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The Interesting

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Translated by Igor Klyukanov

I.

The *interesting* is a complex trans-disciplinary label often applied not only to works of literature, art, and sciences, but also to the phenomena of real life—persons, events, actions, relationships, and so on. In its evaluative scope, the interesting is hardly less universal than the *beautiful* or the *truthful*, and it seems to have become even more popular in our day. While in the past a literary or scholarly work was generally valued for its truthfulness and beauty, usefulness and instructiveness, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it has been a work's primary evaluation as interesting that paves the way for any further evaluation, including critical analysis. Unless a certain work is "interesting," interpreting it is pointless. But the concept of the interesting does not only introduce the discussion; it often concludes and crowns it as well, through statements like: "In spite of a number of flaws, this article is interesting in that it . . ." or "The peculiar features of this work make it possible to explain the interest that it generated in the reading public." The interesting is simultaneously our initial, intuitive evaluation of the quality of a work and the resulting synthesis of all its analytical definitions.

In some cases a work may be devoid of internal interest but at

the same time possess an external interest, inasmuch as it reflects surprising tendencies in public tastes, literary markets, or publishing processes. A mediocre collection of poetry or an incompetent work of scholarship may be interesting as a symptom of certain intellectual or social trends. A dull book that has been published by a prestigious publisher, or has achieved inexplicable success with the public, creates a paradox and sometimes even a scandal; it attracts interest not to itself, but to the situation as a whole—this seems to be the case, for instance, with some “reality” TV shows. We can call “exteresting” such phenomena that appear to be interesting exactly because they are *devoid of intrinsic interest*. Thus, it would be useful to discriminate between a work that is interesting in itself and one that is exteresting as part of an external situation, of a larger social or intellectual context. This latter case is often described by the expression *interesting as*; a work may be interesting *as* evidence of the degradation of public taste or *as* indicative of a crisis in the writer’s creativity. There are interesting people and books, but there are also interesting *situations* that involve boring people and tedious books as focal elements.

There is a clear discrepancy between the growing popularity of the interesting as an evaluative term and the lack of its theoretical exploration. Thousands of volumes are written on *beauty* and *truth* while one can hardly find a single one on the *interesting*. Thus the lines between the rigorous and appropriate application of this term and its colloquial use or even misuse become blurred, and this evaluative word is often applied unreflectively or euphemistically. To say that something is “interesting” is a convenient way to say something positive and pleasant about a work without giving it any substantial consideration. “That’s interesting!” often functions as an empty remark, meaning everything and nothing. Such exclamations can serve as an excuse for evading further discussion or a signal to change the topic, rather than as an introduction to the issue of what makes this thing interesting.

My own interest in the interesting comes from the fact that I have found this concept relevant to practically all the disciplines with which I have been engaged in my theoretical pursuits, from literary theory to cultural studies to linguistics to philosophy. It has

a much broader range of applications than, for instance, the ancient and venerable category of the beautiful, the use of which is mostly restricted to aesthetics and literary and art criticism. Though my primary impulse here is to discuss interesting ideas and theories, that is, the application of this concept in intellectual endeavors, I see no reason why the universal value of the interesting shouldn't be addressed as well, including its relevance for the discussion of literary works or human personalities. A person or an event may be interesting or uninteresting in the same way that an idea or a novel is interesting. My intention here is to clarify the meaning of the term *interesting* without sacrificing the breadth of its current usage both within and outside of the academy. The art of definition, after all, consists of two complementary imperatives: (1) the term must be defined as narrowly and specifically as possible, and (2) all the various areas and contexts of its usage must be covered as broadly as possible.

The category of the interesting can be questioned, perhaps, on the basis of the subjectivity of its applications, since different people are interested in different things. Yet, while the concepts of the beautiful and the good are susceptible to the same line of criticism, few critics question the relevance of aesthetics and ethics as sciences of the beautiful and the good. Our question is not what is interesting to various people, but what constitutes the category of the interesting itself; that is, what it means to raise interest and to be interesting. We cannot merely enumerate "what is interesting" as Sei Shonagon did in the lists that form her *Pillow Book*. Our question is rather: what is the interesting *itself* as a cultural concept? One person might be interested in ice hockey and another in soccer; one person might be interested in philosophy and another in literature; one person might be interested in Hegel and another in Nietzsche; but at the same time, all these people find something interesting, albeit in different phenomena, and it is this very category of the interesting that interests me. Here I will perform a simple phenomenological reduction, bracketing out all subjective and objective factors—that is, who takes interest in particular things and why—in order to focus on the phenomenon of the interesting as such.

