Interpassive agency. Engaging actor-network-theory's view on the agency of objects

Abstract

With increasing frequency, questions about 'what things do' and 'evocative objects' pop up in philosophy and theoretical sociology. They direct our attention to an important phenomenon: the agency of objects. In this article, I contrast Bruno Latour's, and ANT's, view on the agency, or actancy, of objects with my own view of the 'interpassive' role of objects. In reaction to traditional interactivity, interpassivity indicates that our contribution to the realization of a work of art, or an institution, is now taken over by the artwork or institution itself. This is a consequence of the success of emancipation. Our emancipatory privilege to live only in accordance with norms we have interactively subscribed to, is now starting to turn into a burden: we feel an obligation to always live up to our emancipatory promise. Interpassivity, the inability to act according to norms we ourselves subscribe to, is a form of resistance to the pressures exerted by successful emancipation. In contrast with Latour's view that objects can become 'actors' but not for particular reasons, I argue that objects become actors because our interactivity is increasingly being 'outsourced' to them. Paradoxically, we need objects to relieve us from our emancipatory burden, in order to sustain our emancipatory ambition. In turn, the condition of interpassivity implies that objects may acquire a more emancipatory status. As carriers of interactive responsibilities, they now interact with us on a more equal footing. Certainly in that sense I agree with Latour/ANT that the agency of objects should be more seriously considered.

Why, and how, can objects become 'agents'? How, and why, can they exhibit activity and perhaps even intentionality on a more or less equal footing with humans? How can we envisage, and conceptualize, a role for objects that is superior to merely being subservient to human beings? How do we account for 'interaction' between objects and subjects, in a sense that is more than metaphorical, rhetorical, or hyperbolical?

This seems to be a topic of increasing interest in social theory and philosophy. I want to propose a particular answer to the question how and why we might be warranted in ascribing agency to objects. I will develop my argument in contrast with a well-established theory that argues for a quite radical view of 'object-agency': the 'actor-network theory' (ANT) developed by Bruno Latour and others. Latour basically enables object-agency by radically disavowing the subject-object dichotomy: We – humans – have never been modern, and thus we have no business claiming an ontological advantage over non-human entities, 'nature', 'objects', or however we wish to call or (sub)divide this 'other' realm. Which is not really another realm at all. In contrast, I want to show how we can plausibly speak about interaction between humans and objects, and about ways in which objects 'act' with regard to human beings, without doing away with the subject-object distinction. And thus, without relinquishing most of the generally accepted views on the constitution of actorship.

I aim to do this through the notions of interactivity and, especially, *interpassivity*. Interpassivity, as presented first by philosophers Slavoj Žižek and Robert Pfaller in the context of philosophy of art[1], refers to a condition, or phase, subsequent on interactivity. Interactivity in art entails that the work of art is not a mere object to be contemplated by subjects, such as museum or gallery visitors; it is an entity that must realize itself in interaction with human visitors. While in the phase of interactivity, works of art are thus primarily dependent on us, human actors, in the condition of interpassivity the roles are reversed, or at least thoroughly revised. The work of art now acquires a kind of actorship, by taking over our contribution from us: it exhibits agency – which we may describe as either activity or passivity – 'on our behalf', 'in our name'.

If we may apply the analysis of interpassivity also to other objects rather than just to works of art, as I will argue we should, the state or condition of interpassivity provides us with more convincing, or even compelling, reasons to speak of objects exhibiting agency than actor-network theory does. Or so is my claim. Although I do realize that it is not ANT's primary goal to come up with reasons why objects should be considered actors, or 'actants', but rather to 'add new agents' to the description of any constellation of social relations,[2] I do think it is essential for ANT scholars to take on the challenge of explaining more systematically *when* and *why* objects acquired agency. On these counts, I believe the interpassivity analysis can provide important insights that the ANT analysis is – constitutionally – unable to produce.

One final preliminary note. Although this article contains quite a lot of criticism of views by Latour/ANT, it is intended neither as a systematic discussion of such views, nor as a disqualification of them as nonsensical or far-fetched. On the contrary: although I do use Latour/ANT views here primarily as a foil, it is my intention to contribute to the shared

mission of broadening the notion of actorship beyond the purview of human beings, by providing an account of how things, also, may be counted as actors.

I will start by setting out the essentials of the actor-network view on the agency of objects. Next, I will review some of the opposition to such a view, and argue with ANT for 'upgrading' the role of objects in social theory and philosophy. Against ANT, however, I argue that we need questions to answers like: Are *all* objects actants, or can *all* objects *become* actants? Have all objects, or some objects, *always* been actants? And: if (all) objects are actors, or 'actants', should descriptions of reality not be *really* different from what they are now, even in ANT reports? I then set out the main tenets of the theory of interpassivity, and show how this approach may plausibly account for when and how objects may become actors.

What does it mean to be modern?

The 'project of modernity' indeed refers to a new human self-understanding, one that rejects conceiving the world through norms given outside of itself. Modernity understands the world solely through the 'diremptions' (*Entzweiungen*) it has wrought itself. Therefore the need for philosophy to 'grasp its own time in thought', as famously proposed by Hegel, 'the first philosopher of modernity'.[3] While philosophical idealism in general holds that the world can only be understood as constructed by the human mind, Hegel's philosophy entails that labour, the human transformation and appropriation of the natural world, is to be understood not only as instrumental in the fulfilment of human desire, but also as necessary for human self-realization. His philosophy of modernity implies both that the mind 'grasps' (*begreifen*) and masters the world through concepts (*Begriffe*), and that world and *Geist* are involved in a process of mutual self-constitution, albeit with the *Geist* in a 'lead role'. As mind, or *Geist*, manifests itself in the world and understands itself through this process, it is also forced to acknowledge that it necessarily externalizes itself, that it cannot merely stay 'by itself'. The simultaneous process of self-understanding and of self-realization implies both an appropriation of the world, and a process of 'diremption', or externalization of the self, or subjectivity.

