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Interpassivity revisited: a critical and historical reappraisal of interpassive phenomena

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Interpassivity is a concept coined about a decade ago by Slavoj Žižek and Robert Pfaller, to explain how some works of art seem to provide for their own reception. In contrast with interactive works, that can ‘realize themselves’ through participation by visitors, interpassive works are ‘self-fulfilling’. They might be said to ‘enjoy themselves’, or even better, we enjoy ‘through them’; they enjoy, as Žižek and Pfaller insist, ‘on our behalf’. This raises the curious question how and why we could or should ‘believe or enjoy through the other’ (Žižek 1997: 113), or in other words, ‘delegate’ our own belief or enjoyment to others.

Pfaller especially, has undertaken to develop the concept of interpassivity further. First in his collection *Interpassivität* (2000), an edited volume with a wide variety of contributions mostly from the field of the arts. Subsequently, Pfaller’s 2002 monograph *Die Illusionen der anderen* places the theme of ‘believing or enjoying through the other’ in an explicitly psychoanalytical context, entertaining the thesis that enjoyment – in its Lacanian sense – is necessarily linked to what Pfaller calls ‘objective illusions’. These are illusions that are subscribed to by many, but claimed by no-one; they are ‘disavowed illusions’, as we might say. The upshot is that belief is always deferred, ascribed to others, and that no one wants to be identified as the original ‘possessor’.

Although this is most inspiring work that certainly deserves to be further extended, it seems to me that the concept of interpassivity stands in need of more systematic conceptual investigation and development. It may then show itself to be even more

seminal than already manifested in the work of Žižek and Pfaller. In this article, I propose some modifications to the concept that in my view make it more useful for social, political, and cultural analysis, especially when carried out from a historical perspective, while retaining the concept's avantgardist incisiveness. In their work on interpassivity, both Žižek and Pfaller broach the subject from (at least) two different perspectives, that may or may not consistently mesh. The first perspective is a more sociological one, informed by insights from the philosophy of art. It is mostly anecdotal, offering examples of interpassive art or behaviour, raising questions how best to explain them, and suggesting possible answers. The second perspective is a structural one, deriving from Žižek's philosophical and psychoanalytical vocabulary in turn based upon Hegel and Lacan. The suggestion is that the analysis of interpassive cases strengthens the theory of subjectivity expressed in this vocabulary.

In the first section of this article, I present some preliminary considerations related to the first perspective, asking questions about examples presented by Pfaller and Žižek and outlining topics that need to be discussed in more detail. The second section addresses some of the implications of the psychoanalytical or Lacanian background of Pfaller and Žižek's analysis. Here the intention is not to do full justice to this type of analysis of subjectivity, but only to point out some of its shortcomings. I am concerned with one such shortcoming in particular: the apparent lack of a historical dimension. Against the structural and universal Lacanian approach of Žižek and Pfaller, I propose a more historically informed analysis of interpassivity. From an historical perspective, interpassivity is to be related to the rise of modernity, and – philosophically speaking – to the work of Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx.

Interpassivity is not only historically, but also systematically to be related to modernity. This systematic link is located, in the third section, in the notion of *activity*, as the main characteristic of modernity. Only with the rise of modernism, and thus of the paradigm of activity as a requisite and an imperative of social functioning, can we make sense of Žižek's and Pfaller's explanation of interpassivity as the 'delegation of passivity' to some other actor or institution with the purport to be more active still.

In the fourth section, I argue that we can, and should, refine this historical understanding further yet. In modernity we may be said to outsource passivity, as Žižek and Pfaller argue, but that in more recent decades, the era of late or 'post' modernity, it is rather *activity* that we delegate. Overburdened by the demands of our ever more intensely interactive lifestyle, we yield to this pressure by delegating not passivity but activity, in order to be released, at least partially and for a while, from our interactive burden. In my view, this gives a consistent, and both historically and sociologically insightful extension to the notion of interpassivity. In the concluding, fifth section, I revisit some of the ambiguities surrounding the concept of interpassivity. Some of those appear to be misunderstandings, but others are inherently and constitutively linked to the concept itself, not degrading it but rightly expressing ambiguities characteristic of modern, and late modern, life itself. Consequently, interpassivity can be interpreted as passive or conformist resistance, a kind of 'distress call' of (late) modern subjectivity.

1. Ambiguities and questions concerning interpassivity

The first perspective relates interpassivity to specific behaviour in a concrete, institutional setting, namely that of visitors to contemporary art installations (Pfaller 2002: 27-31). Many such installations are nowadays 'interactive'. It no longer suffices to contemplate or admire them as a distant, uninvolved spectator; they require active participation from the visitor in order to be actualized or realized. This kind of art makes both visitor and artwork dependent on mutual involvement, so as to 'form a double system (...) in which both the work and the viewer can change', thereby not merely extending an invitation but in fact imposing an imperative to participate (Brouwer and Mulder 2007: 5, 77).

