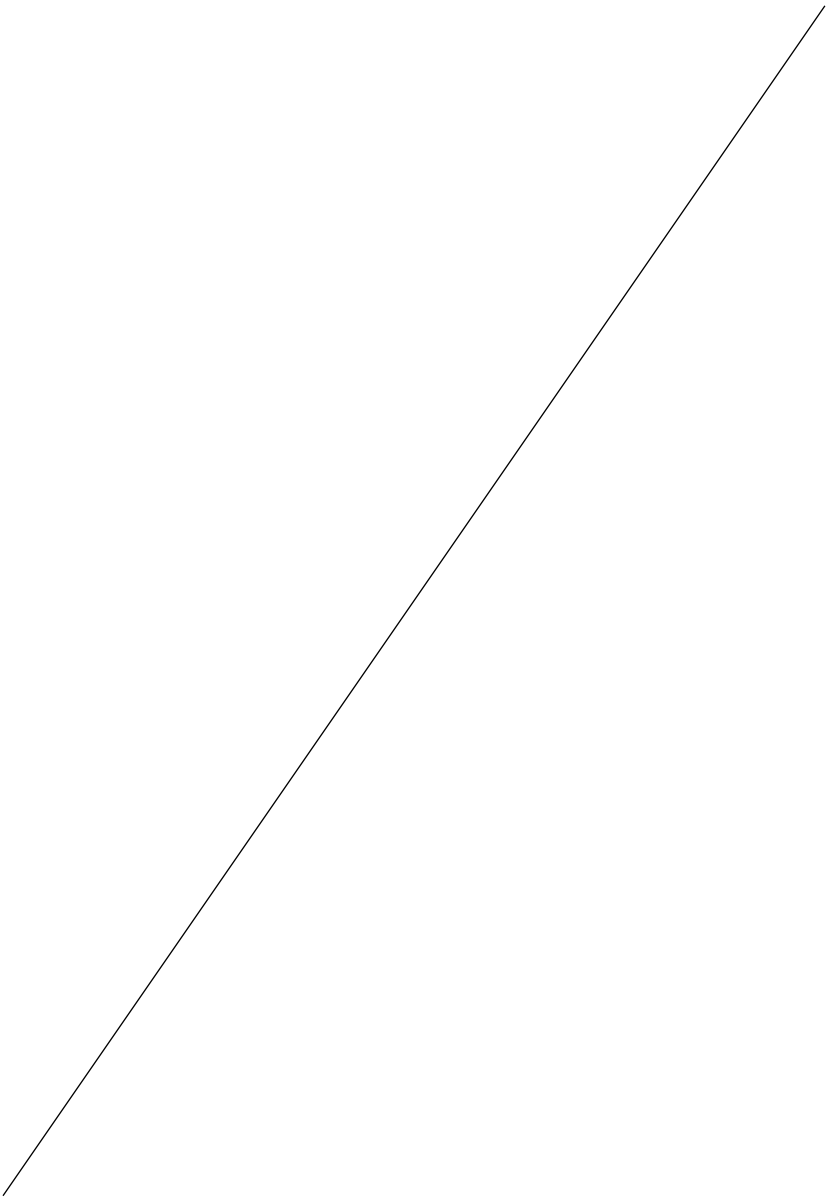

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