

# *Interpassivity:* The necessity to retain a semblance of the mundane?

Mike Grimshaw

## First, some questions

What might it mean to interpassively respond to *Interpassivity*? Is not this collection of essays in this special issue itself a potentially doubly interpassive event (that is, interpassivity redoubled): delegate others firstly, to read the book and secondly, think about – and it is assumed, enjoy – the book to the point of writing about it? Of course, to claim that these series of events are interpassive is to also claim that many of the readers of these essays are in fact “*delegating their enjoyment*”<sup>1</sup> of reading Pfaller’s *Interpassivity*. This delegating of enjoyments signals that enjoyment – or perhaps more so – the type of enjoyment delegated is a type of action and work in itself. Therefore, that enjoyment so delegated can also be a demand upon us that we seek to displace and in displacing we seek to replace our own, expected work of enjoyment. So, interpassivity – using these essays on the book *Interpassivity* as an

example – is the shift from production to consumption; or rather, is this not the consumption of others as displaced and replaced work of and for ‘you’?

So, why would we want to outsource enjoyment? The answer is we outsource because enjoyment can become a task, a demand – that is, *work*. In fact, enjoyment *is* work, but we prefer not to think about it as such and rather wish to retain a notion of enjoyment as that able to be expressed and enjoyed ‘as in and of itself’. However, this position assumes an idealist belief in the possible neutrality of enjoyment. Such a belief naively views enjoyment as being able to exist outside of the capitalist construction and maintenance of society. In capitalism, everything and everyone exists as a cost: a cost to produce, to maintain, to access, to be able to appreciate, to take the time to enjoy. Life is work: extractive upon and of us. Enjoyment – often taken to be that which may exist outside of work life – is in capitalism, work; often unpaid but rather paid for in various ways – including monetary access. I am not saying that interpassive outsourcing occurs *because* we understand and agree with this, but rather that interpassivity occurs as a type of unthought response to our experience of *life as and is work*. That is, interpassive outsourcing is actually a different type of extraction where I get or expect others to work in my place.

There are different types of interpassive outsourcing and here the oft-cited example of canned laughter on TV shows is, in my view, not necessarily interpassivity because it is not necessarily enjoyment being done for us or on our behalf; that is, the canned laughter is not so that we do not have to laugh. To signal canned laughter as displaying amusement in the place of the viewer is not necessarily interpassivity; rather it can signal two things. Firstly, that what is being signaled as amusing to the point of laughter is not necessarily so and therefore the canned laughter is a type of signaled demand that what is said or done on the TV show is worthy of the response of laughter from the viewer. In such case it is the demand of enjoyment, not the displacing of it. Secondly, consider the shows that often have canned laughter – these are shows that may have a didactic approach to the humour presented.

That is, they are attempting to teach their audience 'how and when' to laugh and this can be seen the many children's TV shows that have incessant canned laughter in the attempt to signal to and teach their young audience when to laugh and what to laugh at. The audience of other canned laughter shows are not necessarily children, but they are ones that in effect do not trust all of their audience to understand the humorous statements or moments. In such cases, what is said or done may be still amusing, but not amusing to the point of laughter and so if we think about this in interpassive terms, the canned laughter signals an acknowledged lack of enjoyment or understanding that is covered up by the interpassive laughter, that is the voice of laughter without any connection to what is being laughed about.

In turn, this raises a question about the displaced work of enjoyment in interpassivity: how much of interpassivity is neither work nor enjoyment but rather a cover up of the expected work or enjoyment that does not reach the levels expected or demanded? That is, does interpassivity signal a type of 'lack' of what is expected but is not done or does not occur?

Yet, if we consider the distinction made by Pfaller between interactivity as ideology and interpassivity as theory we can raise the question as to whether or not ideology itself is a type of perverse interpassivity where you let others (subjects and objects) think in your place? Is there a type of pleasure in ideology not that distinct from the other pleasures outlined? Such transference is also not dissimilar to the outsourcing of globalization: seeking production that results in a better series of options for both those who pursue profit and those seeking more consumer choice and consumption. For to have other people and things consume for you is to outsource consumption. So, is interpassivity analogous to an inverse globalization whereby it is not production that is outsourced for consumption but rather consumption outsourced as a type of displaced production?

