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Robert Pfaller

Little Gestures of Disappearance(1) Interpassivity and the Theory of Ritual

Summary:

In this essay the concept of interpassivity is presented as a theoretical tool for understanding the ritual. This concept, interpassivity, was originally developed for the discourse of contemporary art—where it had a strategic value in criticizing the predominant notion of interactivity. For ritual theory, the concept of interpassivity can serve to clarify the idea that ritual came before myth; to point out the critical value of this key thesis of the so-called “ritualists” (Robertson Smith, Wellhausen, Freud, Wittgenstein) without succumbing to the anti-ritualist conclusions that can be drawn from it—as Mario Perniola has pointed out. With the help of the concept of interpassivity, we can show what it means to insist on this thesis, and we can, then, insist on it without ever regarding cultures that have only rituals, but no myths, as primitive.

Interpassivity Versus Interactivity

Obviously, the concept of interpassivity is opposed to that of interactivity. Interactivity in the arts means that observers must not only indulge in observation (“passivity”(2)), but also have to contribute creative “activity” for the completion of the artwork. The interactive artwork is a work that is not yet finished, but “waits” for some creative work that has to be added to it by the observer.

What could be the inverse structure of that? The artwork, then, would already be more than finished. Not only no activity, but also no passivity would have to be added to it. Observers would be relieved from creating as well as from observing. The artwork would be an artwork that observes itself. An example given by Slavoj Žižek seemed to perfectly exemplify this construction:

[...] let us remind ourselves of a phenomenon quite usual in popular television shows or serials: ‘canned laughter’. After some supposedly funny or witty remark, you can hear the laughter and applause included in the soundtrack of the show itself [...] So even if, tired from a hard day’s stupid work, all evening we did nothing but gaze drowsily into the television screen, we can say afterwards that objectively, through the medium of the other, we had a really good time.

(Žižek 1989, p. 34)

For psychoanalytical theory, Žižek had drawn from this example the conclusion that allegedly “subjective”, “interior” entities such as feelings, emotions, thoughts, convictions etc. can have an “objective”, “exterior” existence. In the context of art theory, this is an example of an artwork that observes itself: an interpassive artwork. The TV comedy laughs about itself—in place of the observers who can delegate their amusement (as their “passivity”) to the artwork. Interpassivity in this case consists in delegated amusement.

Delegating One's Pleasure

Starting from this example and its structural idea, we soon discover that interpassivity is a general, extremely widespread phenomenon in culture. There are a lot of people who do not only not want to laugh but who also do not want to have other pleasures, and strive for delegating them. For example, there are people who use their video recorders in an interpassive way: when they find out that an interesting program is coming up on TV, they carefully program their recorders in order to record it. Then they feel relaxed and go out to meet some friends while the program is shown. Later they come home, they check whether everything has been recorded, and then, with deep satisfaction, they put the tape on a shelf without ever watching it. It is as if the machine had watched the program instead of the observers, vicariously.

Such phenomena from everyday culture allowed us to develop a general terminology: Interpassivity is delegated "passivity" – in the sense of delegated pleasure, or delegated consumption. Interpassive people are those who want to delegate their pleasures or their consumptions. And interpassive media are all the agents–machines, people, animals etc.–to whom interpassive people can delegate their pleasures. If, for example, you have a dog that eats your cake in your place, the dog functions as your interpassive medium. If, for a moment, we leave aside the intriguing question why people wish to delegate their pleasures, we can concentrate upon the question how they do it. Also this question, the question of the method of interpassivity, turned out to be quite difficult and intriguing. It was here that we discovered the rituals of interpassivity.

The Rituals of Interpassivity

At first sight, it was very difficult for us to determine how the delegation of pleasure takes place in the cases of interpassivity: How can a pleasure be delegated to another person, just as to a machine?(3) What is the link connecting the interpassive person with her interpassive medium? How can we tell, for example, that this video recorder is now watching TV in my place – and not, for example, in yours?

When someone has an artificial exterior organ, then we can see tubes that connect the body with its exterior organ, and, from the tubes, we can easily determine for whom this organ works. But in the case of interpassivity there are no such tubes that would connect a video recorder with an absent person, or canned laughter with somebody who does not pay attention. What, then, connects the person with her medium of enjoyment?