The concept of interpassivity takes this logic of interaction one step further and twists it around: it claims that some works of art and media seem to provide for their own reception, 'on behalf of the visitors', so to speak. As opposed to interactive arrangements, in which the work of art 'outsources' part of its own realization to the spectator, interpassive arrangements take up the part normally played by the spectator or consumer, namely the enjoyment or 'consummation' of the work of art. Žižek and Pfaller suggest that the object or artwork 'robs me of my passive enjoyment', so that it can itself 'enjoy the show'. The artwork enjoys, in my place. Perception, as passivity, is transferred from visitor to artwork. That is, the artwork takes over the role played by the visitor, albeit a passive role, that of spectator.

What examples do Žižek and Pfaller offer to illustrate their claims about interpassivity? Next to the art installation example, that I take as a paradigmatic case, typical examples that Žižek and Pfaller mention are: the VCR that watches TV for you, the Tibetan prayer mill that prays in your place, the Xerox-machine that reads texts so that you don't have to, the sitcom audience laughter that replaces your own, the artist that eats your sandwich for you, and curators that study, or reflect on, expositions so that you don't have to (Pfaller 2002: 26-41; Žižek 1997: 109-112). Pfaller and Žižek describe what is 'outsourced', or delegated, alternately as passivity, as enjoyment, and as contemplation.

Some of these examples do indeed nicely bring out more or less embarrassing aspects of modern life, that many will recognize from personal experience. We videotape television programs, but endlessly postpone watching them. Yet we derive a certain amount of pleasure, or satisfaction, from the mere fact of having them on record. We feel like we *almost* watched it; we watched potentially or virtually, as it were, albeit – as we must readily admit – not actually. In a similar vein, we photocopy too many books and articles, and never come around to reading all those copies. Still, we somehow feel that the photocopying does not merely precede the act of reading, but almost serves as a substitute for it. Although, as we must readily admit, we learn nothing from mere photocopying. Less directly related to personal experience, or embarrassment, but also recognizable from cultural life is the remark about curators who, so to speak, pre-empt our visits to musea and exhibitions, leaving us passive rather than engaged and interested. And many, at some time or other, will have wondered about the 'canned laughter' experience offered by sit-com series.

Although much in the examples is recognizable, equally much in them is questionable, ambiguous, or not particularly well suited to express the idea of interpassivity as they themselves present it. We might ask questions such as: How many readers (or authors like Žižek and Pfaller themselves) will actually have let artists eat their sandwiches? How many of them will ever have held a prayer mill, much less use it regularly? More importantly, are Pfaller and Žižek right when they claim that interpassivity means: outsourcing passivity, in order to be more active still? The examples mentioned are unconvincing in this respect. In the case of the sandwich, we outsource enjoyment, but not passivity. Those who *do* use a prayer mill certainly do not do so to be more active in the meantime, or to outsource enjoyment.

Do we outsource enjoyment when we photocopy books, or videotape television programs? These examples do give us pause, because they disturbingly reveal a certain ambiguity in our behaviour. In a sense, we act here against our better judgment. We refrain from undertaking activities that we find enjoyable, or at least claim to find enjoyable. We feel pressed to say that *we would like to* read, or watch, or even would *prefer* to read or watch, instead of copying or taping, but we equally feel that circumstances prevent us from doing so. We lack time, opportunity, or peace of mind. But instead of simply reading or not reading, watching or not watching, we choose a third, rather evasive way: we provisionally *postpone* – or in a sense ‘sublate’ – our proposed plans. Whether we thereby indeed outsource either enjoyment or passivity, depends on how we qualify, first, the behaviour that we outsource, and second, our *Ersatz* behaviour. Both could be judged either ‘active’ or ‘passive’. This ambiguity affects the examples provided by Žižek and Pfaller. As in the case of the sandwich, Pfaller might insist that eating is consumption, and thus passivity. But we would be hard pressed to deny that eating could just as well be characterized as activity. Watching TV would probably qualify as passivity. But is going to the movies passive? Or, still more controversial, reading a book? What kind of book – a comic book, the *Da Vinci Code*, Proust, the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*?

Also, we should ask whether ‘passive’ should always be equated with ‘enjoyable’, as Žižek and Pfaller seem to do. This would imply that we do not enjoy activity. That would be rather puzzling, as Pfaller and Žižek claim that by photocopying or videotaping, we disabuse ourselves of passivity in order to engage in more, and more intense, activity. Why would we do so if we find activity enjoyable, at least more enjoyable than passivity? In what follows, I will try to develop a view of interpassivity that brings out the force of some of Žižek’s and Pfaller’s examples, but also shows others to be unconvincing, or not showing what Žižek and Pfaller intend them to show. This not out of a desire to impose strict order upon an unruly subject, but exactly to do more justice to the ‘uncanny’ dimension of behaviour that Pfaller and Žižek were after when they first proposed the notion of interpassivity. Although I agree in a sense with Pfaller’s thesis that the disruptive force of Žižek’s examples itself constitutes a theoretical tool (Pfaller 2007), and thus are not ‘merely’ illuminating or funny, I also feel that the disruptive force sometimes does damage to the value of the concept. Žižek and Pfaller are on to something, but their first explorations on interpassivity have to be refined and extended in order to develop a concept that is both philosophically challenging and analytically powerful.