## The interpassivity of ritual?

It is understandable that Pfaller sees interpassivity as a ritual activity for such outsourcing is central to so much ritual: the outsourcing of work, the outsourcing of pleasure, the outsourcing of consumption and the “staging of the act”<sup>2</sup>. Associated with the ritual is recognition that interpassive acts are *illusions not believed in* – and this is likewise understandable when we appreciate that interpassive illusions do not constitute belief but are rather, actions; therefore, is not interpassivity often accumulation that *displaces* work yet occurs as *work*? The link here to ritual occurs because not only do rituals arise out of and also reinforce beliefs, but rituals are *not pleasure* but are work; yet we claim a pleasure in rituals in order to separate them from work. But also, rituals occur because of a belief in their agency: a belief in agency that we disassociate from work. So, we have what can be termed the interpassive workers: the priests, the critic, the reviewer, the performer, the author – and the theorist and the ideologue: all those who undertake the interpassive ritual, action and production to allow the interpassivity of others. Our response to their work itself can take on ritual action and patterns whereby we maintain the illusion that our response is one of pleasure and not of work. In a similar fashion, the Protestant suspicion and rejection of ritual itself often took ritualized forms: an illusion of response that was neither pleasure nor work.

It is here too that interpassivity involves a critical engagement with religion and religious thought. Pfaller notes “the interpassive dimension of all magic”<sup>3</sup> in that it “*relies, in principle on not believing*”<sup>4</sup>. That is, magic is destroyed by believing – for you can therefore also *not* believe; rather, magic relies on doing and the interpassive illusion of the efficacy of that doing. In contrast to not believing, not doing magic does not challenge the belief in magic, for not doing does not challenge the doing of magic. That is, magic is done or not done, *not* believed or not believed. That efficacy may also be the interpassivity of not doing; the not doing of pleasures in which belief is used to reject enjoyment often in ways whereby rationalist and scientific evidence is positioned in opposition to enjoyment; or conversely, whereby enjoyment has to be performed as

the only rational way to produce and consume enjoyment. In this way enjoyment becomes work. Similarly, the religious hostility to magic is not only the hostility of belief and non-belief (that is, will that 'doing' result in the doing claimed for it?); but also, the why and how of the rationality of 'doing' and 'not doing' which also gives rise to the religious patrolling of both orthodoxy and orthopraxis: that is, the right way to think and to act that is regarded as the rational ways within that religion.

Against this we see the return of enchantment in commodity fetishism: commodities which rationally are just things but in our interpassive response become what, to borrow from Baudrillard, we can term as hyper-real signals and promises of the sacred. But there is a limit as to pleasure of the thing if the thing is separated from the self because the thing can easily become profaned or, even worse in commodity fetishism, the thing can become mundane – that is, of the everyday. In becoming mundane, it becomes secularized (of the world of shared human experience<sup>5</sup>) which is even worse than the profanation which still allows for a re-engagement – given that profanation relies on the sacred for its existence and vice versa. The limit of the sacred thing is therefore the problem of the mundane: if the sacred – or the profane – becomes mundane then it is reduced back to 'thing of the world'. Because the sacred is that 'set apart', in our modern world, it is the self – that which we believe can never be reduced to 'thing of the world' – that is the ultimate expression of the sacred and so is set apart by interpassivity. Therefore, we also seek to profane things in order to keep the non-thing of self as sacred. Interpassivity can in turn be understood as both the fear of the self being profaned *and* the fear of the self being made mundane by the object. Of the two fears, the most feared is the mundane self, for the profane self has the possibilities of either being re-sacralized or continuing to exist as contra-sacred self; but the mundane self loses the options of being either sacred or profaned, rather the mundane self becomes a self of the everyday. It is this mundane self that seeks the interpassive option in order to avoid the realization of the mundane nature of the self in the mundane everyday. This is the first way to answer the question posited by Pfaller of "why do people not want to have their lives and their pleasures?"<sup>6</sup>; in short, interpassivity is the

recognition *and* the denial – by deferral and avoidance – of the mundane self in the mundane world.