2.

The ascent of the interesting among evaluative terms can be attributed in large part to the deep transformations in the epistemological field initiated by Thomas Kuhn's groundbreaking book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. According to Kuhn, it is not the acquisition and accumulation of new facts but rather a change of vision, new lenses on the eyes of the professional community, that causes revolutionary shifts in scientific paradigms.¹ The post-modernist critique of the concepts of truth and reality contributed further to the search for alternative criteria in the evaluation of ideas and texts. These new criteria stressed the heuristic value and transformative potential of an idea, its capacity to break the established configuration of knowledge rather than to expand its correspondence to external reality (I return to this point below in my response to Deleuze and Guattari's critique of *truth*). What makes an idea (a theory, a text) interesting is its provocative stance, its challenge to the norms of "normal" science.

Though this kind of radical epistemology appears to be post-modern and "post-Kuhnian," it also reminds us of the classical notion of *wonder*, or *surprise*, postulated by Aristotle as a cognitive "trigger" providing the motivation for philosophizing. We are surprised by something that challenges our expectations and the rules of our reasoning. The surprising appears to be highly improbable. In our response to this challenge, we must attempt to bridge the gap between reason and surprise, at once rationalizing the improbable and extending the limits of rationality. It is this internal tension between reasonable expectation and the cognitive value of the unexpected or unexpectable that undergirds the category of the interesting.

I would like to propose that the interesting is related to the modal categories of the possible and the impossible, the probable and the improbable. The oscillation between these two and their mutual transformation constitutes the phenomenon of the interesting. Thus, what makes a certain theory interesting is its presentation of a consistent and plausible proof for what appears to be least probable. In other words, *the interest of a theory is inversely pro-*

portional to the probability of its thesis and directly proportional to the provability of its argument. This criterion can be applied to such different fields as religion, history, and physics. For example, the probability of a human being's resurrection after death would appear to be extremely small, and it is in part for this reason that the Christian narrative, consistently arguing in favor of resurrection, has been the focus of interest for a significant part of humanity for two millennia. The probability of the old man Fedor Kuzmich being the same person as Tsar Alexander I is very small, so any historical evidence in support of that theory would present great interest. Similarly, among the most interesting theoretical propositions of the twentieth century are those of relativity and quantum physics, the conclusions of which challenge common sense to the extreme, leading to a situation in which the ultimate improbability nevertheless seems to possess scientific provability.

The least interesting theories, meanwhile, are those that (1) prove the obvious, (2) speculate about the improbable without solid proof, or, worst of all, (3) fail to prove even the obvious. If the interesting is the relationship of provability to probability—that is, *a fraction where the numerator is the reliability of the argument and the denominator is the probability of the thesis*—then the degree of the interesting grows both with the increase of the numerator and with the decrease of the denominator. On the other hand, *as the probability of a thesis increases or its provability decreases, a theory becomes dull.*

If wonder involves the measure of improbability, then reason provides the measure of provability. We now see that the category of the interesting emerges as the measure of tension between wonder and understanding or, in other words, between the alterity of the object and reason's capacity to integrate it. On the one hand, an object offering a proliferation of wonders without any reasonable explanation diminishes its potential to be interesting because we give up all hope of rationally integrating such a phenomenon. On the other hand, the evacuation of wonder that guarantees an easy triumph for reason undermines our interest as well.

The same double criterion of the interesting would seem to hold for a literary text. An interesting plot development is one that is

perceived, on the one hand, as inevitable and, on the other, as unpredictable. As in a scientific theory, the logic and consistency of fictional action must be balanced by its provocative novelty. Voltaire's famous saying "All genres are good except for the dull ones" is also applicable to scientific genres and methods. The dull is the opposite of the interesting and is characteristic of research in which, like a story that goes nowhere, the conclusions repeat the premises, and nothing unpredictable happens in between.