2. The historical turn: (re)conceiving interpassivity in history

Let me start with one crucial reason why the examples given by Žižek and Pfaller appear unconvincing. Pfaller and Žižek typically qualify the examples of interpassivity they provide as 'strange', 'unusual', 'peculiar', &c, but the arguments that follow usually yield the conclusion that interpassivity should count as a universal dimension of human subjectivity. This is as unlikely as it is unsatisfactory. How can any phenomenon be uncommon and common at the same time? Or, more precisely, pathological and universal at the same time? To be sure, there is a ready answer to this question: psychoanalysis, in its Lacanian incarnation, which teaches us – to take just one representative formulation – that 'there is no freedom outside the traumatic encounter with the opacity of the Other's desire' (Žižek 2003: 129). Take, for example, the question raised above why we should want to outsource passivity if indeed we find it enjoyable. In Pfaller's and Žižek's texts, we may find, or reconstruct, three possible answers (cf Pfaller 2000: 1-9): we enjoy the outsourcing of enjoyment openly, secretly, or not at all. From the Lacanian perspective, this corresponds with a perverse, a hysteric, and a neurotic attitude. The pervert enjoys the very transfer of enjoyment to others; not being the subject but merely the 'object' of pleasure itself becomes a source of pleasure. The hysteric is a hypocritical pervert, so to speak: although he equally enjoys the transfer of enjoyment, he disavows this pleasure, and perhaps even the delegative act itself. The neurotic, finally, is simply unable to enjoy the interpassive transfer, perhaps because he is plagued by a guilty conscience.

Against this kind of static typology that is forced to describe all normal behaviour as pathological, I want to oppose an analysis that is dynamic and historical, and that reflects plausible motivations in preference to pathological ones. Still, I also find it important to retain at least something of the Lacanian notion that our subjectivity is always somehow fundamentally 'skewed'. However, the notion of interpassivity should not express this as a timeless, unchanging feature of subjectivity, but as a particular kind of distortion inherent in the historical culture of modernity, or (as we shall see) late modernity. This return to a more Hegelian – and, as we shall see, also Feuerbachian – analysis is perhaps best carried out by looking more closely at the way Pfaller and Žižek relate the delegation of enjoyment (*Genuß*, or *jouissance* in Lacanian French) to the outsourcing of belief. Žižek describes enjoyment and belief as two of the three essential elements of Lacanian subjectivity: belief concerns the symbolic order, while enjoyment refers to the real, in the Lacanian sense (1997: 115). Interpassivity is thus defined as 'believing or enjoying through the other' (1997: 113). Both believing and enjoying, as essential characteristics of subjectivity, are only possible through an intervening or observing Other.

That we can realize ourselves only through the other is of course still fully within the bounds of the Hegelian concept of subjectivity. The Lacanian move is to declare that interpassivity does not merely imply that we enjoy or believe through the other, but that such 'delegation' simultaneously acts as a 'defence mechanism' against the demands of the symbolic order, or the real (1997: 115). We need this defence mechanism because we are necessarily ambivalent regarding our need to 'outsource' part of our subjectivity: we are reluctant to affirm this 'delegation', and also reluctant to disavow it. Hence the

necessarily pathological forms of enjoyment or belief represented by neurosis, hysteria, and perversion.

Hence also the role played by *ideology* in Žižek's and Pfaller's analysis of interpassivity. Ideology stands in for – impossible – 'real belief', as ideology refers to the readiness to take for real what is merely an externalized part of our own consciousness, or subjectivity. Because we, as enlightened subjects, are at least partly aware that culture, the symbolic order, &c, are projections or externalizations of our own consciousness, ideology implies that we hypostatize something we know to be merely a part of ourselves. And in reverse, the real is that which we cannot deal with precisely because it resists reification, or hypostatization (cf 1997: 98). I am interested in this discussion not so much for its Lacanian twist as for its focus on German idealism as the historical framework where the roots of the notion of interpassivity are to be found. As mentioned, interpassivity is basically heir to the Hegelian analysis of subjectivity. Instead of following Lacan's systematic twist, I propose that we look more historically and situate the origin of interpassivity in the work of Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx.

Feuerbach, we may recall, anthropologized Hegel's notion of human consciousness by declaring that either *Geist* or religion is merely the externalization of human consciousness, or subjectivity. Following Hegel's view of the development of human subjectivity as a process of externalization and re-appropriation, Feuerbach concluded that we necessarily hypostatize part of our own subjectivity. Or, in the terms of our present discussion, that we necessarily 'delegate' or 'outsource' part of our subjectivity. But, as Feuerbach argued in addition, it is also something that we keep an intimate relation with, as it is, after all, something that we 'disowned'. In Žižekian terms: such fetishism is a structural feature of subjectivity, as reality is structured by belief, by a faith in fantasy that we know to be a fantasy yet believe nonetheless. Hence our ambivalent relation to the outsourced 'content': we cannot fully embrace it, nor can we fully disavow it.

In turn, Karl Marx 'modernized' Feuerbach (and Hegel) by arguing that, in the historical and social conditions of the nineteenth century, man's defining characteristic was not consciousness but human activity, or 'praxis'. Under capitalist conditions, this praxis was of course tainted by the expropriation of the labourers, who are divested of their means of production. This fully externalized or 'objectified' alienation was reflected in the 'false' consciousness of labourers, and in the contradictions that would eventually result in capitalism's self-destruction – presumably leading to a non-alienated praxis as well as a non-false consciousness.