The way in which this interpassive rebellion against the mundane self in the mundane world can proceed is, as Pfaller observes, via the most mundane activity of all: consumption. Consumption is delegated so the individual believes they gain control and agency – but we must also remember that the delegation of consumption occurs as a type of imposition of the will. Such consumption – by delegated/outsourced person or machine – is an act of both collecting and accumulation that seeks also to control time; in mundane existence to control time becomes a recourse to one of the traditional roles of the sacred: time becomes subject to sacred will and intent. But this sacred self also fears profanation and this is why pleasure is outsourced out of a puritan fear of pleasure as that which may profane the self in some way. Therefore, the interpassive response is that of getting you to do my pleasure for me because pleasure profanes and is not ‘serious’. So interpassivity is also seeking to have others and things profaned *in my place*.

### **The sacred self and the secret of interpassivity**

This profanation extends now to the work of art that can be neither sacred nor mundane but rather *must* be profaned because traditional (“object centred”) arts contain something that should not be included in the work, but should be left to the observer”; but what is this ‘something’? It is nothing less than what we might term ‘the sacred’, but because ‘the sacred’ is now taken to reside in the ‘sacred self’, the work of art cannot be taken to contain this; rather it is the inverse of the ‘sacred’ because the work of art is not the self – it is a thing that affirms the sacred self of the “new skillful observers (who are for the most part art producers themselves)”.<sup>8</sup>

The opposite of the sacred self – that which allows the observer to reaffirm themselves as sacred – is the profane work of art, only identifiable and understandable to the observer who is the sacred self. Yet the context for the sacred self who observes is provided by the

curator who continues the sacred task, acting as liturgist, priest and shaman, both creating that which is to be seen and curating how it is to be seen. The result is that the show rather than the art in itself becomes the aim because the curator creates the event that 'guarantees' pleasure: pleasure decided on our behalf and beforehand. What is central to all of this is the observer, for without the observer there is no interpassivity because without the observer there is no 'work' to be delegated that could be both profaning and sacralizing. For work in itself is mundane and is the action of the mundane worker.

The 'secret' laid bare by interpassivity is that both the sacred and profane are nothing more nor less than *human* acts and potential events – not people or things in and of themselves. Rather, sacred and profane as acts and events require an observer. We can also understand this retuning again to the central example used by Pfaller of canned laughter. The programme that uses canned laughter is in one sense laughing about itself to *prove* that it *is* 'funny' within a fear of not being funny and the associated identified possibility that the programme may not amuse; similarly, the audience is also affirmed by canned laughter that what they are observing is 'funny'. Yet there is also the possible response that the observer may feel there is no need to laugh as laughter is being done for them *because* what is being observed is not really funny and certainly not funny to the point of eliciting individual, spontaneous laughter. What occurs via canned laughter is something mundane that is made profane by canned laughter. Yet this profanation of the mundane enables the sacred self to retain its sense of sacrality because pleasure profanes; better then to let the mundane be profaned and in its profanation reinforce its opposition of the sacred. Without canned laughter the observer may be drawn into an engagement, a non-deferred encounter with that which is mundane – with the risk that the sacred self might be recognized as mundane.

This 'secret' means that central to interpassivity is the profanation of the mundane; that is the profanation of the everyday as that which is positioned as opposite, as inverse to the sacred self. If the sacred self takes pleasure in the everyday – that is in the mundane – it finds itself

