

# Interpassivity

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## Abstract

Interpassivity names a widespread yet underacknowledged form of cultural behavior in which subjects delegate not their labor or responsibilities to others but precisely their enjoyment and belief. First proposed by the Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller in 1996 and developed systematically in his 2017 monograph *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment*, the concept describes the structural tendency of subjects to interpose a representative agent—a person, machine, or ritual medium—between themselves and the experience of pleasure, conviction, or identification. Rather than enjoying directly, the interpassive subject arranges for an Other to enjoy in their place. Pfaller situates interpassivity within a materialist, post-Althusserian theoretical framework, reading it as both a pervasive feature of everyday cultural life and a potential site of escape from ideological interpellation and subjectivization. The concept has been taken up across psychoanalytic theory, media studies, art theory, political philosophy, cultural anthropology, and theological studies and carries significant implications for psychological accounts of enjoyment, belief, subjectivity, and ideology.

**Keywords** Interpassivity -Ideology -Interpellation -Subjectivization -Jouissance -Belief -Ritual -Cultural behavior -Lacanian theory -Capitalism

## Introduction

Interpassivity designates a structural feature of human cultural behavior that is simultaneously ubiquitous and theoretically overlooked. It refers to the practice of delegating to others not activity, but passivity—not labor or responsibilities but the very acts of enjoyment, consumption, and belief—to some other agent. The Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller first introduced the term in 1996 as a critical counterconcept to the then-dominant discourse of interactivity in media theory and art. Whereas interactivity presupposed that active audience participation was aesthetically and politically desirable, Pfaller observed that many subjects prefer to behave in precisely the opposite

direction: they construct elaborate arrangements to ensure that an other—a person, a machine, or a ritual medium—enjoys, laughs, reads, or believes on their behalf.

Pfaller's [2017](#) monograph *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment* assembles and extends this theoretical project across aesthetics, psychoanalysis, ideology critique, and philosophy of culture. Several of the original examples have to do with media consumption: video recording devices watch television in the owner's place, providing the person with a sense of satisfaction that the recording has taken place even if they fail to watch the recording themselves; the enjoyment of watching the television recording has been delegated, but the person enjoys the interpassive act of that delegation. Pfaller develops such examples into a comprehensive theory of how subjects manage their relationship to enjoyment and to the illusions that sustain cultural and ideological life. For theoretical and philosophical psychology, interpassivity offers a model of subjectivity that diverges markedly from cognitive, humanist, and voluntarist assumptions: it describes a subject who does not master its enjoyments but offloads them and who participates in belief without needing to believe.

## Background and Context

### Origins and the Critique of Interactivity

Interpassivity emerged as a theoretical provocation within 1990s debates about new media, participatory art, and interactive aesthetics. The dominant assumption of that moment was that interactivity—audience involvement, coauthorship, and activation of the spectator—constituted an intrinsically progressive artistic and political gesture (Fischer-Lichte, [2008](#)). Pfaller ([2017](#)) regarded this assumption as ideologically uncritical, noting that it reproduced a broader humanist paradigm equating activity with freedom and passivity with subjugation. Drawing on Louis Althusser's ([1971](#)) argument that becoming a subject is itself a mechanism of ideological subjugation, Pfaller questioned whether activating subjects could function as any kind of emancipatory strategy.

Against this, Pfaller proposed interpassivity as what Kant (1763/[1992](#)) had called a “negative magnitude”: not the absence of interactivity but its structural opposite. Where interactivity delegates activity, that is, where others work in one's place, interpassivity delegates passivity: others enjoy, consume, or believe in one's place. Pfaller's earliest examples were drawn from everyday media culture: academics who photocopy a book, letting the copy machine enjoy “reading” it in their stead, but themselves enjoying the delegation. The academic's action, in this case, is restricted to finding an interesting book and copying its pages, but upon returning the book, they experience a deep sense of satisfaction as if the photocopier had read the book in their place. What makes the example theoretically rich for Pfaller is the *figurativeness* of the substitutive act: the photocopier does not merely copy, it literally enacts a representation of reading. Light falls on every page in sequence, line by line, in a slow linear process—the machine “looks” at the text in a way that mimics the act of reading. The academic invests the act of photocopying with the psychic energy that had been attached to the wish to read, so that copying comes to function as a complete substitute for reading, delivering the same sense of satisfaction as reading would have done. Crucially, the intellectual does not believe the machine can actually read. The illusion is not subjective: no one present thinks the

photocopier is reading. Rather, the illusion is *objective*—it is sustained by an imagined anonymous naive observer who might have thought so, and it is in the medium of that imagined observer’s potential belief that the interpassive act achieves its effect. Pfaller (2017) compares this structure to voodoo: just as the symbolic piercing of a doll substitutes for the real act of killing, the symbolic representation of reading through photocopying substitutes for the real act of intellectual work. He calls interpassivity on this account “a magic of the civilised” (p. 57), distinguished from the magic of so-called primitive cultures only by the civilized person’s lack of awareness that they are performing magic at all.