What does this imply for the claims of Latour (and ANT) with regard to modernity? To begin with, of course, Latour claims that 'we have never been modern'. That is to say, the modern view has always stood for a misrepresentation of the world, one characterized by an insistent yet always necessarily failing attempt to establish a distinction between subject and object. Modernity mistakenly claims that every phenomenon can be categorized ('purified') under one of two headings: mind or world. The moment we start separating mind and world, or culture and nature, we also (through 'translation') start producing 'hybrids': entities that are, or seem, natural, but exist only through the intervention of mind, or culture.[4] Indeed, modernity *is* the project of intervention to draw, redraw, and re-establish, a line between the two domains, so as to gain mastery over the nonhuman world. Yet every attempt to do so will just produce more hybrids.

Without going into convoluted discussions on Hegelian ontology, or for that matter on Latour's ontological views, we may properly ask whether Latour's 'nonmodern' stance is really that far removed from what Hegel aims at. One may be appreciative of, or even share, Latour's (and many other contemporary philosopher's) distaste for dialectics, cursorily dismissed by him as a philosophical 'knack' that robs artefacts of their rightful existence by 'covering them up', or 'spiriting them away'.[5] But even then it should be clear that dialectics in no way implies a division between two separate realms, a strict separation of subject and object, of *Geist* and nature. Rather, it does in fact invite us to see culture in general as a 'hybrid', as something 'touched' by *Geist* and therefore in a way 'containing', or expressing, *Geist*. Indeed, culture *is* an ever increasing realm of hybridity, brought forth by the insatiable urge of the *Geist* to touch, or grasp, objects. It is, one suspects, rather the 'lead role' of the *Geist*, together with the *generality* of its grasp, that leads to the 'spiriting away' of the object that Latour objects to.

However this may be, it doesn't seem nonsensical to argue that objects typically get short shrift in traditional accounts in social theory and philosophy, and that important aspects of social reality and social relations may thus be obscured.[6] As Latour describes the mission of ANT: 'no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting 'non-human elements' in'.[7] Moreover, for Latour, it also makes a big difference whether we conceive of participants as *intermediaries* or as *mediators* – as entities that 'transport meaning or force without transformation', or as entities that 'transform, translate, and modify the meaning of the elements they are supposed to carry'.[8] The project of ANT is thus 'simply to extend the list and modify the shapes and figures of those assembled as participants'.[9] Or in other words, 'by increasing, in our accounts, the relative share of mediators over intermediaries'.[10]

We do this primarily, says Latour, by not distinguishing on beforehand between (human) actors and (nonhuman) objects. '*Any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor'.[11] Or more precisely, such a thing is an 'actant', an anonymous agency which in our accounts will receive a distinctive shape through *figuration* – sketching, drawing, filling in, at any level of abstraction.[12] The point of ANT analysis is 'to shift from a certainty about action to an uncertainty about action'. We should not decide *who* is acting and how, but *what* is acting and how.[13] Latour pushes this point to perhaps hyperbolic length. In answer to the question: 'who is pulling the strings, puppets or puppeteers?', he says: 'the puppets do, in addition to their puppeteers'.[14] This is like saying that it is the piano that plays, in addition to the pianist.

For my present purposes, the problem with such an extreme statement is not so much in the principles mentioned, those of increasing the relative share of mediators over intermediaries, and of not distinguishing on beforehand between (human) actors and (nonhuman) objects. It is rather that Latour and ANT reject *any* preconceived notion of *which* objects may become actors, *why*, *how*, and *when*. The implausibility of an example like that of the piano, it seems, is meant to emphasize that we should rule nothing out. Any intermediary can become a mediator. An actant may be filled in at any level of abstraction, in any colour or

shade of gray, in soft or sharp contours, etcetera. Moreover, things may 'authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on'.[15]

'The social', Latour continues, 'is the name of a type of momentary association which is characterized by the way it gathers together into new shapes'.[16] As it is momentary, it may change at any time. It may indeed change merely through another *account* being given, in which other, or more, actants are identified, and more intermediaries are replaced by mediators. As a matter of fact, this is what Latour offers as a *solution* to the quite intractable problem of 'tricking intermediaries into mediators, of 'registering the queerest idiosyncrasies of the humblest actors'. This solution is that 'we draw up accounts'. Accounts, of course, that are as 'uncertain' – that is to say: unstable, unpredictable, revisable – as the phenomena they study.[17] Although Latour resists the conclusion that 'anything goes', Graham Harman rightly concludes here that actually anything does go, as long as you are prepared to put in enough time and effort[18] – either in the laboratory, or in the account, we might add. Anyway, there is no criterion that allows us to decide which account is best – except for the purely quantitative one that 'the more mediators, the better'.

The modernist would say that this is because of the (deliberate) lack of any systematic notion of actorship in the ANT approach. Even Aristotle did not claim that natural objects, or animals, 'act', even though he did think that they move toward some goal or end. Also any modern, systematic notion of actorship would require such a goal-directedness, or at least some intention to that effect. An action is not an action if it is not in some way intentionally directed toward some end. Both the end and the intention are absent in the notion of action employed by Latour/ANT. This may be implied in the rejection of the distinction between subject and object, but as a consequence the notion of actor is conceptually broadened to include any entity that somehow affects other entities – 'affects' in both a material sense of influencing the chain of causation, and in the sense of what I would call a *geistig,* or intentional, influence, and Latour/ANT would probably call a 'transformation, translation, and modification of meaning'.

Instead of bogging us all down in a controversy on what would constitute proper actorship, I would like to propose a different challenge to Latour/ANT's notion of how things act. The idea here is to understand the actorship of things as a consequence of a process of emancipation. Just as humans have emancipated, as a consequence of the process of Enlightenment, so that every person has a 'right' to be considered as a potential actor, now things are becoming emancipated and have a 'right' to be counted as an actant, as a possible actor. Any thing can become an actor, just as any Enlightened person can. This story entails that things started their emancipatory process through humans. Even stronger, they become emancipated *because* the human process of emancipation requires them to. Latour/ANT would probably reject this view as being a mere extension of the project of modernity, and of the subservient status of objects. Still, I think my story has at least three characteristics running in its favour.