To clarify this, another example can be helpful. One may be familiar with the interpassive behavior of some intellectuals in libraries: these intellectuals find an interesting book, rush to the Xerox machine, copy some hundred pages, and then they give the book back and go home with a deep sense of satisfaction – as if the machine had already read the text in their place. The crucial point in this case of interpassive behavior is in the figurativeness of the act: what the intellectuals do (usually without knowing it) is to act as if the Xerox machine were reading the text. They literally play reading by means of the machine: the light of attention, as it were, is shed on every page, one after the other, in a linear consecution; slowly the machine "looks" at every line, and every page.

Figurativeness, and the substitution of a real act (like reading) by a figurative representation of it (like photocopying), is characteristic of ritual action. Interpassivity consists in ritual acts. This ritual character of interpassive practices provides us with an answer concerning the method of interpassivity: The interpassive person and her medium are thus not connected by tubes, but by a representation. The interpassive person delegates her pleasure to a medium by ritually causing this medium to perform a figurative representation of consumption. The one who ritually causes this act is the one for whom the medium reads, observes, laughs, eats etc.

A Magic of the Civilized

The ritual figurativeness that we have encountered within interpassivity is especially characteristic of magic action, where, as Sigmund Freud remarked, a symbol assumes the full value of the symbolized.(4) For example, in Haitian voodoo, the symbolic killing of a person (by mutilating a small sculpture which represents this person) assumes the full value of the symbolized real killing. In the same way the symbolic

representation of reading by photocopying assumes for the interpassive intellectual the full value of real reading, providing him with full satisfaction. Just as, for the so-called “savage”, an act of voodoo may replace a real act of murder, for the intellectual, an act of interpassivity may replace a real act of intellectual work. Interpassivity can therefore quite aptly be called a magic of the civilized.

The only difference between the “savage” and our “civilized” intellectual consists in the fact that only the savage is aware of the fact that he is practising magic. The civilized, on the contrary, is not. What distinguishes the civilized from the savage is therefore not the fact that only the savage were performing magic acts, but – since both are performing them – the fact that only the savage is aware of it. Being civilized therefore seems to imply a lack of awareness of what one is really doing.

Devoid of any idea but still caught up in illusion

This civilized lack of awareness creates a strange position of the interpassive person vis-à-vis the illusion at work in interpassivity. For it is obvious that the act of photocopying in all its astonishing figurativeness stages an illusion – the illusion of reading. And of course, the photocopying intellectuals do not succumb to this illusion. Not for one moment do they believe that the machine could read in their place. They usually do not even think of this illusion. They just perform it: they act as if the machine could read for them.

This bears out the fact that, devoid of any idea, one can still be caught up within an illusion. The kind of illusion we are facing here is therefore completely different from the structure of illusions as analyzed by philosophical tradition – where you have, for example, the image of a hand before your eyes, but you do not know if there really is a hand. In this Cartesian type of illusion you are aware of the image but uncertain about its truth-value. Yet in the illusion we are dealing with here, exactly the opposite is the case: you are completely certain about the image’s truth value (the machine cannot read for you), but unaware of the image (which structures the situation you are in). “For they know not what they believe” – this would be, in biblical terms, the formula for the civilized position towards the illusion at work in interpassivity.

Illusions Without a Subject

However, as soon as one would make the illusion at work in the situation explicit (“Hey, you are acting as if...”), the civilized would immediately be able to recognize the illusion as an illusion, just as well as the savage does. For neither even think that representations of killing or reading were the same as killing or reading. They do not believe in the equivalence between the symbol and the symbolized. As Ludwig Wittgenstein has pointed out, this lack of belief is a fundamental condition for practicing magic. Those who practice magic always clearly distinguish these magic practices from real, technical measures and they distinguish between situations in which they apply the ones or the others.(5)

Magic thus presupposes that the magician does not take a symbolic act for real. In case that someone does that, if he takes a purely symbolic act for a real act, he succumbs to an illusion, but does not practice magic. If, for example, I am at a soccer game and shout to a player who is too busy or too far away to hear me, I may believe in an illusion of communication, but I am not practicing magic. If, on the contrary, at home I shout to a soccer player shown on television, I do not at all believe that he could hear me, but I do practice magic. The recognition of the purely symbolic character of the magic practices is indicated by the shamefulness with which they are usually performed. This symbolic dimension also gets designated by their practitioners – strangely – through remarks like “this does not mean anything”.(6)

