Interpassivity

The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment

Robert Pfaller

EDINBURGH
University Press

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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road, 12(2f) Jackson's Entry, Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4744 2295 6 (epub)

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Introduction: Interpassivity Today

1

Interpassivity is a widespread, and yet mostly unacknowledged, form of cultural behaviour. Rather than letting others (other people, animals, machines, etc.) *work* in your place, interpassive behaviour entails letting others *consume* in your place. We can speak of interpassivity when people, for instance, insist that others drink their beer for them, or when they let recording devices watch TV programmes in their place, or when they print out texts instead of reading them, or when they use ritual machines that pray or believe for them vicariously ('ora pro nobis'), or are happy that certain TV shows feature canned laughter that displays amusement in their place. Clearly, not all of these multiple social practices and individual behaviours are *necessarily* interpassive. However, I would claim that without a concept of interpassivity, many of these practices and behaviours cannot be sufficiently explained. Without the concept of interpassivity, we cannot grasp the ways in which these practices are grounded in the preference of particular subjects for *delegating their enjoyment* rather than having it themselves.

Rather than delegating, for instance, their responsibilities to representative agents, interpassive people delegate precisely those things that they *enjoy* doing – those things that they do for pleasure, out of passion or conviction. Rather than letting others *work* for them, they let them *enjoy* for them. In other words, they delegate *passivity* to others rather than *activity* (as is the case, for example, in practices of interactivity, and also in the social division of labour and class division).

2

This concept of interpassivity, which I proposed in 1996,[1] originally fulfilled a primarily critical function for media and theory. My intention back then was to relativise and water down the overwhelming dominance at the time of the discourse of interactivity. The concept was mainly intended for artists, who were responding in complete panic to the pressures of interactivity, obsessively pondering about how to and whether they could include the audience in their work. The idea of a 'negative magnitude' (Kant 1977b) of interactivity was meant to create a space of distance that would enable a more detached observation.

However, this original opponent has now largely vanished into thin air. The interactivity hype is over and we are left amazed that the euphoric texts on the theme had such a vast audience of believers. Of course, some now fix their hopes with the same intensity and self-evidence on other, very similar myths – for example, participation. However, the theory of interpassivity was never so tightly bound up with its opponent that it would have to go down with it. The notions of interpassivity and interactivity differ fundamentally in their discursive function: they were two entirely different language games. The discourse of interactivity, facilitated mainly by new media, was a revival of very old wishes and utopias,[2] which had become unquestioned facts – consequently, this discourse was more of an ideology than a theory. Contrary to this, the thinking of interpassivity consisted of a series of disturbing observations, questions and considerations, regarding which initially no one – not even those who advanced them – knew where they would lead. It is precisely this uncertainty and openness that distinguishes a theory from an ideology.

3

However, right from the outset the term 'interpassivity' functioned as a shibboleth: as a mark of philosophical partisanship (as all openness

relies on previous constructive decisions). It was similar to what Étienne Balibar once remarked with regard to Louis Althusser's name: you simply uttered the name and you noticed that you had friends (Balibar 1991: 119). Philosophers such as, first and foremost, Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar and Henry Krips[3] recognised that this concept opened up a theoretical perspective. And so they embarked upon the adventure and developed research of their own related to the questions associated with interpassivity. Psychoanalysts, media theorists, curators, art theorists and later many others – from areas such as dance, theatre, film and literature studies, political theory, law studies, cultural anthropology, theology and medieval studies – soon followed.[4] Yet not only theorists but also artists responded strongly to the concept. Brilliant works in fine arts[5] as well as notorious theatre productions, for example by directors René Pollesch and Christoph Schlingensief, drew inspiration from the concept and developed it in particular, unanticipated directions.[6]

The philosophical common ground consisted in a position related to Althusser's philosophy – namely, deep mistrust of the assumption that 'activity' is fundamentally good and that, consequently, activating the beholder will always be aesthetically productive and politically satisfying. Yet, if we take seriously Althusser's idea that becoming a subject is one of the key mechanisms of ideological subjugation (see Althusser 1971), then becoming an *active subject* cannot be turned into any universal political solution. Thinking about interpassivity therefore means no less than investigating a basic, unquestioned assumption of most emancipatory movements since 1968, namely the assumption that active is better than passive, subjective better than objective, own better than foreign, changeable better than permanent, immaterial better than material, constructed better than essential, and so on. In other words, it means questioning the theoretical humanist paradigm of 'reappropriation' that has been so precisely described by Gianni Vattimo (see Vattimo 1991: 28ff.) and, following Althusser, also subjected to well-founded critique by more recent psychoanalytical theory (see Grunberger and Dessuant 1997). This paradigm has shaped neo-Marxism, with its critique of

‘reification’ and ‘alienation’, as much as feminism with its critique of the ‘object’ status of women, or the theory of ‘immaterial labour’ popular in recent years.