The link with Marx is worth pointing out if only because both Pfaller and Žižek relate their analysis of interpassivity to the capitalist structure of society, through a complex, if not convoluted, discussion of the role of fetishism and ideology in capitalist society. This brings up the difficult question whether fetishism will disappear with the (eventual) demise of capitalism, although simultaneously it is held to be inherent in human subjectivity. Žižek and Pfaller should answer, I imagine, that the fall of capitalism alone cannot de-alienate subjectivity. Whatever that is, it can only come about through a full embracement, or affirmation, of the objectively non-alienated praxis by the subject. On the one hand, we should recognize that part of our subjectivity is necessarily externalized and thus

'fetishized'; on the other hand, we should embrace and affirm this fact of 'delegation' as part of the inevitable make-up of modern subjectivity.

What I would like to emphasize here, however, is the *modernist* dimension of Marx's thesis, in which *activity* appears as the key term. My contention is that the notion of interpassivity, as Žižek and Pfaller use it, is to be understood historically, and associated with both the rise of modernism and the predominance of activity, or praxis, within the modernist experience of subjectivity. Interpassivity is not to be understood as a timeless, universal structure of human subjectivity, but as a contingent, historical phenomenon that came into being with the rise of modernism. In this first section, this point was made primarily by showing that a philosophical 'genealogy' traces interpassivity back to the modernist, and idealist, philosophy of Hegel and Feuerbach. In the next section, I will discuss in more detail the importance of activity for understanding interpassivity, in a historical way.

3. The modern turn: outsourcing passivity

Modernity, however we choose to define or outline it, is constitutively afflicted by an activist attitude. This sense of activity is of course implicit in the very philosophy of Marx, and that of his predecessor Hegel. With Hegel, as the primary philosophical thinker of modernity (cf. Habermas 1983), we may say that in modernity, subjectivity itself has become historical – that is to say, an active force shaping reality. It is active in its very essence, always attempting to realize itself in its never-ceasing conflict with the material world and with other subjects. The modern subject is the active creator of the world, not merely 'projecting' it through the working of his mind but constituting it practically through real engagement and confrontation. This perspective is further radicalized by Marx, who in fact declared that philosophy now had to give way to an analysis of praxis, of the practical activity of human beings. The analysis of modernity had to focus not on consciousness but on labour, and the way it was organized in society.

Modernity exudes an atmosphere of activity, of moulding and transforming both the material world and social relations. As Baudelaire famously remarked in *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, modernity is what is transitory, fugitive, contingent. The 19th century's notion of modernity, Habermas (1983, 15-16) noted, is suffused by 'dynamic terms such as revolution, progress, emancipation, development, crisis', making it both a unique period in history, and a period obsessed with activity (cf. Edgar 2005, 191). Nothing is supposed to remain the way it is; everything is drawn into a state of flux, and 'all that is solid melts into air', as Marx and Engels put it in their highly modernist *Communist Manifesto*, and as echoed in the title of Marshall Berman's well-known book on modernity. As Berman (1982: 91) writes, 'Marx is not only describing but evoking and enacting the desperate pace and frantic rhythm that capitalism imparts to every facet of modern life'. And of course, the *Communist Manifesto* is all about revolution, about radically upsetting and overturning existing social relations.

Exposed to the pressure to be active, subjects now experience themselves as being 'driven by time', as standing in danger of 'losing time'. This is already inherent in the industrial, or capitalist, organisation of production, for which 'time is money'. Georg Simmel has shown how this mentality or experience has become characteristic of social experience and behaviour in general (Simmel 1901, 1903). And Pfaller himself explicitly associates activity with production and passivity with consumption, thus linking interpassivity simultaneously to the modernist theme of activity and to the Marxist theme of production (2002, 29).

More recently, Hartmut Rosa (2005) has argued that modernity is characterized by changes in time structure, or more specifically by the phenomena of *movement* and of *acceleration*, leading among other things to experiencing a 'lack of time', of being pressured, and the sense of 'time flashing by' (2005, 213-218). Such experiences constitute stress factors, affecting all areas of life. In general, the number of *potential* possibilities is growing so fast, in comparison to whatever we manage to actualize in our individual lives, that the *Ausschöpfungsgrad*, as Rosa calls it – our rate of actualization, as it were – irrevocably tends to fall – just as Karl Marx argued regarding capitalist profit rates (2005, 294). In other words, no matter how many possibilities we realize, we will always end up dissatisfied, because ever more options will be left unrealized.

This particularly modern kind of discontent even affects our free time. It is a common experience that leisure or 'free time' in modern life is not really free, but beset by and invested with the same kind of expectations, pressures, and stress factors as our 'unfree' time. We want to 'make the most' of our free time, to spend it as effectively or satisfactorily as possible, not to waste opportunities, &c. Accordingly, time 'freed up' by outsourcing (pre)occupations is not left idle, as one would perhaps expect. It is either carefully organized so as to provide the maximum of relaxation, enjoyment, or revitalisation, or it is 'directly' spent on *Ersatz* activities that demand our more immediate attention, or somehow seem more pertinent.