First, it makes clear on what grounds subjects and objects are to be counted as equals: on the grounds of emancipation. Even stronger, emancipation is the best ground for such intended equality to make normative sense. Surely, objects enjoy more true equality when this is achieved through a process of emancipation, than as a mere consequence of human fiat. In other words, what I argue is that something really happened to objects that made them emancipated and conferred upon them a form of actorship, while Latour/ANT would rather claim that objects have – passively – regained a status that (modern) human beings denied them, or remained ignorant of.

Second, the historical nature of my account makes it possible to explain why discourses that recognize the actorship of things, such as those of Latour/ANT, start to arise in the early 1990s, rather than at some random earlier (or later) time. This timing is consistent with what I would like to call a new phase in the 'dialectic of Enlightenment', in which precisely the successful realization of the principles of emancipation has called forth a reaction – the phenomenon of interpassivity. The interpassive condition, as I will elaborate below, implies a shift from interactive responsibility from human beings to objects, thereby in a way endowing objects with actorship.

Third, my approach embeds the controversial, and for many probably nonsensical idea, of the actorship of things in a context that provides such actorship with recognizable ends and intentions. Namely, a response to the emancipatory discontent – the interpassivity – that modern human beings seem to have fallen prey to in the last two decades or so. Things, it appears, assist us in our struggle with what I call our emancipatory fall-out, our inability to consistently act in accordance with the emancipatory status we struggled so hard to attain. In contrast, Latour/ANT recognize no such ends or intentions. They are thus wont to emphasize the 'surprising' nature of the actorship of things, and the unpredictability of what is, or might be, exercising agency. As we never know how things will act, the accounts provided by Latour/ANT of such actorship will necessarily remain really speculative.

To substantiate these claims, let me first set out the main relevant parts of - my version of – the theory of interpassivity, in the next two paragraphs. Having done that, I can return to my argument with, or against, Latour/ANT.

The rise and fall of interactivity

Latour claims that modernity is a failed project, or rather, a project that could never have succeeded. He thus radicalizes the more generally accepted notion of modernity as an 'unfinished project': it remains unfinished, because it was misconceived in the first place. As an alternative, I want to propose a particular way in which the project of modernity went awry, that may explain when and why the external world of objects came to play an active role in our human life.

With the advent of modernity, subjectivity itself has become historical – that is to say, an active force shaping reality. It is active in its very essence, always attempting to realize itself

in its never-ceasing conflict with the material world and with other subjects. The modern subject is the active creator of the world, not merely 'projecting' it through the working of his mind, but constituting it practically through real engagement and confrontation. This importantly involves externalizing part of our subjectivity, creating culture and institutions as entities that exist apart and independently from us, yet also as something that we necessarily relate to, as something that we need to define ourselves in relation to. As already mentioned above, this is part of the story of emancipation, of human subjects making themselves free from external norms and determinants.

During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, institutions were instrumental in shaping the modern world, in ways that had been impossible or unthinkable before. In that sense, modernity constitutes a radical break with the earlier functioning of social, political and cultural institutions. But although modernity in some way always carried an emancipatory streak, it cannot be said that institutions in modernity always fulfilled an emancipatory function; that would fly in the face of, for instance, racial discrimination and the subjection of women. Institutions, or at least some institutions, became emancipatory in the full sense only between, say, 1965 and 1975. This is the first of three important turning points in the history of institutions and emancipations, in the second half of the twentieth century. As explained below, the second occurred in the early eighties, and the third in the late eighties and early nineties. These turning points represent fateful 'twists' in the emancipatory potential of institutions – twists that may be understood as following an inner dialectic of emancipation, as a part, or moment, of the larger dialectic of Enlightenment.

The first turning point marks the rise of interactivity. It refers to the moment that people started to become involved in the functioning of institutions. Of course, there are earlier examples of how and why people no longer accept on good faith that actually existing institutions indeed represented their own externalized subjectivity. There had been protest movements and organizations of e.g. women and labourers that demanded, and sometimes indeed effected, social or political reform, rightfully suspecting that existing institutions might serve other, 'external' purposes – those of tradition, or of a power elite. But such groups and their 'voice' did not yet become recognized as regular partners in the institutional organization of society. This, I propose, started to happen only in the second half of the 1960s.

This is a story that started with the general outcry for civil rights, for democratization, and for increased participation, resulting in a massive transformation of institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. Many institutions were successfully reformed, so as to make them consistent with emancipatory purposes. Democratization and participation created *interactive* institutions. Like interactive installations in art, such institutions came to accommodate and, later on, to appreciate, and even solicite, active 'input' from the population that previously was only passively involved. Of course, as already mentioned, people had been involved earlier in very much active forms of protest, or even revolution. But never before had they been interactively related to institutions, being recognized as regular 'partners in dialogue'.

The sociologist Abram de Swaan has described this process in terms of a transformation of a 'command household' into a 'household of negotiation'.[19] A command household is ruled by 'the head of the family', while in a negotiation household decisionmaking is typically subject to discussion, negotiation, and renegotiation. While primarily referring to the institution of the family, De Swaan also extends his analysis to many other social institution, such as politics (as the relation between government and citizen), and institutions for higher education. Similarly, institutional arrangements have developed in the sphere of labour that enable workers to participate, to some degree at least, in the process of decisionmaking. We could also point to the sphere of mental health, where the distinction between staff and patients, between 'normal' and 'abnormal', became radically questioned. Last but not least, institutions started to develop that explicitly aimed to 'empower' ordinary citizens in the sphere of social work, community organization, street corner work, and such.

