

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Autumn 2018 Edition, ISSN 2611-5166, ISBN 9788857551654, 10.7413/18258630043

INTERESTING

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(First published November 30, 2018)

It. *Interessante*; Fr. *Intéressant*; Germ. *Interessant*; Span. *Interesante*. The adjective “interesting” stems from the Latin verb “interesse”, which means being (*esse*) in-between (*inter*) (Esser 1973; Fuchs and Gerhard 1976; Wölfel 2001). “Interesting” originally has a juridical meaning, referring as early as in the Middle Ages both to financial interest and financial loss. The ambiguity of the term, due to the perspective from which it is regarded, which could be either that of the creditor or that of the debtor, etymologically enhances an irrepressible gap asking to be filled. When, in particular from the end of the 17th century, the place of interest moves from the courthouse to the theater, by virtue of their common rhetorical background, it rapidly gains a more and more pronounced aesthetic meaning (Wölfel 2001).

In his *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Habermas 1972), which is crucial for the philosophical debate on the notion of “interesting” and “interest”, Habermas points out the broader social dimension of interests, which are not only relevant to the artistic reflection, but also to the scientific world. According to Habermas, sciences themselves are grounded in prescientific concerns, which have their roots in concrete life. While Habermas focuses on the epistemic role of the concept of interest, which he divides into three kinds (technical interest to rule over nature; practical interest in communication free of bounds and fetters; and emancipatory interest in orality and freedom), Adorno stresses the more proximate link with aesthetics. In other terms, if art has to be autonomous inasmuch as it is free from needs, it is however heteronomous insofar as it reacts in an antithetical way to certain social interests external to art. It is in this sense that “the dignity of artworks depends on the intensity of the interest from which they are wrested” (Adorno 1997: 11). Although literature has potentialities to change the conscience and therefore also society, as Enzensberger maintains on his part in *Literatur und Interesse* (1977), it nonetheless does not manage to abstract from the concealed interest of the dominant class.

Against these positions, too heavily dependent on political and social philosophy, Lothar Pikulik has recently claimed the necessity to develop an aesthetics of the interesting which critically distances itself

from the traditional category of the artistic beautiful (Pikulik 2014). Pikulik holds that as early as in the 18th century the concept of beauty begins to be interiorized, therefore subjectivized as well, with regard to the classical tradition of the objective beautiful. Precisely within such a transition it is possible to better understand the currency the notion of “interesting” has gained from the end of the 18th century. Albeit not mutually exclusive, beautiful and interesting were often in a conflictual relationship. To buttress his thesis, Pikulik refers first of all to Kant, who famously pinpoints the fundamental difference between the two concepts, stating that interest prevents the judgment of taste from being pure, and secondly to Friedrich Schlegel. In his famous writing *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, Schlegel not only recognizes in the interesting a typically modern category, but he also sees in it the symptoms of the shift from aesthetic essentialism to the effectual dimension of art. On this basis, Pikulik makes clear that the emergence of the notion of interesting in the aesthetic domain between the 18th and the 19th century is closely connected with a renewed consideration for recipients and their psychological nature. If subjectivism represents the theoretical framework within which the aesthetics of the interesting lies, however, it cannot avoid its negative counterpart of boredom. Precisely because the internal dynamics of interest implies a tension without satisfaction in order to sustain desire, boredom is the price to pay to eventually appease the rush of the subject towards the object. Only a new and heightened interest will then be able to pluck us from the new state of poise, in a recursive circle already clearly detected by Schopenhauer (1923). If such a circle necessarily leads to raising the stakes of the interesting, not coincidentally assimilated to a drug by Pikulik, it does not come as a surprise that the antidotes of the *taedium vitae* do not limit themselves to sensationalism, but also go as far as to the apology of the evil, as Pikulik demonstrates through a series of examples drawn from the literature of the 19th and 20th century.

Along with the German tradition, the issue of the interesting is also discussed in the contemporary English-speaking debate. Starting from the reflection on the relationship between non-aesthetical and aesthetical conditions in the wake of Sibley (2001: 34-5; 47), Sianne Ngai (2008; 2012) intends to better outline the case of the interesting. Provided that there is no logical entailment between aesthetic judgments and non-aesthetic judgments, Ngai, picking up on Cavell (2005), stresses the rhetorical importance to attract others’ attention on specific details buttressing our aesthetic judgment. In this way, she argues, the question about what aesthetic judgment is turns into the question about how we support it. Indeed, it seems that no notable specific dependence of aesthetic features on non-aesthetic features is present apart from a very loose connection with the issue of novelty. Accordingly, an aesthetics of the interesting is paradoxical, insofar as there might be an endless proliferation of possible reasons in support of this judgment (Ngai 2008: 780-1). This means on the one hand that all can act as evidence for the interesting, but nothing will ever be ultimately convincing. For this reason, as Schlegel had already claimed, the deduction of the interesting is perhaps “the most difficult and complicated task” within “the entire realm of the science of aesthetics” (Schlegel 2001: 99).

Another crucial feature of the interesting is that, unlike other aesthetic categories, it constitutively entails both an aesthetic dimension and a non-aesthetic dimension, between which it toggles. It is this genericity that characterizes the interesting, differently from, say, the beautiful, which is always aesthetically laden. In this sense, while William James had already declared that interest is the minimal condition of our

experiential reality (1890, 1: 402-3), Ralph Barton Perry defines it as the tendency “of the human mind to be for some things and against others” (1954: 115). In this line of thought, Tomkins considers interest as “a necessary condition for the formation of the perceptual world” (Tomkins 1962-1992, I: 347). In particular, Tomkins pinpoints the element of temporality, that is, the fact that the interesting object is “one we tend to come back to, as if to verify that it is still interesting. To judge something interesting is thus always, potentially, to find it interesting again” (348). In this sense, as Ngai concludes (Ngai 2008: 787), the interesting contains the “forward reference in time” pointed out by Goodman’s argument that the future aesthetic encounters can determine the nature of the aesthetic encounters in the present (Goodman 1976: 99-126).

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

A. Nannini, *Interesting*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2018 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2018/autumn/Interesting.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630043.

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A. Nannini, *Interesting*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 1, Milano, Mimesis, 2018.