## Theoretical Architecture: Double Delegation and the Objective Illusion

Pfaller identifies a two-stage structure within interpassive behavior that he calls double delegation. In the first stage, the subject transfers enjoyment to a representative agent. In the second, equally crucial stage, the belief that the delegated act constitutes genuine enjoyment is transferred to an anonymous, undefined other. This other is a naive observer who is presumed, without being identified, to maintain the illusion that the act counts as real consumption. It is this anonymous, objective illusion—which can be an illusion imagined of a potential, rather than actual observer—that makes interpassive satisfaction possible. The photocopying scholar feels satisfied with their haul of copies not because they believe the photocopier has read the texts but because some unspecified naive other might think so, and it is in the medium of that anonymous belief that the interpassive satisfaction is produced. Pfaller’s account of the objective illusion (Pfaller, 2014, 2017) has been extended to filmic aesthetics and the structural dynamics of cinematic spectatorship (Hagin, 2008).

This structure of the “illusion without a subject” is one of Pfaller’s most distinctive theoretical contributions. Building on Slavoj Žižek’s (1989/2009, 1997) analysis of canned laughter in television sitcoms—which drew in turn on Jacques Lacan’s (1992) observation that the chorus in Greek tragedy experienced compassion and fear in place of the audience—Pfaller generalizes the principle: enjoyment, belief, and identification can be externalized into objects, machines, or ritual media and can operate objectively, without requiring any subjective appropriation. The viewer who sits impassively through a program equipped with canned laughter has, Pfaller argues, laughed, albeit through the medium of the other. The subjective feeling is absent, but the structural fact of laughter is accomplished.

## Interpassivity, Ritual, and Belief

Pfaller extends the analysis of interpassivity to ritual practice, arguing that rituals are inherently interpassive structures. In religious ritual, believers need not inwardly experience the convictions their outward practice enacts: the ritual medium such as the prayer wheel, the liturgy, or the gesture of holy water believes and prays on their behalf but in the medium of an anonymous illusion. Žižek’s (2009) analysis of the Tibetan prayer wheel, which Pfaller quotes and develops, illustrates this: the wheel prays *for* its user; whatever the user is thinking subjectively, they are objectively praying. Pfaller reads this not as mere metaphor but as a general feature of ritual behavior: the ritual performs the act and thereby relieves the individual of the burden of direct identification with what the act enacts.

This analysis connects to Pfaller's account of how enjoyment becomes unbearable when experienced directly. It is not, as may have been supposed, that the interpassive subject lacks the capacity for enjoyment but instead that they find direct enjoyment intolerable and construct arrangements to ensure that an Other bears it instead. Pfaller illustrates this with the example of Christmas rituals in contemporary families: parents perform the fiction of Santa Claus for children, while once they reach a certain age, children act as though they still believe for the sake of their parents. In both cases, the naive belief is attributed to the other rather than owned by oneself. The enjoyment circulates in the gap between these mutual attributions: it is enjoyed by nobody directly and by everyone in effigie.

## Debates and Challenges

### Interpassivity and Ideology

One of the most generative and contested aspects of Pfaller's theory concerns the relationship between interpassivity and ideology. Pfaller poses the question with deliberate ambiguity: is interpassive behavior antiideological, insofar as it constitutes a flight from interpellation and subjectivization, or does it represent a second, and entirely different, form of ideology that does not rest on subjective identification? Althusser (1971; see also Butler (1995)) had argued that ideology operates by recruiting subjects through interpellation, that is, by hailing individuals into subject-positions with which they identify. Interpassivity, on this reading, represents a mode of living within ideological structures while evading their subjective grip: the subject performs the required acts without internalizing their meaning or taking up the subject-position they imply.

This has significant implications for how psychology and critical theory understand ideological compliance. Many critical traditions, from Brechtian aesthetics to psychoanalytically inflected critique, have assumed that ideology works through identification and that critique must therefore work by disrupting identification—by estranging the spectator from their imaginary investments. Pfaller's analysis of interpassivity challenges this model by suggesting that ideology can function without identification at all or that what appears as cynical distance or ironic nonbelief may be no less complicit with ideological structures than sincere conviction. The subject who knows perfectly well that a given cultural arrangement is ideological yet participates in it by delegating belief to an anonymous other is no freer from its effects than the true believer.

Žižek (1997, 2002, 2009), who engaged extensively with the concept and contributed to its theoretical development, drew a parallel implication: laughter and ironic distance do not dissolve ideology but may reinforce it, since belief can persist objectively, through external media, even when subjectively disavowed. The discourse of cynical reason, which imagines itself to be postideological, may be the most thoroughly interpassive form of ideological participation (Johnston, 2004; Žižek, 2009).