We may view this process of transformation as a classical case of dialectics. Institutions first appear on the scene as externalization of human subjectivity, shaping a culture that sustains modern life and modern freedom. While they thus embody, or 'reflect', modern subjectivity, over time they may fail to correspond to how people view themselves. Naturally, people then no longer accept the authority of such institutions; they want to restore their relation to, and influence on, what was after all originally their own externalized subjectivity. In this process, they come to establish a critical, interactive relationship with institutions, and to reflectively link their own subjectivity with the existence of such interactive relations.

I propose that this process of interactive institutional emancipation has been largely successful. Family relations have been dramatically changed. And also more generally, authority relations have changed dramatically, making many kinds of authority much more 'responsive' and answerable to institutionalized forms of critique and dialogue. Teachers, professors, policemen, government ministers, judges even, aren't the authority figures they used to be. In consequence, institutional change has become very difficult to realize without soliciting the opinion, and the support, of all those involved, or at least a substantial number of them. Possibilities for protest or formal appeal, legally or otherwise, have dramatically increased, and are being extensively used. The participation of women in many professions and institutions has also increased dramatically, as has, although to a lesser degree, that of assorted minorities.

The claim that emancipation has been by and large successful may not appeal to everyone. Isn't modern society better characterized by the spread of control and discipline? It seems to me that this is not simply a matter of either/or. Although I cannot develop this point at any great length here, my own view is this: indeed modern society requires many 'disciplinary' practices and institutional arrangements in order to maintain the conditions for enlightened actor- and citizenship. Being a modern, emancipated individual is not an easy task. It would be impossible to live an emancipated life without institutions that facilitate, pressure,

cajole, encourage, or – if one prefers – 'discipline' us to behave in line with the requirements of emancipation. We need not, and indeed should not, deny the liberating effects of emancipatory progress to recognize that we are also subject to disciplinary processes; indeed, that such processes sustain emancipated life.

Another objection might be that even if the process of emancipation has been successful, at least in a philosophical sense, there are still quite a number of people that remain marginalized or excluded, or that otherwise do not enjoy the – perhaps dubious – benefits of emancipation. No doubt this is true. But this objection itself implies that such groups, or people, *should* come to enjoy such benefits – in fact, sooner rather than later. Including these groups, however morally desirable in itself, will only extend the scope of the problem that, in my view, has arisen as a consequence of successful emancipation: the problem of interpassivity, that I will discuss below.

The historical and conceptual link to that issue is provided by the second turning point in the history of emancipation, a point that we may situate in the early eighties. In some way, this is a surprising turn: now that institutions had become interactive and were supporting the creation of emancipated subjects, these subjects turned against the institutions. Feeling emancipated and self-assured, they were thoroughly imbued with interactivity yet simultaneously they rejected the authority of institutions, even emancipatory ones. Having created emancipatory institutions just some ten or fifteen years earlier, modern subject had become so emancipated that they started to experience these very institutions as paternalistic and meddlesome. In other words, although they remained interested in interactive consultation, even insisting on being consulted on all issues that touched upon their personal interests, they no longer saw a connection between interactivity and the formation or representation of collective goals and values. They took the interactivity for granted, while simultaneously realigning their subjectivity to fit much more private, individuals goals and concerns. Thus in the 1980s and 1990s, progressive emancipatory activism quite suddenly turned into assertive liberal individualism.

Interpassivity

This 'post-emancipatory' condition of both individuals and institutions is where the notion of interpassivity comes into play. Interpassivity is a post-emancipatory condition *par excellence*, in the sense that it refers to a phase or condition that arises out of interactive self-constitution. The concept itself originated in the second half of the 1990s at a symposium on 'interpassive media' organized in 1996 by the Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller.[20] The general idea is as follows. In the context of (philosophy of) art, interactivity refers to a situation in which participation of visitors is required for the realization of the work of art. They must perform a certain action, react in a certain way, or at least simply be present, for the work of art to 'work', to fulfil its particular nature. As we can now easily see, this reflected the general condition of society in the 1960s and 1970s, in which participation by subjects was increasingly considered

necessary, or at least highly desirable, for institutions to fulfil their particular goals. Interactive art made both visitor and artwork dependent on mutual involvement, so as to 'form a double system (...) in which both the work and the viewer can change', thereby not merely extending an invitation but in fact imposing an imperative to participate.[21]

Interpassivity, in turn, refers to a condition *beyond* interactivity. Interactivity is no longer necessary for the work of art to realize itself, as it has now learned to 'take over' the input of the visitor. The artwork acts 'in his place' and 'on his behalf'.[22] It is important to see that interpassivity does not return us, or the artwork, to the condition *before* interactivity. Although it is true that before as well as after interactivity the work of art does not depend upon input by the visitor, it does make a difference that interpassive visitor and artwork *have gone through* the experience of interactivity. The condition of interpassivity reflects and expresses the experiences incurred through a whole generation of interactive functioning. It does not imply the end of interactivity; visitors typically still persevere in interaction, even insisting on it. But interactivity no longer serves the purpose of realizing some – common – goal. It continues mostly for its own sake, as a sort of ironical comment on 'art for art's sake'. The visitor is now relieved from whatever contribution he previously made. It is taken from him and processed by the artwork on its own accord, in what we might call a pro-active movement, or a pre-emptive strike.

Interpassivity thus indicates different *attitude* from before toward externalizing, or outsourcing, our subjectivity. Modernity, as we saw, implied the realization that institutions were no more, and no less, than externalizations of our own subjectivity; this constituted an important part of modernity's emancipatory power. This emancipatory potential received a new impulse in the 1960s and 1970s. The gap between institutional functioning and new forms of freedom expressing themselves in society, and in individual self-perception, led to critical reflection on the functioning of institutions. In response to society's demand, institutions became interactive, so as to better accommodate emancipatory values and ideals. Externalized subjectivity was thus permanently 'checked' against individual subjective existence.