Consequently, it seems to me that the concept of interpassivity – as Žižek and Pfaller define it – is most usefully and consistently applied not to the whole of history or culture, but specifically to the period of modernity. Here we can plausibly say that subjectivity is 'haunted' by the expectation of incessant activity. Accordingly, we search for possibilities to decrease our passivity, and increase our activity. Or rather, for ways to project a *semblance* of incessant activity, or to keep open the options for future activity. As Rosa remarks, we spend a considerable amount of our time nowadays on merely keeping options open – although the number of options rises much faster anyway than our ability to realize them, as we noted above.

And finally, is not Žižek himself the ultimate modernist, or perhaps better, the ultimate meta-modernist? Are not his two intellectual sources of inspiration the first philosophical modernist Hegel, and the last modernist psychoanalyst Lacan? And are not – despite the dazzling, wonderfully humoristic variety of subjects, and the luminous insights into the human condition – are not his targets of analysis and criticism typically modernist, such as German idealism, communism, capitalism, fundamentalism, totalitarianism, film, opera? Is not – to round off this typically Žižekian series of interrogative rhetorical

questions – Žižek in fact best described as a political *anthropologist*, that most modern species of the human sciences?

4. The late- or postmodern turn: outsourcing activity

To understand interpassivity not as a timeless aspect of subjectivity but as a historically shaped phenomenon not only implies that it came about at some particular moment, but also suggests that it may dissolve, change shape, or undergo some other kind of transformation at a later time. And this is indeed what I want to argue: the changes that have affected modernity in the last few decades – changes that may or may not be adequately described by terms such as late modernity or postmodernity – also affect the ‘trade-off’ between activity and passivity as conceptualized in the notion of interpassivity.

To see what this might entail, let’s return to the observation we started out with, that of interpassivity in art. The original idea proposed by Pfaller and Žižek was, as we saw, that the relation between art(work) and visitor underwent a fundamental change. Although they do not provide a concrete historical timeframe, it is clear that this change is of recent origin, roughly the last two decades. In this period, interactive art – or at least some part of it – became interpassive. Realization of the artwork still requires activity, as was the case in interactive art, but this activity is now being taken over by the artwork itself (or in some cases, the artist herself).

In order to better understand where and how my own view on the nature of this ‘interpassive turn’ differs from Žižek’s and Pfaller’s view, it is enlightening to point out that the artwork example – in my view correctly – suggests a more encompassing development of the relation between visitor and artwork than the mere passage from interactivity to interpassivity. Before it became interactive, art clearly was ‘non-interactive’. That is to say, just as in its interpassive incarnation, it did not require interaction by visitors. Nevertheless, the ‘pre-interactive’ phase was different from the interpassive one, as the artwork had not yet gone through the interactive turn. While in the ‘pre-interactive’ phase participation by the visitor was *not needed*, and in the interactive phase *required*, in the interpassive phase it is *no longer* needed. As Žižek puts it, (in the interpassive phase) the artist inscribes into the product not only the traces of its production process (the standard avant-garde procedure), but the anticipated reactions of the passive observer (Žižek 2002: xxxi). In other words, the interpassive artwork ‘pre-empts’ the visitor’s reaction, or contribution – a reaction, or contribution, that was required by the interactive artwork, but not even expected, or solicited, by its pre-interactive predecessor.

We may extend this idea beyond the sphere of art. Instead of confining the analysis to the relation between artwork and visitor, we can – at least as a provisional hypothesis – transpose it to other settings. We may replace ‘work’ by ‘institution’, and ‘visitor’ by citizen, user, client, consumer, labourer, or member of a family, as we have quite often developed an interactive relation with the institution or authority that regulates our life in such capacities (cf author 2006). A typical example is politics, where one-way, paternalistic relations have given way, in the sixties and seventies, to two-way, interactive patterns of

communication and opinion-formation. But also in the private sphere, such a transformation has taken place. Family relations also have developed from what Dutch sociologist Bram de Swaan (1990: 139-167) calls a 'command household', ruled by 'the head of the family', to a 'negotiation household', in which decisionmaking is typically subject to discussion, negotiation, and renegotiation. Similarly, institutional arrangements have developed in the sphere of labour that enable workers to participate, to some degree at least, in the process of decisionmaking. Also, institutions for higher education have been 'democratized', transforming from 'command' to 'negotiation' households. And we can think of many other examples in which we have become a partner in negotiation, or a 'stake holder', in capacities such as consumer, user, or client.

From this perspective, it appears that our relation to – at least a number of – social institutions has undergone a structural transformation: from command household to negotiation household to what we may perhaps call an 'interpassive household'. In neither of these three phases, it should be noted, are we merely passive, uninvolved subjects. Simple, unquestioning obedience to authority is incompatible with our status as enlightened subjects. This is already clear from Kant's exposition in *Über den Gemeinspruch*. Although authorities may rightly expect us to obey, we always have at least the right, and perhaps even the duty, to point out mistakes they have made, and errors they have committed. As enlightened subjects, we are thus always already capable, even required, to exercise our powers of understanding and of critique.

