

Interpassivity: Why do we need others to do things in our stead?

We often feel great comfort when we understand the other, the other person or machine (VCR, TV, etc.) does the very thing that we want to do ourselves. Besides, it is always exciting and giving us a consummating feeling of enjoyment when our favourite fantasies are worked out by others. These instances also save us time, money, and the trouble of doing something by ourselves. The comfort also arises from the fact that these instances allow others to take care of our emotional responses, feeling, and attitudes. This is the other side of the interactivity in art and media where the artist or media programs achieve their purposes by having the active contribution of the audience. In an interactive art, for example, the spectator and the artist both contribute to the purpose of art but in interpassivity, the subject is expecting his own 'reading' and emotional response done by someone else—the other. A xenophobe in Australia, for example, might take pleasure when he/she sees the One Nation Party Leader, Paulin Hanson on TVs, expresses her hatred and loathing of the migrant communities in her words and bitter facial grimaces. A racist man would say to himself that this woman is my model (the other), for she always takes care of my hatred towards foreigners for me. In such instances I transfer my desire and fantasy to the other and replace the pursuit of my active *jouissance* into a passive one. The process behind this intersubjective dislocation of emotions and *jouissance* is called interpassivity. This dislocation in feminist quarters identifies interpassivity rather repressive. The resultant enjoyment in interpassivity for a feminine subject enacts a desire which is essentially prescribed by man.

Drawing upon Lacan's comments on the function of the Chorus in ancient Greek Theatre and examples from the functional use of the Buddhist Tibetan prayer-wheel, hired prayers, hired weepers in different cultures, and the use of canned laughter in Television shows, Zizek develops his theory of the interpassivity and the interpassive subject in Lacanian perspective. He essentially picks the concept from cultural theorist such as Robert Pfaller and Jean Baudrillard who famously said that the cable TV and VCR 'in a way, "watches" the movie for us'. Zizek suggests that the expansion of new electronic media helped people to use the machine (the object) in order to do everything that they might desire. For example, the machine VCR, the object tapes certain movies or parts of a soap-opera for us and an X-rated movie shows the characters do the actions that we want to do. In these instances, we watch our own actions in active actions of others in a passive way. Lacan's critique of the Sophocles' *Antigone* is an illustrious and classical example of interpassivity. In his criticism, Lacan was intrigued by the function of the chorus, representing the spectators who were moved by the tragedy. The chorus engaged with the process of purification and thus the chorus took care of the emotional responses of the spectators.

The interpassivity is not opposed to the interactivity, because the purpose of both is the one and the same thing. Simply put, the one alternates the other in the broader symbolic order. This is the reason why Zizek designates interpassivity as "the uncanny double" of interactivity. The same process Zizek says takes place between the analyst or as Lacan says *the subject supposed to know* and the analysand. The analysand thinks with comfort that the

analyst knows about his/her secret desires, as Žižek emphasizes, “I can only arrive at the unconscious meaning of my symptom if I presuppose that the analyst already knows its meaning.”

Žižek also is concerned with the other aspect of the reality that shapes interpassivity—transference of the real emotion and enjoyment into fake emotion and enjoyment. I enjoy but this is a false enjoyment because I just enjoy the picture of the enjoyment in a passive way. The person or the object that enjoys in reality is another person or machine not me. In intersubjectivity, we thus face the Other with no Otherness. Žižek gives the example of decaffeinated coffee as the coffee without its essence, the caffeine. The desire for the real caffeine enables us to enjoy caffeine but without its essence and its reality. “Everything is permitted, you can enjoy—on condition that is stripped of the substance that makes it dangerous.” This line of arguments leads Žižek to justify the question of “Jenny Holzer’s famous truism ‘Protect me from what I want’ renders in a very precise way the fundamental ambiguity of the hysterical position.” By drinking coffee without caffeine, the subject avoids the essence of the object of enjoyment. In Žižek’s view, this avoidance and the tendency to see one’s desire fulfilled by other itself is part of the subject’s desire in a social and intersubjective level. Therefore, it is through such interpassivity “as Pfaffner and Žižek call it, that we must “give up” this kernel of Being to the Other as that we can become.”

The miraculous technological revolution has turned the cyberspace into a ‘reservoir’ of interpassivity for us and the dislocation of our desire on the desire of the other, on its part, made interpassivity into a compulsive obsession. The primary function of the chat room in cyberspace is site for the exchange of our desires—the site of the interpassivity in our modern digital culture.

In this seminar we will discuss a more fuller account of the concept of interpassivity in contemporary cultural and social studies in the light of Lacanian theory of subject, the Other, intersubjectivity, desire, and unconscious.

Our friend and member of the group, Bawar Zana will also give us his insight and comments on the concept of interpassivity.

Dr Ehsan Azari Stanizai

Reading:

Zizek, (2006), “The Interpassive Subject: Lacan turns a prayer-wheel,” *How to Read Lacan*, Granta Publication, London.

Jagodzinski, (2004), *Youth Fantasies: the Perverse Landscape of Media*, Palgrave-Macmillan, New York.

Date: Wednesday 28 February 2018

Time: 6-8 pm

Location: Tutorial Room, No.3, NIDA, 215 Anzac Parade