Naturally, this process worked both ways. Individuals ascertained whether institutions were still 'up to speed' with what went on in society and in private life; the institutions, in turn, gave notice to individuals as to what was expected of them, as newly empowered emancipatory subjects. For a relatively short but intense period, this 'coalition of the willing' held together. Individuals and institutions viewed each other positively. Co-producing institutions and subjects spurred each other on, to achieve higher degrees of – mutually enforced – emancipation and self-realization. Individuals (again) saw institutions as positively enforcing externalizations of their own subjectivity, and institutions found subjects willing co-operators in their schemes of social development.[23]

The transition from interactivity to interpassivity implies both a new (second) kind of externalization of subjectivity, and a change in attitude towards externalized subjectivity, both brought about by the prolonged experience of maintaining an interactive relation with our own externalized, or outsourced, subjectivity. The *privilege* of self-realization embedded in the

interactive condition virtually implies an *imperative* to self-realize, analogous to the 'imperative to participate'. Accordingly, individuals began to experience their emancipated, interactive status not only as a modern privilege, but more and more also as a burden. Interpassivity implies the shifting of this burden towards the entity with which one is – still – interactively connected: institutions in the case of society, artworks in the sphere of art. Thus we have effectively created a double shift: first we externalized our subjectivity to institutions (or artworks), and now we also 'outsource' the burden of interactivity and emancipation towards the institutions (or artworks).

But again, interpassivity also implies a change in attitude towards this double shift. On the one hand, we feel relieved that institutions, or artworks, appear prepared to assume the load of emancipation and self-realization, or at least part of it. On the other hand, we cannot shed the feeling that there is something odd, or even paradoxical, about this kind of 'outsourcing'. We have in fact made institutions, or artworks, responsible for our own check on them. And simultaneously, as we have emptied our interactive relation with them of its content, we are increasingly left with a mere empty shell of 'communication'.

It is important to see that outsourcing does not imply the rejection, or devaluation, of emancipatory ideals. On the contrary, it is precisely because we embrace these ideals, perhaps more than ever, that we feel unable to live up to them. We simply cannot self-realize in all aspects of life that have opened to us as modern, emancipated, and interactive beings. This is literally too much of a good thing for us. It is exactly because we *want* to be fully modern that we are increasingly unable to act consistently in accordance with our norms and ideals. We might call this condition 'kantian incapacitation'. Naturally we feel ambiguous about this condition, because we do not readily admit that we fail to live up to our own norms and ideals. Perhaps we often do not even realize that this is the case; it is after all an unwelcome insight that the source of our discontent lies in failing to do what we ourselves consider the right thing to do.

And just as naturally, we feel ambiguous about the 'solution' of outsourcing our emancipatory burden. As said, it is an odd solution to begin with: we expect institutions, or works of art, to perform our check on them, in our name. Moreover, we sense both relief and discontent; we consider ourselves both self-reliant and deficient. Outsourcing is in a way a device of our own making, to bridge a divide also of our own making. Yet we do not feel comfortable with either this divide, or this 'bridge'. We are unable to view our outsourcing with equanimity, much less with straightforward enjoyment; we are unsure what relation we should entertain with our own externalized subjectivity, now including our own interactive check on it. We cannot live with our burden, and we cannot live without it either.[24]

What objects may do, and why

The interpassivity analysis brings out that precisely because of our status as fully emancipated individuals, we become dependent upon the authority of institutions, or artworks, as carriers of

our outsourced (inter)activity. Now we may begin to see the connection with the question of objects, the way they are 'acting', and what role they may play in our lives. The basic idea is that objects become 'actors' when, and in so far as, they have become the bearers, or representatives, of our outsourced (inter)activity. This is what authorizes them to act 'on our behalf'. They are active in our place, compensating for our failure to act.

This also provides us with answers as to *when* and *why* objects became (inter)active. They became interactive when, as a consequence of the becoming interactive of institutions, human beings began to take part in the process of their realization. Not surprisingly, this process of emancipation, of the recognition of objects as a kind of 'partners in discussion', first took place in the sphere of art. After the complicity between human beings and objects was thus set into motion, the objects become more fully emancipated in the phase of interpassivity, as they now take (part of) our interactivity upon themselves. We tend to say that we 'outsourced' our interactivity to them, but perhaps we may just as well say that they have 'insourced' it, as it is difficult to establish an initiating party here.[25] In a curiously dialectical way, by assisting us in our efforts to remain emancipated actors, objects themselves are becoming emancipated. To the same extent that we abdicate responsibility for acting in accordance with interactively established norms, objects take on this responsibility. Indeed they do this 'on our behalf', or 'in our name', as Pfaller and Žižek argued, but by doing so they also get more on an equal footing with human beings.

How do objects, in the new role they are starting to play, relate to institutions? I argued above that the rise of interactivity was accompanied by the rise of institutions that enabled and accommodated interactivity. In a dialectical twist, individuals turned against emancipatory institutions and thus became interpassive. This also implied a turn from institutions to objects. And we have in fact seen the reason why. Institutions, once they had become interactive (in the 1960s and 1970s), influenced or directed behaviour through collective opinion formation: a revival, one might say, of the classical ideal of the public sphere. Self-direction was enabled through institutional mediation; institutions enabled individuals to interactively constitute, and revise, their 'life plans'. After the 'interpassive turn', however, institutionalized interactivity became less and less effective in the coordination of action. To be sure, as emphasized above, as emancipated actors we are not in the least unwilling to follow our own norms. But when the demands of emancipation tend to become too encompassing and the load of emancipation too heavy to bear, we sometimes simply *fail* to act on our own norms.

