

# Painful Pleasure, Pleasurable Pain

Call for Contributions

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**Guest Editors: Sarah Schäfer-Althaus and Cornelia Wächter**

Pain and pleasure are often regarded as a corporal continuum, with the body functioning as a staging ground for action, stimulated and penetrated, and prone to “synesthetic corporal interaction” (Burgwinkle and Howie 2010: 106). Both in research and in the popular imagination, pain and pleasure have predominantly been understood as the antagonists of one another and have received most attention as forces motivating our behaviour in opposite directions: we aim to *avoid* pain and *seek* pleasure – supposedly not both at the same time. And yet, one can all too easily morph into or coincide with the other. Certainly since the Romantic period, the complex entanglements of pleasure and pain have been subject of sustained exploration in and beyond British literature. Jeremy Paxman even sardonically remarks that the “central ambiguity” of pain and pleasure “that punishment is reward; pain, pleasure – rings with English hypocrisy” (1999).

Nevertheless, when it comes to the concurrence of pain and pleasure, as most prominently represented by S/M-related practices, fascination is still coupled with the potential to provoke. Pain and pleasure frequently overlap and cross, one often being the result or trigger of the other in much more commonplace and pervasive phenomena than S/M culture. In fact, (mental as well as physical) pain and pleasure are remarkably similar in terms of evolution and neuroanatomy, and one can easily merge into the other and vice versa. As Siri Leknes and Irene Tracey assert, emerging evidence “points to extensive similarities in the anatomical substrates of painful and pleasant sensations” (2008: 314).

Furthermore, how we conceive of the boundary between pleasure and pain and the mutability of that boundary is culturally and historically contingent. Thus, for instance, Steven Allan observes “a tendency in our late-industrial, consumerist society [...] that sees the body as a site for asserting self-determined identity via controlled pain, wounds and domination” (2013: 2). Pain and pleasure are operative in the negotiation of the limits of the normative and the transgressive, but they are also intertwined within realms that are considered to be part of everyday culture and, as such, challenge the traditional dichotomy associated with both concepts – from the mother giving birth, to the marathon runner pushing his/her body to the limit, to the pleasures arising from modifiable flesh (e.g., tattoos, piercings etc.).

Over the past decade, mundane forms of pleasure/pain have increasingly become the subject of cultural explorations of various kinds, not least of all in Britain. Thus, for instance, in 2011, Michael Mosley researched and located intersections of pleasure and pain, such as chilli eating contests and bungee jumping, for a BBC documentary, and the Victoria and Albert Museum hosted an exhibition on *Shoes: Pleasure and Pain* in 2015. The planned JSBC issue is interested in investigations of the boundaries, overlaps and interdependencies between pleasure and pain and the challenge of its dichotomy, especially concerning less exoticized and eroticized everyday cultural practices in Britain and British society.

Possible topics might include (but are by no means not limited to) the following:

- Voluntary and involuntary body modifications
- Childbirth and other liminal experiences of embodiment
- Pain, pleasure and (physical) sensationalism
- Non-corporeal forms of pain/pleasure
- Aestheticized pain/pleasure
- Pain/pleasure and fashion
- Soundscapes and smellscape of pain/pleasure
- Food culture, taste and consumerism
- Sports and physical transgressions of boundaries
- Cognitivist and philosophical perspectives on the intersection between pleasure and pain
- Representations of pain/pleasure in literature, art, film, television, photography, advertisement, everyday culture etc.
- Historical and contemporary perspectives

Please submit abstracts (400-500 words) accompanied by a short bio note to both guest editors for this issue: Sarah Schäfer-Althaus (salthaus@uni-koblenz.de) and Cornelia Wächter (cornelia.waechter@rub.de) by 1 July 2020. **Finished articles (5,000 words) will be due by 1 November 2020.**

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