associated with that which is neither sacred nor profane. Only by delegating pleasure onto that which is *not* the sacred self – that is the profane other, the profane thing – can the admitting of pleasure in and of the mundane be deferred. This also requires a knowing attitude because to delegate pleasure requires one knowing and valuing the pleasure being deferred; otherwise there is no pleasure and what could be a profanation becomes merely mundane. Why is this important? Because of what is done: “interpassive people substitute one act with another by investing the latter with psychic energy that was previously bound to the first.”<sup>9</sup> If that is done without knowing and valuing then the act becomes mundane and the one substituting finds their mirror in the unknowing and unvalued mundane: they become desacralized. However, by knowing and valuing what they are doing, the substitution becomes the inverse of the sacred, which is the profane – and the sacred exerts a power and will; in other words, there is the expression and retention of agency. The pleasures that are delegated or deferred in the interpassive act are those that are expressions and reminders of mundane, everyday existence. To take *personal* pleasure in them is to remind oneself that one is actually mundane and participates in a mundane reality; but to delegate or defer them allows one to maintain the myth of the sacred self who can exert agency and will that enables one stand apart from those who partake of mundane pleasures. By positioning the pleasures as the opposite of the sacred self, such pleasures occur as a profane inversion of the sacred self and what it *might* or *might wish* to do. Only by delegating to the profane other, the other made profane by doing or acting my pleasure *for me* can I maintain my sacred self in the rejected reality of the mundane.

It is here we get to the central interpassive attitude or moment, the ‘acting as if’ which we can also recognize as the central religious attitude. For what is gained by this ‘acting as if’ – as if pleasure is attained, as if sacred and profane identity is maintained? What is gained is nothing less than a way to confront the mundane absurdity of existence by the performance of the ‘acting as if’ whereby ‘as if’ sacralizes and profanes mundane existence and the mundane self’. This is why ritual becomes central and instructive to interpassivity, for ritual seeks to create and

maintain a 'do but do not' action; that is, the desire of both actions, the desire 'to do' which is deferred into the desire 'to do not' – and so contains within it its own prohibition. The outsourcing of the prohibition onto the other person or onto the thing becomes a type of ritual to maintain the sacrality of that person, for the displaced interpassive ritual seeks to maintain the sacrality of the self by the delegation of pleasure. For if the sacrality of the self is a fiction maintained by 'acting as if' it is not a fiction, then the pleasure which makes the sacred self enter into the mundane world of other selves and things needs to be displaced – and displaced by the ritual it relies upon. To have others and things do that which we wish to 'do but not do' is to invest the doing – that is the utility of gaining or pursuing pleasure – with ritual meaning (a certain pleasure, for sure!); but ritual meaning that only by profaning can keep the fiction of the sacred self. This is the replacement of the sacred self by the profane self: that is, you profane others and things by having them act 'as if' for you. For if *you* acted 'as if' you would not be profaned, but rather be confronted with merely mundane pleasure, action and self. In short, I become confronted with the realization that I am like everyone else and do everyday things in the everyday like everyone else.

But questions arise: if I undertake interpassivity do I really know and understand what I am doing (a type of magic act) and why I am doing it? Or is it, as Pfaller terms it, 'a magic of the Civilized'?<sup>10</sup> What breaks the magic spell is the drawing of attention to the fact that the civilized is acting 'as if' – not acting out of belief but acting 'as if' the action itself results in the desired outcome. That is, we do it despite rationally knowing that it does not and cannot 'occur' – knowing this, why is it that we continue to pursue the impossible? This is because we are so caught up in what we observe or do that rationality 'disappears'. This is why we see the return of ritual that seeks to interpassively maintain a sacred self and a profane other or thing through the delegation of pleasure. If we consider this rationally then we know there is no sacred self and no profane other or thing that we submit to for our pleasure: all we have is mundane beings in a mundane world of things – and pleasure neither sacralizes nor profanes us. But the illusion of sacred and profane requires the civilized magic of interpassivity which we can term rituals of

the civilized whereby ritual substitutes for belief – whether a Catholic ritual of action or a Protestant ritualizing of the word. Ritual frees me of the need to believe because the doing of ritual becomes both the point of it *and* the point of that which the ritual is located within. So, whether it is ritual action, ritual thought, ritual attitude, the performance of ritual *is for others* so that I do not have to believe; it is the performance of ‘as if’ I believe because if I did not believe why would I do the ritual? Therefore, we can say that the doing of the ritual is whereby the belief occurs; that is belief is a verb undertaken via ritual: ritual action, ritual thought, ritual attitude to self and others; *a verb performed for others*.