What changes, in the development of kinds of 'households', is thus the type of response to the authority of institutions (the family, the corporation, the political system, &c). And indeed, in the early seventies, institutional relations started to become interactive: the transformation of command household into negotiation household started to take place. It should be noted here once more that we did not transform from passive into active subjects, but rather that we were already active, modern, 'enlightened' subject whose status was 'confirmed', and in a sense brought to completion, by the 'interactive turn'. In late sixties and the seventies, individuals became emancipated in both their public and their private life. They demanded, and obtained, a say in how institutions are organized, in processes of decisionmaking at a variety of levels in a wide array of social institutions. As emancipated subjects, they henceforth expected that their voice be heard, and their interests taken account of, in institutional decisionmaking. At least at the level of procedure, emancipated individuals developed a high degree of involvement in the institutional life of society.

Or, translated back into the terms of artwork and visitor, the 'artworks' of social institutions could only realize themselves – that is, identify their objectives, execute their procedures, and establish their legitimacy – through the active involvement of the visitors. In other words, by becoming interactive. Both the institutions and the visitors – or citizens, labourers, clients, users, &c – now find their active status confirmed and enhanced by the acquisition of an interactive dimension. Now let us push the analogy a bit further still. To start with, let's recall Pfaller's description of the interpassive artwork as the 'reverse' of an interactive one. In the latter, a part of the artistic production ('activity') is shifted from artist to visitor, while in the former, the contemplation ('passivity') is transferred from visitor to

artwork (2002: 27). We can now see that this is not quite right, as the visitor in the interactive phase was not 'passive' but, indeed, (inter)active. Pfaller's description would apply better to the situation before interactivity, where we might say that the visitor merely contemplates the artwork, and in that sense is 'passive'. (Although, as argued above, even then they are not merely passive receptors but 'actors', in the sense that it is their understanding and their critical powers that make the modern perception of art possible in the first place.)

My proposal is that we take the interpassive relation not as a further intensification of the interactive one – as the interactive relation was already an intensification of the non-interactive (but nevertheless active!) preceding relation – but rather as a *reaction* to the interactive relation. We should see the interpassive attitude – the behaviour exhibited and the self-experience expressed by a subject in an interpassive relation – as a symptom expressing an ambiguous message. By being interpassive, the subject indicates that he feels overburdened by the demands of (inter)activity, yet cannot, or does not want to, sever or disengage himself entirely from this relation. We can thus characterize interpassivity as the delegation of *activity*, not passivity – a delegation necessitated by an acute sense of being overwhelmed by interactive engagements and obligations. Our self-understanding as being fully emancipated, interactive subject creates its own downfall, so to speak: as we become overburdened by our interactive lifestyle, we try to keep it up by outsourcing, or delegating, part of our interactivity.

The interpassive attitude in its proper, 'late modern' sense, that of outsourcing activity, is thus as ambiguous as its counterpart in the modern sense (as represented by Pfaller and Žižek), that of outsourcing passivity. Both flow from the same, or a similar, experience of pressure: the pressure of showing conformity with active, even hyperactive, life. In the phase of (inter)activity, the movement of outsourcing was accommodating, even affirmative: it served to keep up the appearance and the sensation of being an adequate participant in modern life. We try to retain control over, and remain 'owner' of, all our activities, whether we 'transfer' them to others or not. Although, as noted, the 'trade-off' is ambiguous, and in a sense against our better judgment. What we want mostly, in the end, is to present an *attitude* of activity to the world. Even if we do not *really* trade in passivity for activity, we feel pressured to act *as if* this were the case. Interpassivity – in the sense here ascribed to Žižek and Pfaller – is thus more about the *fantasy* of delegating passivity, and thereby increasing activity, than about the *reality* of such a 'swap' – a proper Žižekian twist, we might add. Whether we really gain time, and whether we really spend this time on (more) activity, matters less than that we feel pressured to present ourselves as attempting such realize such swaps.

Pfaller and Žižek are thus right in arguing that interpassivity is a strange kind of 'show' we put on to 'make believe' – to others, but also to ourselves – that we are fully adequate interactive subjects, while in fact we are not. Or more precisely, not any more. My point is that our failing attempts to remain interactive subjects forces us to become interpassive in the sense that we now illicitly transfer, or delegate, our (inter)*activity* to others. Pfaller and Žižek are also partly right in their satirical analysis of interpassivity as the postponing of plans and activities against our better judgment: we let the VCR record a

TV program, while already sensing that we may not come around to watching it later. The Hegelian term 'sublation' (*Aufhebung*) thus expresses very well the ambiguity inherent in interpassive behavior: plans are 'stored', in the sense of 'put on hold', as well as cancelled, as well as postponed, exactly in order to be carried out better, *eventually*.

But where Pfaller and Žižek continue in the modernist vein by arguing that interpassivity is a strategy to keep up an active life, and thus merely the continuation of the fantasy typical to modernity, in my view interpassive behavior signals a kind of wariness, and even *resistance*, regarding the demands of interactive life. An ambiguous signal, to be sure, because we do not readily admit to such *interactive metal fatigue*, as I have dubbed it elsewhere (author 2004, 2006). The interpassive subject desperately wants to remain 'loyal', or true, to the interactive relation, yet indicates a desire to be released from its burden. As a result, he 'disowns' the implied activities, half-heartedly transferring them to others rather than fully renouncing them.