Yet for the purposes of my analysis of the interesting, short utterances, rather than long narratives, would perhaps be most suitable. Such utterances as "A table is an item of furniture" or "The Earth revolves around the Sun" are true but trivial, because the truth they describe is well known and self-evident. On the other hand, such utterances as "A table is an agricultural tool" or "The Earth revolves around Jupiter" are false but not for that reason interesting; errors and falsities may be as boring and trivial as plain truths. Which utterances, then, are most interesting? Those that express truths, but the least evident and predictable ones. Aphorisms, in particular, exemplify the interesting as such, producing a revolution in our consciousness by undermining common-sense truths and affirming apparently unpredictable ideas. Take the famous saying attributed to Heraclitus: "You cannot step twice into the same river"—a profoundly interesting statement precisely because it denies the obvious fact that one can enter and cross the same river many times. (But, we learn to ask, will the river be the same, filled with the same water?) Or take Henry David Thoreau's aphorism: "Men have become the tools of their tools." The conventional relationship between men and tools is reversed in this statement, but the reversal does not make it false; on the contrary, it suggests a deeper truth about economic alienation and the psychological subjugation of men by their tools.

Among aphorisms there is a special variety called *paradoxes*; the etymology of the term (from the Greek *paradoxon*: para-, "beyond," and doxa, "opinion") suggests the way that paradoxes are understood to conflict with expectation. Oscar Wilde was, famously, a great master of them. "Action is the last refuge of those who cannot dream," he proposes, reversing the conventional view that dream is the last refuge of those who cannot act. In some cases a

paradox becomes an end in itself, a pure reversal of a plain idea, and does not bring forth a deeper truth. But in fact, any good, memorable aphorism is more or less paradoxical because it conflicts with our established opinions and defies truisms in order to find the truth at the very edge of common sense. And it is precisely this edge that sets the parameters of an interesting object of whatever kind—text, theory, situation, or individual.

3.

It is instructive to trace how the modal meaning of *interesting* in its contemporary usage (curious, attracting attention), a meaning that in English dates only from the late eighteenth century, has evolved from the earlier sense of the word *interest* as a financial term. Since the fifteenth century, *interest* has signified something like “compensation for loss, interest in money lent, money paid for the use of money and the rate of such payment.” Raymond Williams, in his famous dictionary of conceptual etymology, remarks that “[i]t is exceptionally difficult to trace the development of interest [from an economic term to] the now predominant sense of general curiosity or attention.” However,

[i]t remains significant that our most general words for attraction or involvement should have developed from a formal objective term in property and finance. . . . It seems probable that this now central word for attention, attraction and concern is saturated with the experience of a society based on money relationships.²

The development of *interest* from its early financial sense to its contemporary evaluative usage can be explained precisely by the notion of high value attached to the low probability of profit. There is a clear conceptual connection between the modal definition of *interesting* and *interest* as a term of lending and investment. This shared idea is the notion of a higher return under the condition of higher risks. The least probable profit results in the highest rate of interest. An idea is more interesting—that is, it generates a higher interest—if its assumptions are less probable. The less predictable a narrative is, the more interesting (engaging, fascinating)

it is. Similarly, higher financial interest is reaped from a more risky investment: the probability of its return is lower, thus the potential gain should be higher.

Our interest in a certain book or a theory is an intuitive anticipation of a possible profit from an intellectual investment. We invest our time, our labor—indeed, a portion of our life—in consuming an intellectual product, in the hope that we will be rewarded by multiple gains and eventually receive more than we had invested. If a book or a theory is based on familiar assumptions leading us to obvious conclusions, that is, if they simply return to us what we already know, then they are not worthy of investment as they do not generate interest—in both the financial and cognitive senses of this term.

Looking even deeper in the origins of the term, the word *interest* derives from the Latin *inter esse*, “to be between; in the interval.” In Russian, meanwhile, *interesting* can be synonymous with *pregnant*—“She is in an interesting state,” one can say. Although she herself is one, there is another entity within her. This, indeed, is precisely the situation of the interesting; it is a form of pregnancy, of potentiality. In more general terms, it is that which fits into the gap between two extremes: between evidence and wonderment, between logic and paradox, between system and chance, between order and freedom, between self and other. The interesting occurs *between* thesis and antithesis, if (a) they are both relevant for the situation, (b) their synthesis is impossible, and (c) the victory of either side is precluded. As soon as one of these extremes overpowers the other, though, interest disappears, lapsing into detached respect or listless indifference. Oddity and madness are not interesting in and of themselves, but only in that kind of madness that has its own method, “a mind of its own,” or, conversely, in an idea that contains some madness within it. We might rephrase Niels Bohr’s aphorism: your theory is crazy, but it’s not crazy enough to be interesting.