The illusion at stake in the practices of interpassivity therefore has a very interesting and particular kind of ownership: it is in a way nobody’s illusion, an anonymous illusion, an illusion without a subject.(7) None of the real persons present at this little spectacle (and, in our Xerox example, the copying intellectual is quite often the only present person) has to believe in this illusion. The possibility of delegated reading does not depend on the presence of a believer, since it is not just a subjective illusion: delegation works for the intellectuals not because they thought that the machine could read for them; the machine reads for them because somebody else, an anonymous naive observer, could have thought that.(8) In this sense, the anonymous illusion is an “objective” illusion. The interpassive act of photocopying is an act that takes place, as it were, in the medium of the others’ illusion. Therefore, when Žižek wrote that with TV-Sitcoms “objectively, through the medium of the other, we had a really good time”, this not only referred to the

objectivity attained by the “reification” of our amusement in the canned laughter; it also pointed to the objectivity of the illusion at work in the situation.

The Interpassivity of Rituals

With the help of an objective, anonymous illusion we can interpassively delegate all our pleasures and acts of consumption (like laughing, reading, eating, drinking etc.) to an interpassive medium. Somebody else – an anonymous other, not we – believes, then, in the equivalence and thinks that we were enjoying; and this anonymous belief in our enjoyment brings about the deep satisfaction that we experience when we never watch our VRC tapes.

This structure also applies for religious belief. Religious belief, too, can become subject to interpassive practice. Not we have to believe, then, ourselves (and consume, as it were, the “comforts of religion”), but only some anonymous other has to be made believe that we believed. Thanks to an anonymous illusion we are therefore able to derive a lot of satisfaction from not believing in our own religion.

The anonymous belief, which allows us not to believe, is being established through performing the ritual. This objective illusion is at work in almost all ritual religious practices. Therefore we can say that there exists a profound interpassivity of the ritual as such. Through rituals, individuals delegate their religious beliefs to interpassive media. Not only is interpassivity based on ritual, but also the ritual itself is based on interpassivity. Slavoj Žižek has pointed this out with regard to the use of Tibetan prayer wheels. Žižek describes this practice as follows:

you write a prayer on a paper, put the rolled paper into a wheel, and turn it automatically, without thinking [...] In this way, the wheel itself is praying for me, instead of me – or, more precisely, I myself am praying through the medium of the wheel. The beauty of it is that in my psychological interior I can think about whatever I want, I can yield to the most dirty and obscene fantasies, and it does not matter because – to use a good old Stalinist expression – whatever I am thinking, objectively I am praying. (Žižek 1989, p. 34)

By staging an objective illusion, with the help of the religious interpassive medium of the prayer wheel, the Tibetan can distance himself psychically from his religion. Yet this interpassive dimension does not only appear in very special or even exotic religions. We can find the same also, for example, within Christianity: A Christian believer may go to a church, burn a candle, stay for a few minutes and then leave the church while the candle remains in his place, burning for a few more hours. The formula “Ora pro nobis” – read in the sense of “Pray instead of us” – seems to be the key for understanding the interpassive dimension inherent in ritual action.

By acting “as if” praying would take place, the Tibetan and the Christian actually keep a distance from their religion – just as the interpassive video freak evades watching television. The Tibetan’s and the Christian’s ritual practices thus turn out to be defensive moves against their proper religions. They allow the Tibetan and the Christian to indulge in a psychic or spatial “disappearance” (be it obscene fantasies, as in Žižek’s example, or a change of space and practice, as in the case of the Christian).(9)

Disappearance becomes possible by performing a ritual, i.e. by offering a spectacle designed for an objective, anonymous belief. The objective belief, which is at work in ritual, renders superfluous the “subjective”, personal belief of the religious believer. When objective belief is there (thanks to a ritual medium), the religious subject can go away. Due to its interpassive dimension, the ritual frees the individuals from subjectivation.(10) This is what Žižek has called “the beauty of it”.