Inevitably, the desire to be interpassive is rarely expressed forthrightly. If it were, it would indeed not be interpassive, but rather transmogrify back into *interactive* behavior, voicing opinions and claims in a setting of communicative reciprocity. The interactive subject must employ some other means to express his discontent – a discontent of which he is not, or at least not fully, conscious. The interpassive attitude is thus indirect, evasive, and characterized by a certain, indeed, passiveness. It evinces a desire to remain aloof. It is *interpassive* because it attempts to embed this passivity *within* the interactive relation, keeping this relation formally intact but tending to empty it of its purpose. It is thus a form of, albeit half-hearted, resistance not so much against (inter)activity itself, as against the pressure exerted by what the subject experiences as excessive interactive pressure. For the interpassive subject, interactive has precisely become 'too much of a good thing'.

As a consequence, the interpassive subject is one that is 'present yet passive'. Or more revealingly, one that is 'passive yet present'. For 'present yet passive' would be a more proper description of the pre-interactive relation (although, again, passive would not be quite right here either). 'Passive yet present', on the other hand, indicates that the interpassive relation yields to the subject's preference for passivity, yet makes him want to remain present and 'connected', as he was in the interactive situation. Applied to the artwork example: the presence of the visitor is still needed, but not his active involvement. The visitor is made redundant, in the sense that his or her *involvement* in the realization of the work has become superfluous. Apparently, the artwork is now able and willing to consummate itself, actively dis-interesting the spectator in its realization. The visitor, we may conclude, is literally left on stand-by. And so, more generally, is the interpassive subject.

5. Tarrying with the ambiguous

This article pursues a subject that is as ambitious as it is ambiguous. It is consciously and intentionally ambiguous, in that it works toward a more consistent concept of interpassivity that is better equipped to explain social and cultural development, while simultaneously valuing and retaining several, though not all, of the ambiguities that seem inherent in the

concept as originally proposed by Žižek and Pfaller. Ambiguity is what gave life to the concept of interpassivity in the first place: why should anyone want to delegate enjoyment? Perhaps some of the examples given by Žižek and Pfaller are not fully valid, or to the point, but quite enough remains to make us feel uneasy. There is something uncanny in our behavior here, and this concept captures it, or some of it. Next, and in the same vein, the examples highlight pathological behavior, behavior that seems irrational and unusual, yet (psycho!)analysis identifies it as common and widely spread. Again, although we may justifiably conclude that this analysis is somehow flawed, we are left with a nagging suspicion that there may be something to it after all.

More ambiguities show up along the way. We may ask – a question that I did not get around to address explicitly – whether the distinction between active and passive is really tenable. Can active and passive behavior so neatly be distinguished, or be distinguished at all? As one might ask with e.g. Mladen Dolar (2000): is not every action also a reaction? And: is enjoyment really enjoyable, or is it always already spoiled – as well as enabled – by the presence of the Other, whether real or fantasized, and therefore irredeemably tainted as neurotic, hysteric, or perverse?

These last two sources of ambiguity – the active-passive problem and the psychoanalytic take – I have chosen to eliminate. Perhaps the most radical decision is the refusal to follow the psychoanalytic approach to interpassivity. I find that it restricts, more than enables, historical and social investigation. Its strength is to show up pathologies in apparently normal behavior; its weakness is to show up normality in apparently pathological behavior. While it can produce sparkling and fascinating insights in cultural anthropology and philosophical psychology, it is poorly equipped to understand either historical development or social differentiation. See for example Mladen Dolar's contribution to Pfaller's original 2000 collection on interpassivity, where he tries to show that interpassivity is already to be found in the choir in Greek tragedy, and is more generally to be equated with 'culture' or 'media' (Dolar 2000).

Different considerations apply to the possible ambiguity of activity versus passivity. Indeed behavior is often not easily identified as either (completely) active or (completely) passive. Is watching a movie active or passive? Reading a book? We should note that even language itself is ambiguous, or recalcitrant here. Despite, or perhaps because, the clear and even categorical division between active and passive modes in which verbs may be used, we are almost forced to describe what someone is occupied with in *active* terms. For instance, when we say: 'Reading and watching TV are activities that many people enjoy', we do not really mean to qualify reading and watching TV as *activities*, yet language forces this qualification upon us. We will be hard pressed to find an alternative grammar that properly expresses an essential passivity in anything that 'happens' (in a *Vorgang*, in German). Probably the best we can do is employ 'proxy' verbs such as 'linger', 'protract', or 'tarry' – or the German term *Betrachtung*, which carries a more active connotation than its English counterpart 'contemplation' (although Pfaller associates it with passivity: 2002, 27).