The ‘theoretical anti-humanism’ of the concept of interpassivity has from the very beginning united all who have been interested in this perspective. As a result of this, though not exclusively so, the *theory* of interpassivity was enthusiastically received. And so, just as Althusser was a *theoretical anti-humanist*, we were *theoretical interpassivists.* However, the question of whether one should also feel sympathy with the *practices* of interpassivity or not was a wholly different and open matter at that time.

4

The peculiar relation of interpassivity to pleasure was one of the initial questions that the theory had to grapple with, that is, the question of why interpassive people seemed to avoid their desire and to transfer it instead to other people, animals, machines and so on. The question was: what did they gain from this? Why was it that some people did not want to watch television themselves, contemplate art, laugh, cook or make love, and instead preferred to have these things taken care of by other agents in their place? And moreover, why couldn’t they simply do without these things altogether?

In addition to the fundamental aesthetic or libido-economical paradox of favouring the delegation of a pleasure over one’s own pleasure, the question of the relationship between interpassive people and their delegates also arose: was it a matter of identification? Love? Amplified narcissism? Or was it necessary to conceive of a new type of relationship here?[7]

5

Initially, the problem of how interpassivists came to be certain that it was *their* enjoyment that was being represented by a person or a

device seemed to be a secondary matter. And yet the question of how they could be so sure that their guest drank beer *for them*, and not for someone else, soon divulged the rich potential of cultural-theoretical consequences hidden within this inconspicuous phenomenon. In this manner it was revealed that interpassive behaviour is always necessarily connected with a seemingly miniature staging of the act of enjoyment. With the help of the photocopier, intellectuals played at reading in libraries. Only those who caused the staging could feel represented. Akin to the substitute behaviours of compulsive neuroses decoded by Freud (see Freud [1907]), in these cases, too, the figurativeness of the interpassive substitute actions was often barely noticeable; as a rule the actors were not aware of them. And even if they had thought of this, they would never have themselves believed it. After all, who would ever be capable of confusing the operation of a photocopier with the act of reading and take it to be its fully fledged equivalent?

At this point it became obvious that we were dealing with illusions of a special sort: not merely illusions that *certain people* have never believed in, but apparently illusions that *no one* has ever believed in. These illusions appeared entirely unsuitable for anyone ever to believe in. And yet a good deal of everyday cultural behaviour and individual pleasure gains which emerged from them could only be described in this way. Only thanks to these 'unbelievable' illusions and to their presence in the situation could the intellectuals leave the libraries thoroughly satisfied with their prey, even when they would perhaps never look at the copies again. We had to begin reconstructing these illusions and clarifying whom they were actually meant to convince. The process of reconstruction of 'illusions without owners' or 'illusions of the others' resulted in a series of unanticipated discoveries – ultimately, of a new psychic observing agency, only touched upon to date by psychoanalytical theory, but not yet conceptually registered: that of the 'naive observer' (Pfaller 2014).

Interpassivity's double delegation – the fact that interpassive people first transfer their *pleasure* to a representative agent, and secondly transfer the *belief* in the illusion they have staged to an undefined, naive other – provided a valuable clue for a further discovery. Not only did the actions that interpassive people used to back up their delegation take the form of rituals (similar to the 'ceremonial behaviours' of neurotics analysed by Freud [1907]), but the reverse was also true. All rituals had from now on to be considered as interpassive behaviours. Far from deriving from some external malicious suspicion towards religious, state or other types of ceremonial acts, it was precisely these ideas that made it possible to explain the often amazing hostility of some religions towards their own rituals at particular times (see Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 1). What religions fought within their own rituals was precisely their interpassive function. The theory of interpassivity has at this point presented us with an unanticipated benefit in terms of a solution to a fundamental problem of cultural theory (on this, see Pfaller 2008).