With the advent of interpassivity, such failure becomes less amenable to 'discursive' correction, that is to say, to interactively evaluated convictions or cognitive capacities. As fully emancipated actors, we *know* the relevant norms all too well. What we increasingly need is not cognitive, but physical, material 'reminders'. We need *objects* to instruct us how to act, precisely because they interact not by speaking, or arguing, but merely through silent 'directing'. Objects can become 'directors' because they are now, increasingly, the carriers of the outsourced interactivity that was previously embedded in, and enabled by, institutions. How precisely institutions relate to objects may vary. Institutions may deploy objects to accomplish their

mission, where previously discursive means were employed. Alternatively, objects may replace institutions as 'placeholders' of emancipated actorship, as we 'place' (or externalize, or outsource) our interactive involvement in objects rather than institutions. An example is constituted by the chip card-operated gates at train stations, and other semi-public places, that replace human supervision. And as such gates (attempt to) make improper behaviour, within the designated space, simply impossible – without valid card no entry – they also obviate the need for human interaction should improper actions occur.

The chip card is not an arbitrary example, as it stands for an object that can literally be 'loaded' with institutional authority; the institutional rules and norms that we have interactively agreed with are transcribed onto the electronic circuits on the chip card. Thus, when we are 'instructed' by the card to perform in a particular way, or when it prevents us from acting in a certain way, we are merely reminded of norms and rules that we knew already, and already agreed with. Increasingly, in our society, such 'direction' by 'interactively loaded' objects seems required to make us act in accordance with our own rules.

Next, we should look at the different ways in which objects are able to assist us. Or, from their point of view, so to speak: how can they express their newly acquired interactive responsibilities? A first way is simple and passive. The object remains silent and static; its message is contained within its mere presence and shape. Or rather, in the way that its presence and shape interfere with our actions when such actions do not conform to our own the norms – or at least, norms that we have had the opportunity to co-validate. The typical example here is the 'sleeping policeman', which 'reminds' us of the speed limit.[26] Or the hotel key with the oversized wooden label, which 'reminds' us to check our key at the reception desk.

Obviously, given their limited capabilities as actors, the role of objects will often remain confined to this static and silent role. They make us trip over them when we step out of line, so to speak. But when we take a somewhat broader view of 'objects' in the world as belonging to the set of material means through which the environment in which we act is shaped, objects also play a less haphazard role in influencing, directing, coaxing – or, if one prefers: disciplining – our behaviour. Of course, that claim that the physical shape of our environment – as constituted by a (large) number of objects – influences our behaviour is in itself a commonplace; just as it is a commonplace that the condition of my piano influences my playing. My point is that this shaping, at least in some instances, is taking on a new meaning: it directs – coaxes, cajoles, &c – our behaviour *because* we ourselves are no longer always able to do so, on the basis of interactively constituted norms. Other than the random influence that the environment always exercises on us, this kind of influence is *normative*. Even stronger, I am thinking here of environments that are shaped to do precisely this. My thesis is that we will encounter more and more environments that, through their physical shaping, 'help' us act in accordance with norms. That such environments can exercise a normative force is of course already well established.[27] My point however is that we need this normative force because we

can no longer always bring ourselves to act on the very norms that we ourselves have interactively validated, due to our condition of interpassivity.

Interpassive objects thus engage in what Madeleine Akrich, working closely with Bruno Latour, has called 'scripting': the particular design of the object leads us to act in a certain way.[28] Indeed 'scripting' seems to be the essence of the 'activity', or 'actorship', exhibited by objects.[29] Objects do not merely, or randomly, act; it is not even clear what it would mean to say that they do. Despite the claims of *We have never been modern*, 'acting' must somehow mean that objects take part in the meaningful, intentional world of human beings. Indeed it seems to me that this is the typical way we take notice of them. Again, despite the claims by Latour/ANT, it would in fact be quite difficult to find other meaningful grounds to take notice of them. Things cannot, by themselves, draw our attention, other than by having us 'trip over them', literally or perhaps figuratively.

Latour in fact seems to agree with this, in a passage in *Reassembling the social* where he discusses the question of how objects can manage to enter into our accounts. He observes that objects 'quickly go silent': 'by the very nature of their connections with humans, they quickly shift from being mediators to being intermediaries'.[30] And he continues: 'This is why specific tricks have to be invented to *make them talk*, that is, to offer descriptions of themselves, to produce *scripts* of what they are making others – humans or non-humans – do' (emphasis BL). What objects 'have to say' is here equated, and rightly so, with what they 'make us do'. And only when we become discursively aware of this, can we account for them as 'actants' in whatever particular way. Scripting thus implies that we could discursively lay out what such objects make us do.

Two objections might surface at this point. First: are things really unable to make us take notice? Do not microbes make us ill, or hurricanes make us take shelter? They do – but what they don't do is appeal to some form of interactively constituted understanding. Also, there is no normative implication to be derived from their 'actions'. They do not shape the environment in ways that are normatively meaningful for us, or that can count as interactively validated. In so far as we do interact with such 'actors', we do this merely for survival, or for what we might call realist reasons.[31]

Second, Latour/ANT might argue that the normative import of the object's influence on our behaviour is indeed merely realistic, or prudential in nature, not moral or institutional: the objects 'translate' our moral or institutional concerns into prudential ones. The sleeping policeman thus 'translates' our concern for the speed limit – and the moral and institutional reasons behind this limit, such as respect for the law, safety, fuel economy, environmental concerns – into prudential concern for the suspension of our car. The hotel key with its oversized label translates the institutional expectation to check our key at the reception into a prudential concern to rid ourselves from such unmanageable items.

Indeed there will always be such a prudential dimension to how objects 'instruct' us, as this is usually the most effective way to make us comply. This does not mean, however, that their instruction cannot also contain an institutional or a moral dimension. In a similar way, as

Kant's moral imperative that we treat others 'at least also as ends' makes clear that we inevitably always also treat them as means. Furthermore, the interpassivity analysis can provide an answer to the question as to *why* we need such 'translation' (from moral to prudential) in the first place, a question neither raised nor answered by Latour/ANT. Why do we need the 'bump' from the sleeping policeman, or the uncomfortable bulge of the hotel key to spur us into action in conformity with our own insights? According to the interpassivity analysis, we need such a translation because we sometimes become weary of always living up to our own emancipated standards. As cognitive reminders will not usually suffice to remedy this failure, we need to be physically 'reminded'.

