

# The New Criterion

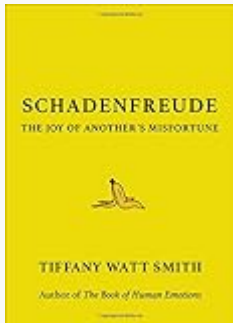
Books April 2019

## Ice cold

by Anthony Daniels

A review of *Schadenfreude: The Joy of Another's Misfortune* by Tiffany Watt Smith

### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



*Tiffany Watt Smith*

*Schadenfreude: The Joy of Another's Misfortune*

Little, Brown Spark, 176 pages, \$15.00

**S**chadenfreude: The Joy of Another's Misfortune is interesting, but not because it is good. It is interesting because it is symptomatic of the increasing vulgarity and crudity of intellectual life in the modern English-speaking world, particularly in Britain, where it goes almost unopposed.

The phenomenon of schadenfreude is a fascinating and important one, of course, well worth examination. But since it is usually subtle, undeclared, and often unacknowledged, even by he who experiences it, it requires some finesse to dissect it, which unfortunately the author, Tiffany Watt Smith, does not possess. Even the subtitle of her book is misleading: schadenfreude in its English meaning is surely not the *joy*, but rather the secret or surreptitious pleasure or satisfaction in another's misfortune. But the error is a warning that proper distinctions, so necessary to this field, are about not to be made.

For example, the author suggests that schadenfreude is often a manifestation of a sense of justice, and often occurs when the world is put to rights by the downfall of those who have hitherto had

undeserved good fortune or who have escaped appropriate punishment for their ill deeds. She writes:

One of the stories we tell ourselves about modern Western justice is that it is unemotional and sober. . . . When we think of justice today, dispassionate judges and rational deliberation are the ideals that spring to mind. Yet justice is also hugely emotional. When in 2009 the swindler Bernard Madoff received his 150-year prison sentence, the public gallery erupted in cheers and applause.

There are several things wrong with this passage. No one believes that Western justice is unemotional and sober in the sense that prejudice, public disgust, or thirst for revenge never, as a matter of empirical fact, enter into or affect its deliberations; Man is a fallen creature who never attains his ideals. But in my experience as a witness in the British criminal justice system, a great effort is made by Western justice, a mostly but not always successful one, to be dispassionate and attend only to the evidence and not to extraneous prejudicial matters, all according to rules laid down in advance. We may take this for granted and therefore be horrified when the courts do not live up to their own standards, but this does not mean that, overall, our systems of justice are not a considerable achievement. Many improvements could be made to them, as to all human institutions, but the emotional public response to verdicts does not in the slightest impugn or reflect on the objectivity of those verdicts. The author does not draw the proper distinctions.

Even worse, her example of the cheering and applauding reaction of the public to the sentence meted out to Madoff is surely not an example of what we would normally call *schadenfreude*, which is a secret, black and midnight emotion; it does not cause those who experience it to break out into cheering and applause. If we experience *schadenfreude*, we deny or disavow it, even to ourselves, and certainly do not let others see it. *Schadenfreude* is more like a secret poisoning than an attack with machete. Overt or excessive pleasure at the severe punishment of wrongdoers may be vengeful or merely sadistic, but it is not *schadenfreude*. The crowds that gathered at public executions, and which would gather again if such executions were now permitted, were not driven to by *schadenfreude* or anything like it: by prurience and savagery, more like.

In fact, the author seems herself to have a somewhat deficient sense of justice divorced from emotion. In the chapter that deals with the supposed connection between justice and *schadenfreude*, she recounts how, in her twenties, she worked in a theater in which a male director flirted with actresses and female playwrights, while “sleazily rating their attractiveness behind their backs.” After the #MeToo campaign started, this director gave an interview in which he said, “I think the search for who is the Weinstein of British theater is an honorable search,” whereupon five women came forward to accuse the director himself of “historic harassment.”