7

One thing has become clear by now. In interpassive behaviour, people take up selective contact with a thing in order, in exchange, to entirely escape that very thing – and indeed, not only, as we have established to begin with, with regard to enjoyment, but also with regard to belief; that is, with regard to an identification with an illusion. Interpassivity is thus a strategy of escaping identification and consequently subjectivisation. Precisely there, where it is suggested that they become self-conscious subjects (through 'interpellation' in the sense of Althusser [1971]), people seize interpassive means to flee into self-forgetfulness. Interpassivity is therefore either an anti-ideological behaviour, or it is a second, and entirely different, type of ideology that does not rest on becoming a subject. Not only Althusser's Marxist theory but also Judith Butler's gender theory were preoccupied with the search for such an alternative (see Butler 1995); it was the fundamental question of every theory that sought

an escape from ruling ideologies, dominating models, hegemonic identities and so on. Interpassive behaviour seemed to present an unexpected answer. At this point, it seemed obvious to take sides, not only with interpassivity's theory, but also its practices.

8

The rituals of interpassivity, its 'little gestures of disappearance', resemble acts of magic. Just as Haitians liked to spare themselves the need to kill their enemies by carefully piercing a doll, hordes of interpassivists spare themselves entire evenings in front of the television by carefully programming their recording devices. As in ritual theory, even here we can productively turn the explanatory relations around in the other direction: not only must interpassive behaviour be understood as an unperceived 'magic of civilised people'; it is also necessary to recognise the interpassive dimension of all magic. *Magic relies, in principle, on not believing*; Ludwig Wittgenstein in his notes on Frazer and Sigmund Freud in his essay about fetishism had already noticed this in an unspectacular way (see Wittgenstein 1993a; Freud [1927a]).

However, if magic rests on not believing, what are we to think of the 'disenchantment of the world' that we are observing at present? In other words, what are we to make of the increasing hostility towards all elegant and glamorous pleasures, for example, tobacco culture, the use of alcohol, the appearance of sexual stimulants and 'adult language', or make-up and dressing up, and all other appearances that differ from private or mundane behaviour because of their heightened ceremoniousness? Are not the arguments of self-ordained health guardians always based on the assumption that 'well, earlier, it was believed that . . .' (e.g., that smoking was not dangerous), which the imperialist colonisers had already erroneously applied when observing tribal cultures? Are we not dealing here with something that is always wrongly considered a step towards enlightenment, an emancipatory progress in knowledge? But if it is not, then what is it? Only now does the full momentousness of Max

Weber's answer become understandable: neither science nor philosophy cause the 'disenchantment of the world'. Instead, it is religion: the internalisation-oriented religion of Protestantism is supremely hostile to the external practices proper to magic. And this Protestantism can be so radically internalised that it does not even have to be aware of its own religious nature (Weber 2002). Only the *fanaticism* pertaining to 'health religious' movements allows us to discern this religious nature. The hostility against those magic practices that make our lives colourful and loveable stems from religion, and not from any progress in knowledge. Magic never had believers; it always happened against better knowledge (Mannoni 2003). Therefore it cannot be better knowledge that suspends the magic spell.

The disenchantment of the world seems to be taking place even within the sphere of art. We can observe this, for instance, when in the name of the politicisation of art its contents are forced and its forms ignored. From the perspective of interpassivity, a question arises, namely, does this translate into a gain in knowledge or is this merely a sacrifice of pleasure and of every possibility for art to process affects? By banishing the magic of art, one potentially does away with its crucial efficiency apropos the social unconscious – and with that, its most important political power.

9

At present, there is a great deal of contemplation in various social contexts of the relationship that emerges between certain activities and the people who observe or engage in these activities. This relationship is usually imagined to be one of increasing identification. It is widely believed that those who watch do so in order gradually to become more like the actors, and ultimately also to become active themselves – or at least, to be capable of becoming so. Thus, the pleasure experienced by people who remain immobile while watching sport on television is nowadays usually explained by the theory of 'mirror neurons'. These realisations, however, pose more questions

than they answer: for example, the appropriate research would have to examine whether the fact that many people currently do not cook, but instead buy ever more beautiful cookbooks, can really be explained through a hypothesis of 'non-mirroring neurons'.

The idea of refraining from great deeds through miniature play is, in any case, of key importance for all questions concerning, for example, the relation between violent computer games and violent acts by youths, or the relation between pornography consumption and sexual violence by adults (or, for example, between S/M games in Nazi costumes and real fascist activities). Might it not rather be the case that such games, like magic acts, function as a defence reaction and actually spare the actors from committing real acts of violence? Is it not conceivable that games might have a 'cathartic' function in the Aristotelian sense? Is it not the case that young people who build up a lot of aggression during a school day might have to shoot things on a computer for a while so that they can go to school the next day more or less relaxed?[8]