### **Mundane emancipation?**

This in turn brings us to the question of participation, for participation creates and maintains its own rituals, which are often expressed and undertaken as the solution for ‘emancipatory claims’.<sup>11</sup> Yet is participation emancipatory when it becomes a type of hegemonic demand – whether in politics or in art? Does not participation – if it is to be truly emancipatory – need to include the option of non-participation, of refusal? Yet this non-participation returns us to our central issue because non-participation is to challenge the belief of participation as both sacred and profane; non-participation is to express the mundane as that in which the rituals have no efficacy. It is the mundane which is the location and expression of the need and *the right* not to believe and of the need and *the right* not to undertake ritual. It is the mundane that returns us to non-sacred and non-profane beings in a world of mundane things.

Furthermore, mundane emancipation is emancipation for all: the freedom from sacred and profane, the freedom from ritual, freedom from the illusion that we need to believe, freedom from the rituals of a sacred self created and maintained in response to and via profane others. For the demand to join in holds within it a potentially fascist impulse that seeks simultaneously to sacralize and to profane: to sacralize certain people, nations, things, ideas and to profane other peoples, nations, things and ideas, all undertaken via ritual. The fascist privileging of spontaneity (often within a reactionary discourse) is a philosophical

programme of participation: that which, without really thinking, demands and acts 'as if' it has been thought through. And this is why such participation relies on propaganda which aims at "*the dissolving of the division of labour between transmission and receivers*"<sup>12</sup>, whereby there is no division but rather only participatory consumption. It is this that facilitates a narcissistic culture wherein the 'authentic person' becomes a hegemonic demand and such authenticity is taken to be the expression of the sacred self – who, in a fascist ideology, resides in a sacred nation of sacred people with and for a sacred purpose; which is really a rejection of mundane existence and identity 'as if' one is set apart as 'sacred'. This is why we see the return of ritual in the contemporary world as 'spontaneous' expression of participation 'as if' such expression performs both sacred meaning and profane identification: for the only way "one is able to show others *what he or she is not*"<sup>13</sup> is to profane others and things and spaces.

Whether in art practice, event and expression or in everyday life, to profane is the rejection of the opportunity for "a critical reading: it is no longer possible to inquire into whether something quite different is being said" than what the sacred person who profanes (who is also often an artist – of art or politics) "intended to say".<sup>14</sup> For to question the profaning is to question the sacrality of the one who profanes – and in a narcissistic culture of fascist ideology there is the rejection of the everyday mundane as the place from which to question and critique. (I note here the way a narcissistic culture of liberal identity politics operates in very similar way to the narcissistic culture of fascist ideology. The difference is that fascism stands in the name of 'some' [albeit horrible] truth)<sup>15</sup>.

The fascist demand of participation is also the drive for community: "the place where only those who are physically present can profit – a limited number of people who almost know each other"<sup>16</sup> – or who organize the 'spontaneous' expression of participation and ritual that sacralizes them against the profane. So what can be done? We have to be aware of and sure of what we can offer. Against the community of sacred and profane, we have the society of the mundane; against the fascist demand we have the democratic offer.

## Conclusion

We find ourselves in a demanded community of postmodern fascism, that only wants the illusions it can fully believe and the complete identification of the community with these illusions.<sup>17</sup> This also means identity politics is nothing more nor less than the illusion of the sacred self who is at risk from profane others who do not believe in oneself and one's sacrality. So, we experience the fascist retreat into tribes with their demand of participation and the patrolling of the boundaries of pure and true identity. The result is seeking of control and order, a willingness to be told what to do, to welcome bans and prohibitions so that the individual, the group, the tribe, the community can maintain their sacred self. That and those banned and prohibited are those things and people believed *to* profane – and it is this that results in the delegation of antipassivity: the outsourcing of the pleasure that *could* profane me so that it *now* profanes others. Perhaps what we need to recover is the ability to act, think and behave 'as if' both we and the world are mundane?

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivity. The Delegated Aesthetics of Enjoyment* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Vahanian, G (2005) *Tillich and the New Religious Paradigm*. The Davies Group, Publishers, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Pfaller, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 94-95.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>15</sup> I thank Cindy Zeiher for pushing me to this comment – and of, course to many others in her thoughtful reading of an earlier version of this article.

<sup>16</sup> Pfaller, 113.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 132.