Here is how Watt Smith reacted:

I do not know the details of the allegations. But I also have to admit that the experience of the women involved was not at the forefront of my mind in that exact moment. What I felt—and it is hard to

describe this precisely—was a kind of ecstasy, as if a clean white light had exploded inside me.

Her reaction had nothing to do with *schadenfreude* and was more akin to lynch-mob mentality. What she actually knew of this man was at the most marginally discreditable. Flirting is, or at least can be, pleasurable for all parties concerned, and backbiting, while inglorious, is so common a phenomenon that it probably comprises at least a third of all human conversation. The reports of “historic harassment”—that is to say, harassment in the past, rather than historically important harassment—are in themselves no more to be believed than disbelieved. Among other problems with them are distortions of memory over time and changes in what is deemed acceptable behavior. In this passage, the author displays her crudity which, however, is by no means hers alone. It is, so to speak, part of the *Zeitgeist*.

Insofar as *schadenfreude* has any connection with justice at all, it is that it does *injustice* to him whose misfortune occasions it. When La Rochefoucauld said that there was in the misfortune of our friends something not entirely unpleasing (a dictum that is both obviously true and revelatory), he was not suggesting that our friends have done anything to deserve our malice—quite the reverse. Indeed, if they had done something to deserve it, what we felt on learning of their discomfiture would not be *schadenfreude* but an assuaged desire for revenge.

**T**he inexactitude of the author’s examination of the subject of her book is repeated: she has a tin ear for nuance. For example, she draws our attention to a relatively new phenomenon, the placing in the public domain of the small miseries of a person’s existence, which apparently started in France with a website called *viedemerde.fr*. This great advance in civilization has apparently spread to much of the world.

Again, there is no *schadenfreude* here. It is exhibitionism on the part of those who post their miseries, but it is not *schadenfreude* on the part of those who read them, because those who do so have no previous knowledge of those who suffer the miseries described; it is mere voyeurism, which is very different.

Every chapter and every break in every chapter is headed with several examples of supposed *schadenfreude*, printed in italics. Here the quality of the author’s mind is displayed in all its vulgarity. I take a few examples at random:

Drunkenly chatting up someone in a pub, who finally coughs and politely points out that I have toilet paper trailing out of the back of my trousers.

When my cousin accidentally swallowed a globule of her dentist’s snot.

When a boyishly charming actor is caught receiving a blow job from a prostitute on Sunset Boulevard.

When your perfect neighbor’s perfectly groomed dog rolls in fox poo and jumps on the front seat of their car.

When, at the critical moment of the Olympics Dressage, another country's horse poops.

When you have a bad date, and then you read this: A woman met a man on Tinder, and when they went back to his house, she went to the loo. But she found to her dismay that her poo did not flush. So, she panicked and tried to THROW IT OUT OF THE WINDOW.

It is hardly to be expected that lack of refinement should be expressed with elegance. The author's prose is bad, sometimes abominable.

The baby-faced TV presenter who drinks too much, or the actor exposed for diva-like behavior on set does not withdraw humiliated and shamed, never to be seen again (and we might not feel great if they did).

Whether the writer's vulgarity is a pose adopted to establish her democratic credentials, or whether it is a true reflection of her mind, I cannot say—nor, indeed, which is the worse. It certainly does not conduce to great precision:

On the train home, you'll start enumerating the reasons why their life is actually a bit crap.

But what is perhaps most significant about this is that the author is not a degenerate bar-fly delivering his opinion after his sixteenth whisky in a provincial pub, but a research fellow at the Queen Mary College of the University of London Centre for the History of the Emotions, the college being "an established university . . . committed to high quality teaching." Moreover, the book is published with the blessing of the Wellcome Trust, which is one of the largest and most important research charities in Britain, if not the world.

The book has at least the virtue of being short, but also the vice of being too long. Without intending to, it displays in concentrated form the prevailing characteristic of modern British culture, namely a vulgarity in conception, thought, feeling, and expression which has been raised almost to the level of an ideology.

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