From the point of view of the theory of interpassivity, the fact that the games in question have in recent years come under increasing suspicion of abetting real acts of violence points towards an emerging theoretical weakness in *common sense* understanding. This weakness lies in the increasing inability of contemporary culture to imagine that playing games could have a potentially defensive function. The whole idea, brilliantly presented by Jacob Bernays, that the 'cathartic' function of theatre in Aristotle's theory has to be understood precisely in this way has become unthinkable when it comes to video games (Bernays 1979). This diminishing awareness can be understood as an effect of the 'disenchantment of the world'. A type of 'iconographic naivety' permits common sense always only to compare the content of a game with the content of a violent deed, and then to infer unambiguous, grievous conclusions about the game itself (without, however, typically extending these to other games, such as, for example, chess or bowling, which would be the logical thing to do). Equally, the idea that a *complementary* relationship between the game and the deed can actually emerge, precisely due to the identity of the

content and the concurrent difference of functions, becomes hard to comprehend and imagine. Moreover, there is not even a trace of an idea of posing the question of the relationship – the ‘articulation’ – of these two practices (for this notion, see Althusser 1993: 149). Yet it is the job of cultural theory to observe and analyse such historically evolving or currently proliferating epistemological inhibitions and difficulties in thinking.

10

Since many practices of contemporary culture do, indeed, develop in the direction of increased ‘avoiding through playing’, common sense’s difficulties in thinking are all the more conspicuous. What remains unnoticed in theory enjoys increasing popularity in practice. Once again, the blindness of awareness seems to provide favourable conditions for the prosperity of its object. ‘Cultural capitalism’ or the share of ‘immaterial labour’ in contemporary consumer goods precisely consists in the product’s function of avoidance. As Slavoj Žižek remarks, today’s material objects increasingly serve as props for an experience, for participation in a particular lifestyle or conviction (Žižek 2002a: 118). Certain apples are not just fruit, but a promise of a health-conscious life or even an expression of ecological protest. Special training shoes serve not only as sports equipment, but also as fashionable props and a sign of an informed protest against child labour in China or even, precisely thanks to their specific logo, as a definitive overcoming of that very logo craze (on this, see Ullrich 2003: 128).

Yet it would be almost impossible, at least in the history of capitalist production methods, to find products that had not already been charged with such meanings. Roland Barthes analysed this clearly in *Mythologies* (Barthes 2013): for instance, a car such as the famous ‘DS’ introduced in 1955 by Citroën was not simply a means of locomotion, but was simultaneously a ‘myth’ that translated in this case into a promise of modernity and utopian elegance. If we want to conceptually distinguish ‘cultural capitalism’ from capital’s traditional

exploitation of labour, it is the changed quantitative relationship of the two that offers itself as relevant criterion (for example, advertising, myth creation, branding, etc., would in previous periods have amounted to less than 50 per cent of the value of a product; today, on the contrary, these aspects account for much more than this).

If there is a precise dividing line here, then it does not run between the presence of a myth and its absence. Instead, the decisive question is the following: is the myth one of participation or does it already have the interpassive dimension of avoidance typical of our era? Customers who purchased a Citroën DS probably wanted visibly to belong to a new era. Today, on the contrary, the majority of customers who buy four-wheel-drive off-road vehicles or so-called SUVs live in the city. They most likely know only from hearsay of rural life and of terrains that are difficult to drive on. The rough-and-ready car provides them a sense of 'off-road' without ever having to go there. While the philosopher Alain wrote pointedly at the beginning of the twentieth century that 'what the city dweller especially likes about the country is the going there; action carries within it the object desired',[9] today, when it comes to cultural capitalism, this wording must be turned on its head: what the SUV owner likes about the countryside is precisely the fact that he does not go there. The 'not doing' provides the basis for the fulfilment of his desire. Possession of an off-road vehicle, even if it only looks like one, such as an SUV without four-wheel drive, saves him from ever having to make an off-road trip. The characteristic of cultural capitalism is, as Mark Slouka clear-sightedly remarked, precisely that a bit of life is purchased along with the product (Slouka 1995: 75; see Rifkin 2001: 171) – and, furthermore, with the goal of not having to live it. The SUV takes care of it for us – it is rural leisure, in a similar fashion to an apple that is healthy in our place, or to trainers that are athletic on our behalf (after all, trainers are increasingly being worn by people who do ever less sport). In other words, cultural capitalist goods are dispatchers of vicarious life; they are interpassive media.