Religion and Religious Hostility Against Ritual

The fact that religious rituals do have this interpassive dimension, allowing the believers to keep a distance from their religious belief, is very well illustrated by the history of religions. It is reflected in a constant hostility of the religions against their own rituals. Far away from conceiving their rituals in a benevolent Pascalian way,(11) as necessary and reliable means of religious practice and propaganda, religions often regard their own rituals with deep suspicion and even adopt active measures against them. Humphrey and Laidlaw have commented on this very pointedly:

What happens in religious traditions when the nature of ritual is questioned, but the practice of performing rituals is not itself abandoned? Much anthropological analysis simply equates religion and ritual, or regards them as forming some kind of indissoluble whole, yet in many cases a religious attitude, a searching for spiritual perfection perhaps, can turn upon its own vehicle, ritual, to regard it with distrust, depreciation, or even fear. [...] We think that these reactions to ritual tell us about more than just particular religious ideologies, for there is a sense in which, when different religious traditions act in this way, they are reacting to a common phenomenon. Such reactions therefore reveal the essential features of ritual action. (Humphrey/Laidlaw 1994, p. 1)

This “depreciation” of ritual by its own religion often leads to practical consequences. As Sigmund Freud has noted, the history of every religion is characterized by constant returning “leaps of reform”(12) – by attempts to reduce the observance of allegedly “meaningless” rituals and to replace them by conscious attention to meaning. The use of ritual machinery and of specialists (priests) becomes more and more reduced in religious ideology (as opposed to economy where the use of machinery and division of labor increase in history). An increasing imperative of “Do it yourself” characterizes the history of religion. The exteriority of ritual is thus being transformed into the interiority of religious consciousness, as it can be seen for example in the “leap” that led, in Christian religion, from Catholicism to Protestantism. Clearly this hostility of religions toward their own rituals expresses an acknowledgement of the fact that the rituals allow the believers to avoid conscious attention to the religious meaning. When religions abandon a good part of their own rituals, they try to destroy the interpassivity inherent in these rituals.

The “leaps of reform” within the history of religion show a tendency to supersede ritual interpassivity by religious consciousness of the individuals. Anonymous, objective belief is being erased in order to establish subjective faith.(13) Non-subjectivated forms of religion become more and more “superstructured” by subjectivated forms. Of course, this process has its limits: ritual can never be completely abandoned; an “invisible religion”, as conceived by David Hume, is not possible (or rather, it is not a religion anymore).(14) The religious superstructure of subjectivated faith can never completely replace its basis, the anonymous, objective belief embodied in ritual.

Civilized Blindness

The only thing that these “leaps of reform” can do is to render the interpassive dimension of religion more and more invisible. Not the existence of objective belief can be abandoned, but its visibility. This is the reason why civilized people, as opposed to “savages”, are unable to recognize that they are practicing magic. Now this increasing subjectivation not only creates blindness for the magic dimensions in civilized culture (for example, when people speak to their cars, as if thus they could encourage the engine to start). Since objective belief is the basic principle of cultural pleasure,(15) the blindness for objective belief also implies an unawareness of one’s own pleasure. “Civilized” cultures, blind to their magic dimensions, are therefore unable to consciously enjoy their pleasures. The remarkable rise in ascetic ideals within Western culture during the last decades expresses an increasing inability to deal with cultural pleasure. Throwing little children in jail for playing “doctor games”, spending huge amounts of government money on campaigns to prevent young people from having pre-marital sex, demonizing and disenfranchising simple pleasures like drinking and smoking etc. are just the most striking examples of this growing ascetism. A general tendency towards a “culture of complaint”(16) gives proof to the fact that the so-called “civilized” are increasingly unable to experience their own pleasure as a pleasure. Instead, they can only experience it in its reverse form, as “neurotic displeasure”, as Freud has called it. Pleasure that passes unrecognized returns as its opposite. What the cries of joy are for those who know to enjoy, are the sighs of complaint for those who don’t.

Ritualism without Primitivism

From here we can see what is at stake concerning ritual: What the key thesis of the “ritualists” about the “precedence of ritual” really says is that objective belief (“ritual”) comes before subjective faith (“myth”). This implies that objective belief can stand alone, without being covered up by subjectivations, which render pleasure invisible and thus unpleasant.

We have to add that this not only goes for so-called primitive societies where ritual appears not to be accompanied by myth. It also applies, for example, to ancient Greek culture – which, of course, was full of myths, but not of myths that allowed for subjectivation. This can be seen in the mythological element of the “bad Gods”: The fact that, in Greek mythology, Gods behaved worse than men, gives a clear proof of the fact that this mythology did not create any possibility for the individuals to “recognize” themselves as subjects in any big SUBJECT.(17) This is the reason why Greek culture developed a completely different relationship to both guilt (as Nietzsche has remarked(18)) and pleasure (as Freud has stated(19)).