Thus although objects may be seen as translating institutional and moral concerns into prudential concerns, such prudential considerations do not fit comfortably with our status as emancipated beings. If indeed we would systematically fail to translate such prudential considerations back into moral or institutional reasons, we would betray our emancipatory status. As we do not want to renounce this status, but simultaneously suffer under the demands it makes on us, we tend 'outsource' them to objects – objects that in turn represent institutions. And last but not least, a *merely* prudential 'use' of objects would also conflict with the emancipated status of *objects*, in the era of interpassivity.

My claim therefore remains that objects make us act *for a reason*. In as far as objects can be said to act, they – just like humans – have a normative message. 'Scripts' are not random; they (cor)respond to – are sensitive to – what we might call our 'experience of modernity'. This conclusion follows naturally from the thought that objects acquired agency through the interactivity that human beings engaged them in. When objects became interactive, their script invited us to exercise and develop interactive capacities. Human beings and object needed each other's interactive engagement in order to realize themselves.

Now being loaded, or 'charged', with our 'outsourced' interactivity, the objects direct their attention at us. In this sense also they act 'for a reason': they attempt to restore in us our capacity of reasonable actors. Or if that is too much to ask, they at least help us to act in accordance with our own norms. Norms that we ourselves can very well subscribe to, but – due to our condition of interpassivity – cannot always bring ourselves to act on. This is what interpassive objects do: they induce us to act on our own norms. Their shape or position forces, guides, or encourages us to act in a proper way. We know that we should lock the hotel room, and present the key to the front desk; the shape of the Berlin key forces us to lock the door, and encourages us to present it at the desk (it is too cumbersome to take with us). Modern hotel doors use 'smart cards' with chips. These, we might say, induce correct behaviour only negatively. They do not incite us to return them at the hotel desk when we leave, or to do anything else in particular. But the intelligence embedded in the card makes our possible negligence immaterial; it 'expires' the day we leave and makes improper use impossible.

As this example already shows, electronically empowered objects, or environments, have much more flexible and 'intelligent' ways to 'coach' us than physical objects. The latter can 'address' us only passively, that is to say, when we literally happen to come across them, as in the case of the sleeping policemen. But 'smart' objects are nowadays all around us, ranging from camera surveillance and RFID-tags on common, daily objects to full-blown Artificial Intelligence environments and domains of 'pervasive computing'. This of course drastically increases the possibilities for intelligent objects to coach us, well expressed in the term 'persuasive technology'.[32]

Yet there is a category of objects, or actants, that can be said to 'act' without attempting to direct or guide us. While scripted interpassive objects have a *directive* effect, because they direct our action in a specific direction, there also exist *reflective* interpassive objects. This is the category of interpassive *artworks*. They do not give us direction, but they incite us to reflect. Not so much on how our behaviour conflicts with the norms we ourselves subscribe to, but on the phenomenon of interpassivity itself. Such artworks thematize interpassivity. They do not endeavour to provide a practical solution for the condition of interpassivity, but they invite us to reflect on the interpassive relation we entertain with them. They ask the question also thematized by Pfaller: "Are you satisfied with this interpassive relation? Do you *enjoy* it?" In other words, such artworks bring to light the *ambiguity* of the interpassive relation. We experience this ambiguity by becoming aware of the fact that although we, as visitors, are still supposed to be present, and even interactive, our input is apparently no longer needed. The artwork has already taken care of it, leaving us redundant.

An example of such an artwork may be provided by Marina Abramović's performance accompanying her retrospective exhibition 'The artist is present' at the MOMA, spring 2010 in New York. The setting is extremely simple: two chairs and a table. Abramović sits in one of the chairs. Visitors are encouraged to sit silently across from the artist for a duration of their choosing, becoming participants in the artwork. Some visitors stay a few minutes, others many hours. In any case, nothing much seems to happen. Many visitors, famous art critic Arthur Danto included[33], speculate on what might have went on during the speechless session: something ephemeral, spiritual, transcendent? The right answer seems to be: precisely nothing went on. That is to say: no interaction took place, or at least, no content was communicated, or interactively validated. Indeed 'the artist is present'; so is the visitor, but his presence is inconsequential, redundant. We here witness an outspoken interactive setting, in which interaction has lost its meaning. In other words, we witness interpassivity being thematized: the last 'act' of the performance play of interaction, the 'fallout' or impotence to which the interactive setting nowadays falls prey.

Neither directive nor reflective objects 'tell us what to do'. The directive objects merely make us do something, while the reflective objects lead us to reflect upon our interpassive condition. This is appropriate, as the interpassive condition indicates that appeals to our interactive capacities increasingly fail to properly guide us. Fortunately, we have now enabled objects to come to our rescue, although we still harbour ambiguous feelings about this

outsourcing to, or insourcing by, objects of our interactive responsibilities. In any case it means, as Latour/ANT and I can fully agree, that we should treat objects with more concern and attention, and even a measure of appreciation.

Conclusion

With increasing frequency, questions about 'what things do' and 'evocative objects' pop up in the domain of philosophy and theoretical sociology.[34] And rightly so. They direct our attention to a phenomenon that is not yet well understood, but certainly deserves closer attention: the agency of objects. Such agency is always controversial and can be conceptualized in different ways. In this article, I have chosen to compare my own view of the interpassive role of objects in contemporary culture with Bruno Latour's, and more generally ANT's, view on the agency, or actancy, of objects. It has not been my intention to provide a full-blown account, or critique, of either Latour or ANT. I enlisted them as opponents because they are the most vociferous advocates for considering things as actors, an advocacy that I basically subscribe to, albeit for different reasons.