## Debates on Agency, Subjectivity, and Enjoyment

Pfaller's account of interpassivity has attracted both theoretical elaboration and critical scrutiny. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the concept intersects productively with Lacanian accounts of *jouissance* (a titillating, often painful enjoyment), which similarly emphasize the ways in which enjoyment exceeds and eludes the subject's conscious intentions, is structured by the Other, and can be externalized into objects and practices. Yet the relationship between interpassivity and Lacanian *jouissance* requires careful handling: Pfaller's framework is explicitly post-Althusserian and materialist rather than strictly Lacanian or psychoanalytic, and his use of concepts such as the "naive observer" and the "illusion without a subject" draws on a different theoretical vocabulary from Lacan's account of surplus *jouissance*, the Other, and fantasy. The relationship between delegated enjoyment and the Lacanian account of *jouissance* has been usefully explored and conceptually differentiated in Todd McGowan's analyses of enjoyment and contemporary subjectivity ([2004](#)).

Questions have also been raised about the scope and limits of the concept. Not all forms of mediated enjoyment or vicarious consumption are interpassive in the strict sense Pfaller intends: the structural criterion of the double delegation, the objective illusion, and the absence of direct subjective appropriation that distinguishes genuinely interpassive behavior from everyday instances of mediation or vicarious pleasure. Pfaller is explicit that the concept requires careful delineation and cannot simply be extended to cover any situation in which one person appears to enjoy on behalf of another.

## Possibilities

For theoretical and philosophical psychology, interpassivity opens several productive avenues. First, it provides a model of subjectivity that is radically decentered not in the poststructuralist sense of the unstable self but in the more concrete sense of a self that routinely outsources its most intimate acts (i.e., enjoyment and belief) to external agents. This model is of considerable relevance to psychological accounts of the self-concept, agency, and motivation, which often presuppose a tight alignment between subjective experience and behavior. Interpassivity describes a structurally divergent case: the subject acts without experiencing or experiences the effects of enjoyment without the direct performance of it.

Second, interpassivity has direct applications within the psychology of belief, religion, and ritual. Pfaller's account of ritual as having an inherently interpassive structure offers a theoretically sophisticated alternative to both functionalist and cognitive accounts of religious practice. It suggests that participation in ritual need not involve the beliefs the ritual nominally expresses and that the psychological satisfactions of ritual may be produced precisely by this gap between outward performance and inner conviction.

Third, the concept is of considerable relevance to media psychology and the psychology of digital culture. Contemporary digital environments are saturated with interpassive structures, although their duration is often functionally shorter than those facilitated by the technology of the 1990s (e.g., a photocopier versus downloading a pdf of an article): recommendation algorithms that select in place of users, social media platforms that register reactions on behalf of their audiences, and streaming services that autoplay content that might never be watched. The interpassive structures of contemporary digital environments have been analyzed, for instance, in relation to algorithmic mediation and online political disbelief (Krzych, [2022](#)). Pfaller's framework suggests that the

psychological analysis of digital engagement must attend not only to what subjects actively consume or produce but to what they arrange to be consumed in their place.

Finally, interpassivity retains its critical purchase for ideology critique within psychological research. In a cultural context in which performative gestures of political engagement (e.g., sharing, liking, and signing online petitions) proliferate without requiring any change in behavior or belief, the concept provides a precise vocabulary for analyzing how ideological commitment can be delegated to external media, producing the subjective satisfaction of political action without its substance. Similarly, investigations of neoliberal capitalist ideology can be aided with the concept of interpassivity. Although interpassivity precedes capitalism, the question can be posed of why, under conditions of late capitalism, delegating enjoyment becomes not just a cultural technique but a compulsion indicative of an inability to enjoy directly. Pfaller's analysis of what he calls "cultural capitalism" (2017) (e.g., the SUV owner who "possesses" rural, off-road leisure precisely in order not to experience it or the trainers worn by people who do not participate in sports) identifies a specifically contemporary intensification of interpassivity. Under cultural capitalism, goods are explicitly marketed as proxies for life: you buy not the experience but its vicarious representative. The commodity form itself becomes an interpassive medium, and consumption takes the structural shape of delegation. The question worth pursuing, then, is why people in contemporary capitalist culture find direct enjoyment increasingly intolerable and seem require the mediation of a product, a screen, or a vicarious agent before they can register something as enjoyed.

## Cross-References

- [Alterity](#)
- [Capitalism](#)
- [False Consciousness](#)
- [Ideology](#)
- [Lacanian Discourse Analysis](#)
- [Neoliberal Ideology](#)
- [Subjectivation](#)
- [Subjectivity](#)
- [The Other](#)

### Competing Interest Declaration

The author(s) has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

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