Yet, I have chosen to slight these considerations and employ, or construct, a robust opposition between activity and passivity. As did Pfaller and Žižek, although – as explained

above – I identify ‘activity’ as a qualification typical of modern subjectivity, not of subjectivity in general. Also, where Pfaller identifies activity with production and passivity with consumption, I propose to shift the emphasis from production of *goods* in the Marxist sense to production of *social norms* in the Kantian sense. The main object of analysis thus becomes the transition from interactive (autonomous) subjects who see themselves as co-producers of social norms (or in Kantian terms, as participants in moral legislation), to interpassive subjects who still feel interactively connected to the social production of norms but see the resulting norms not as a shared product but rather as something alien that is to be consumed rather than respected, much less held in reverence. As a corollary, where the interactive subject felt obliged to act upon the norms he co-produced, the interpassive subject feels disempowered to act upon such norms; he finds himself unable to ‘deliver’. We might say that the interpassive subject suffers from *Kantian incapacitation*.

Suffering, we should note, is the correct way of expressing this affliction. The interpassive subject is generally not unwilling to act in accordance with the norms he (co-) affirmed; however, he finds himself unable to do so. The interpassive subject does not turn against the ideals of interactivity and emancipation. It is precisely because he has embraced them so wholeheartedly that he now – after trying to act on them for years or even decades – starts to feel overwhelmed by the unrelenting weight of their demands. The emancipatory pressure of always performing as one’s own moral laws prescribe, is beginning to exact its toll. The interpassive subject wants a ‘break’ from the moral demands – but where Kant, in the *Grundlegung*, described this wish as an illegitimate revolt of the desires against moral reason, the cause of the interpassive ‘revolt’ is something more akin to exhaustion (cf Rosa’s *Ausschöpfungsgrad!*). The interpassive subject suffers from *interactive metal fatigue*: the incessant strain of interactivity is causing minifractures in the emancipated armour of (post)modern subjects.

This Kantian incapacitation and its resultant exhaustion of practical capacities might also go to explain the inarticulate discontent, the fragile self-esteem and the languid attitude typically expressed by interpassive subjects described by Pfaller, Žižek, and myself (author 2004, 2006). It is also in line with the typical kind of ambiguity expressed in Mannoni’s ‘I know very well, but still...’. Although the interpassive subject may delegate the actions he cannot perform, or the commitment he cannot bring himself to embrace, neither can he bring himself to enjoy the resulting (interpassive) state of affairs. He feels discontented and disappointed with himself, with his inability to fulfil the promise of interactive life.

Pfaller suggests that the interpassive subject may reclaim enjoyment by reflectively affirming the fact of delegation of enjoyment. This seems an odd suggestion, for how can we wholeheartedly affirm what we half-heartedly renounce? There are two possible answers here, neither particularly attractive or convincing. The first is the one given by Pfaller in *Illusionen der Anderen*: the delegation of enjoyment *produces* new enjoyment – in fact, it even produces *surplus* enjoyment, arising out of ‘diebische Freude’ (Pfaller 2002: 43). The second is the Žižekian-Lacanian answer: by affirming our interpassive delegation of enjoyment, we ‘traverse the fantasy’. We affirm what cannot be affirmed because it is the structuring fantasy of our subjectivity, ‘the abyss of the Other’s impenetrable desire’

(Žižek 1997: 30-31), or in yet other terms: the attitude of affirming the delegation of enjoyment would be a case of 'actively endorsing the passive confrontation with 'objet petit a"' (ibid.), the ever-elusive particle that stands for our constitutive fantasy of what the Other sees in us. Pfaller's explanation is unattractive because it is merely a variation on the theme of perversion: enjoying that we have let someone else take over our enjoyment. Žižek's, or Lacan's, explanation is unattractive because it merely offers us reflective self-understanding of our ineradicably perverse nature: 'enjoy your symptom!' Both answers thus, perhaps surprisingly, come to the same thing: an affirmation of our passivity.

Finally, it is also ambiguous how we should interpret the development from interactivity to interpassivity in political terms. On the one hand, it indicates an affirmation of the 'system' by its participants, a desire to 'do what it takes' and to be (inter)actively involved as a 'co-producer' of institutional and social norms. Simultaneously, it also signals a growing inability to keep up with the demands of the interactive democracy, to be relieved from the burdens it imposes. So we may also view interpassivity, on the other hand, as a form of resistance against the conglomerate of interactive systems - whether we identify this as modernity, emancipation, capitalism, or disciplinary society, to name but a few. As argued above, interpassivity attempts to embed passivity *within* the interactive relation, which may be interpreted both as loyalty to the system, and as a form of resistance.

In sum, interpassivity is an intrinsic product of modernity, yet also expressing a particular form of discontent with modernity. As interactivity realizes the full promise of modernity and enlightenment, in terms of emancipation and participation as general principles of social recognition, interpassivity indicates how the stress produced by this realized promise of emancipation and participation leads to phenomena of delegation, disavowal, and even resistance. In this view, interpassivity is part of the story of 'modernity and its discontents'. Literally even: the discontent is a dis-content, an outsourcing of the interactive content to others, disavowing the obligation to affirm interactively constituted social norms, and more especially the obligation to *act* on them. As we saw, the interpassive subject is not primarily a victim, nor a perpetrator; in essence, he is a bystander. He is neither for nor against, but merely: present.

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