What is at stake in the thesis of the ritualists, is therefore not the “primitivism” consisting in a lack of mythology. Rather, it is the idea that even in so-called “high” cultures, the social imaginary can be organized in a different way. Objective, “interpassive” belief can stand for itself. And such an organization of the social imaginary is not a mark of primitive societies, but rather a mark of culture. Since – as Freud has remarked – what could merit the name of culture if not the ability to create and to get along with one’s pleasure?(20)

This is the reading that we have tried to give to the thesis of the ritualists by applying the theoretical tool of our concept of interpassivity: Stating that ritual comes before myth means that also high cultures are able to avoid the barbarism of succumbing to ascetic ideals.

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Notes:

1 This text was presented at the conference “Thinking and Saying Ritual (*Pensare e dire il rituale*)” at the Centro Internazionale di Semiotica, Urbino, July 15-17 2002, under the title “Devoid of any idea but still caught up in illusion: The discrete magic of the civilized”.

2 This highly problematic equation of observation with passivity which is presupposed by the notion of interactivity has been criticized by H. Bloom (Bloom 2000).

3 The classical formulation of this problem has been given by Ludwig Wittgenstein, when he asked whether one could feel pain in a part of somebody else's body: “Es ist offenbar vorstellbar, daß ich einen Schmerz in der Hand eines anderen Körpers als meines sogenannten eigenen spüre. Wie aber, wenn nun mein alter Körper ganz unempfindlich und unbeweglich würde und ich meine Schmerzen nur mehr im anderen Körper empfände?” (L. Wittgenstein 1981, p. 90, § 60)

4 Cf. Freud 1919, p. 267

5 Cf. Wittgenstein 1993, p. 125: “The same savage, who stabs the picture of his enemy apparently in order to kill him, really builds his hut out of wood and carves his arrow skillfully and not in effigy.”

6 With regard to the title of this conference we could say: Saying the ritual presupposes not thinking it.

7 Mario Perniola has elaborated on the idea of a sensation which does not belong to anybody (Perniola 1999, pp. 9, 167). What we encounter here is an illusion which does not belong to anybody.

8 For a theory of this “anonymous” belief see Mannoni 1985; for a comparison between the naive observer and other psychic instances of self-observation (superego, ego-ideal) cf. Pfaller 2002.

9 For this notion of disappearance see Virilio 1980.

10 This rule does not only apply for interpassivity within religions; it is at work in all kinds of interpassivity. Since, according to Althusser, subjectivation is achieved through interpellation (cf. Althusser [1969], p. 110), we can say: interpassivity is opposed to interpellation. The possibility to avoid subjectivation appears to be the reason for interpassive practice, and the key source of the strange satisfaction experienced by interpassive individuals.

11 Cf. Pascal 1995, p. 125 (§ 418): “You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have [...]: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on.”

12 Cf. Freud [1907], p. 126

13 For this distinction see Mannoni 1985, p. 13.

14 See for this Hume 1980; Bozovic 2000, pp. 3-14.

15 This can be clearly seen in the specific pleasure provided by trompe-l’oeil paintings, where you have, for example, the painting of a landscape plus an illusion that the painting was covered by broken glass. Of course, the pleasure of this refinement is only accessible to those who discern the “broken glass” as an illusion, as a part of the painting. If, on the contrary, there are ever observers who succumb to this illusion, unable to delegate it to anonymous others, they cannot experience the pleasure either. For them it will remain just regrettable damage, a profane reality. Only those able to delegate the illusion (for example, by saying “somebody might have thought the glass was broken”) can experience the pleasure provided by the artwork. (I have elaborated this in my book “The illusions of the others. On the pleasure principle of culture” (Pfaller 2002)).

16 Cf. Hughes 1993

17 The imaginary recognition of the individual as a Subject in the image provided by a big SUBJECT is, according to Althusser, the key structure of subjectivation. (Cf. Althusser 1969, p. 120)

18 Cf. Nietzsche [1887], pp. 834-5.

19 Cf. Freud 1905, p. 60.

20 Cf. Freud 1908, p. 32. This is the reason why Freud, in his title “Die ‘kulturelle’ Sexualmoral...”, writes the word ‘kulturell’ under quotation marks: When a culture is unable to produce individual happiness, its imperatives do not merit the attribute ‘cultural’ anymore.