The most important difference between our accounts is that my account of the agency of objects is historical; such agency is not, in my view, a transhistorical or universal phenomenon. That it was recently 'discovered' is not accidental, but easily explained considering its recent origin, roughly somewhere in the 1980s. Objects acquired agency when human beings began to interactively engage with them. This was a first moment of 'emancipation' for the objects. For human beings however, this was also the moment when interactivity started to become 'too much of a good thing' for them. The emancipatory *freedom* of having to act only on norms one could subscribe to oneself turned into a virtual *obligation* to always do so, turning a blessing into a burden. Increasingly, we as human beings cannot bring ourselves to act on our own norms. Rather than admit defeat and give up on the interactively acquired capacities, we externalize, or outsource, them: we ask objects to exercise them, on our behalf.

Interpassivity thus represents two interrelated and simultaneous developments. The first concerns the emancipation of human beings, as part of the dialectic of Enlightenment. Interpassivity here stands for what we might call the 'tragedy of successful emancipation'. Precisely the successful realization of the principles of emancipation increasingly causes an inability to act on those principles, and a tendency to outsource this responsibility to objects. Conversely, interpassivity thus implies a more pronounced form of emancipation for objects; this the second development. As such, they are indeed to be counted as 'actors' in the story of our lives. And what is more, they may even be said to have taken this task upon themselves. That is to say, it may be the case that the objects 'insourced' our interactivity, rather than that we 'outsourced' it to them.

Finally: how do we recognize when, or whether, an object is interpassive? That is to say, when it is attempting to remind us of our interactive capabilities? As the condition of

interpassivity is relatively new, and our acknowledgement of our interpassive condition is far from complete, we yet need to learn how to interpret and understand the interpassive assistance that objects provide us with. Here Latour's ethical injunction becomes relevant: it is a virtue, perhaps even an imperative, to identify ever more objects as actors; or, as he puts it in his recent work, to identify mediators not intermediaries. From my perspective, we can only do this if we understand when and why how objects have become actors. In other words, when we understand the consequences of interpassivity, both for ourselves, and for the objects.

References

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[1] Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivität*. Wien: Springer 2000. Id. *Ästhetik der Interpassivität*. Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2009. Slavoj Žižek, *The plague of fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997
[2] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social. An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford university press, 147
[3] Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1985, 13.
[4] Bruno Latour, *We have never been modern*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard university press, 1993, 10-11.
[5] Latour, *Reassembling the social*, 169-170.
[6] Cf Markus Schroer, 'Vermischen, Vermitteln, Vernetzen. Bruno Latours Soziologie der Gemenge und Gemische im Kontext', in: George Kneer, Markus Schroer, Erhard Schüttpelz (eds.), *Bruno Latours Kollektive*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 361-398
[7] Latour, *Reassembling the social*, 72.
[8] Id., 39.
[9] Id., 72
[10] Id., 61.
[11] Id., 71
[12] Id., 53-54.
[13] Id., 60.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Id., 72.
[16] Id., 65.
[17] Id, 122.
[18] Graham Harman, *Prince of networks*. Melbourne: re.press, 2009, 23.
[19] Abram de Swaan, The management of normality. London: Routledge 1990: 139-167
[20] Pfaller, *Interpassivität*.
[21] Joke Brouwer & Arjen Mulder, *Interact or die!*, Rotterdam: V2, 2007, 5, 77.
[22] See generally: Pfaller, Interpassivität. Id, *Die Illusionen der anderen*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2002; Id., *Ästhetik der Interpassivität*. Žižek, *Plague of fantasies*. Gijs van Oenen, 'A machine

that would go of itself. Interpassivity and its impact on political life', *Theory & Event*, 9/2, 2006. Id., 'Interpassivity revisited. A critical and historical reappraisal of interpassive phenomena', in: *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 2/2, 2008.

[23] This is where Habermas and Foucault in my view come together: in order to be, and become, emancipated actors, we need institutions and environments that 'enforce' emancipatory action.

[24] It is this ambiguity that is emphasized in Robert Pfaller's elaboration of the concept of interpassivity, although his explanation for the ambiguity is not historical, but lacanian. Pfaller argues that what we outsource is 'enjoyment', in the lacanian sense of *jouissance*; the ambiguity then naturally derives from the ambiguous nature of *jouissance* according to lacanian theory. See Pfaller, *Die Illusionen der anderen*.

[25] My thanks to Elke Müller for this insight.

[26] Bruno Latour, 'Where are the missing masses? The sociology of a few mundane artifacts', in Wiebe Bijker & John Law (eds.) *Shaping technology/building society: studies in socio-technical change*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT press, 1992, 244.

[27] See, e.g. Lawrence Lessig, *Code, and other laws of cyberspace*. New York: Basic books 1999

[28] Madeleine Akrich, 'The de-scription of technical objects', in Wiebe Bijker & John Law (eds.), *Shaping technology/building society: studies in socio-technical change*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT press, 1992, 205-224.

[29] By objects, I here mean what Latour calls 'quasi-objects', or hybrids. 'Natural objects', as Latour says, are naturally recalcitrant (Latour, 'When things strike back. A possible contribution of science studies to the social sciences', *British Journal of Sociology*, 51/1, 2000, 107-123). Or at any rate, they do not attempt to direct us.

[30] Latour, *Reassembling the social*, 79.

[31] Translated into the discussion on the constitution of a 'public', I am here more on the side of Jacques Rancière than on the side of Jane Bennett – while Bennett, in turn, is voicing a more cautious position than e.g. Latour. Cf Bennett, *Vibrant matter. A political ecology of things*. Durham and London: Duke university press, 2010, 106.

[32] Peter-Paul Verbeek, 'The Moral Relevance of Technological Artifacts', in Marcus Düwell a.o. (eds.), *Evaluating New Technologies*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2009, 63-77

[33] 'Sitting with Marina', *New York Times*, May 23, 2010.

[34] Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What things do*. Pennsylvania State university press, 2005. Sherry Turkle, *Evocative objects. Things we think with*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT press, 2008.