11

A pressing question arises, namely, why do people not want to have their lives and their pleasures? Why do they aspire to be substituted by other agents in precisely these areas? As we had to recognise in the examination of rituals,[10] interpassivity has to do with the sacred, indeed, the cultural 'sacred in everyday life' (according to the concept of Michel Leiris [2016]). Since interpassive behaviour always aims at avoidance, we must understand it as a behaviour that fends off this sacredness. People therefore always engage in interpassive behaviour when they fear that they would otherwise experience too close an encounter with something sacred. This applies also to the use of cultural capitalist leisure products that serve for the avoidance of life and leisure itself; since as Paul Lafargue (1883) knew quite well, like life, idleness, too, is sacred among heathens.

This defensive, 'apotropaic' movement displays traces of the oldest, most infallible way of behaving towards the hallowed in culture: dread. That which is sacred is anything but agreeable or easily compatible. Instead, it is ambivalent and for that reason is described with words that mean both 'sublime' and 'dirty' (see Freud [1912–13]: 311). Against this backdrop, it becomes clear how amiss current practices are that steadfastly attempt to have people encounter particular things 'participatively', or that measure the usefulness of museums, now typically privatised and legally independent, by the number of visitors. After all, sites such as museums do not fulfil their main function by being visited! Instead, their greater usefulness consists in knowing that the art in them is in good hands and that one does not need to constantly visit them in order to see it.[11] The notion that such sites would be useless if human faces did not parade one after another in front of the artifacts is not only strange, but it has also forgotten culture. It originates in a quasi-childish trust in the boundless digestibility of cultural objects – a blind trust that owes to the blindness with which we use things in everyday life, such as the off-road vehicle.

12

Most of the essays in this volume have been published in other languages, the only changes being to the bibliographical references, which have been standardised. The idea of the volume is to make it possible to follow the development of my reflections on interpassivity. Unavoidably, this leads to certain repetitions. I must therefore appeal to your patience, though this is not simply a problem of the narrative rendering. We must remember that thoughts on interpassivity are intended to reduce paradoxes, to overcome difficulties in thinking and to break barriers to knowledge. When your car is stuck in the snow in a parking space in winter and you want to push it free, this doesn't usually happen with the first push. You have to use a 'rocking' technique, pushing it forward, then letting it roll back again, then pushing it forward again, and so on. And one must proceed in precisely this way when thinking about interpassivity and related issues. The recurrence of particular considerations and examples should not be seen as mantras (albeit, mantras do seem also to possess a fine, interpassive dimension), but instead, as in the case with the stuck car, as a way of gaining momentum.

Notes

1 At the conference 'Die Dinge lachen an unserer Stelle. Interpassive Medien: die Schattenseite der Interaktivität', University of Art and Industrial Design, Linz, Austria, October 1996; see Pfaller 1996 and 1998 (cf. Chapter 1).

2 For example, Umberto Eco's ambiguous utopia of the 'Open Work' (Eco 1989). For a criticism of its philosophical premises, see Chapter 5 in this volume.

3 See Žižek 1998; Dolar 2001; Krips 1999. For Žižek's theoretical method, see Chapter 4 in this volume. Since the theory of interpassivity has proven to particularly require an art of thinking in examples, as is beautifully demonstrated by Žižek, I have added this 'method' chapter to this book.

4 For these developments, see, for example, van Oenen 2006 and 2010; Yoshida 2008; Hiebaum 2008; Johnsen et al. 2009; Kuldova 2016; and the

various contributions in Pfaller (ed.) 2000; Feustel et al. (eds) 2011; and Wagner (ed.) 2015.

5 Taking one example as representative of many, I want here to mention the Austrian artist Martin Kerschbaumsteiner's wonderful video 'Kunstaktion "Arbeit"' (parts one and two), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYABLSEyz5I; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qv24iFXD9L4 (last accessed 9 August 2015).

6 René Pollesch has referred to interpassivity theory in his plays *Ich schau dir in die Augen, gesellschaftlicher Verblendungszusammenhang* and *Calvinismus Klein*. For his collaboration in this matter with Christoph Schlingensief 's production *Sterben lernen* in Zurich 2009, see http://www.welt.de/kultur/theater/article5448961/Seid-nett-zu-den-Eidgenossen.html and http://www.nzz.ch/gebetsmuehlentheater-1.4121040 (last accessed 9 August 2015). Schlingensief also referred to interpassivity in his blog: https://schlingenblog.wordpress.com/2009/12/page/3/

7 For this, see Chapters 1 and 2 in this volume.

8 I have elaborated on this more extensively in my book *Second Worlds* (Pfaller 2012).

9 Alain 1973: 242. For questions concerning urbanity and interpassivity, see Chapter 7 in this volume.

10 For this, see Chapter 3 in this volume.

11 For this, see Chapter 6 in this volume.