4.

In contemporary scientific discourse, the concept of the interesting is utilized in reference not only to the theories but also to the ob-

jects of research. According to the principle of “maximum diversity” developed by the physicist Freeman Dyson, “the laws of nature and initial conditions are such as to make the universe as interesting as possible. As a result, life is possible but not too easy. Always when things are dull, something turns up to challenge us and to stop us from settling into a rut.”³ As soon as life becomes dull and balanced, something unpredictable occurs: comets or meteorites strike the Earth, a new ice age arrives, wars break out, or computers are invented. This constant introduction of diversity leads both to an increasingly stressful life and to more complex and interesting modes of cognition. Experts in the theory of chaos—that is, the theory of this kind of unpredictability—often use the term *interesting* to denote what is nonlinear or unsusceptible to simplification and prediction. Specialists in chaoplexity at the Santa Fe Institute, according to John Horgan, “often employ ‘interesting’ as a synonym for ‘complex.’”⁴ At the same time, and in a kind of resonant relationship with these scientific usages, the concept of the interesting gained momentum with the postmodernist deconstruction of the *truth* in the 1970s–1990s. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari sharply contrast the interesting with the outdated paradigm of knowledge as an approximation to an external reality:

Philosophy does not consist in knowing and is not inspired by truth. Rather, it is categories like Interesting, Remarkable, or Important that determine success or failure. . . . [A] concept must be interesting, even if it is repulsive. . . . [T]hought as such produces something interesting when it accedes to the infinite movement that frees it from truth as supposed paradigm and reconquers an immanent power of creation.⁵

Thus the interesting, according to Deleuze and Guattari, provides an alternative to the truthful. The interesting is what repels and resists, what breaks the positive conventions of knowledge, and what contradicts both factual evidence and public taste. I would argue, though, that such a concept of the interesting, deriving only from the “infinite movement” and “power of creation,” is overly romantic, as narrow, in its own way, as the rationalist conception of truth.

It is no wonder that poststructuralist views on the irrelevance of truth have offended the majority of scientists and drawn their sharp criticism. Usually the merit of a scientific theory is measured by three interconnected factors: truthfulness, correctness, and verity. Theory is truthful when it corresponds to external reality, correct when it is free from internal contradictions, and veritable when it is verified by tests and experiments. Of course, these three criteria are necessary but insufficient conditions of being interesting; they lack the dimension of surprise or improbability. On the other hand, wonderment without any search for proof and evidence also becomes empty.

The interesting is constituted not merely in opposition to truth, after all, but in its juxtaposition of the truthful and trustworthy with the improbable and wondrous. The romantic is interesting when it discloses its rational side, and vice versa. Edgar Allen Poe and Jorge Luis Borges deserve, perhaps, to be considered among the most interesting writers for the way that they rationally decode the mysterious; at the same time, this decoding does not abolish the sense of mystery in their work, but rather intensifies it. Similarly, in scientific inquiry, thought that resists facts and despises evidence is as trivial and boring as thought that relies solely on facts without rising above them. The interesting is what comes in between two mutually exclusive and equally indispensable aspects of the phenomenon. If poststructuralism, as represented by Derrida, Deleuze, and Guattari among others, tends to dismiss truth as a feature of an outdated episteme and renounces its conceptual status, then the next intellectual paradigm will restore the value of truthfulness within the broader category of the interesting. The truth regains its significance as unpredictable and impossible truth, a surprise at the unknown rather than an acceptance of the known.

However, if an author attempts to surprise readers by all possible means, the interesting, pursued for its own sake, may well be perceived as “predictably interesting” and therefore turn into the boring. The interesting not only evolves from the unpredictable and surprising but has to retain these qualities in the process of its own manifestation—that is, it must be spontaneously and unexpectedly interesting. Otherwise, as an end in itself, it degenerates into an ar-

tificially enforced interestism, which is quickly recognized and fails to arouse genuine interest, instead dulling our attention and curiosity. Interestism is a contortion of the interesting, a quick discharge of its resources, an intellectual coquetry, a spasm, an explosion of the unexpected that comes too early, aborting our expectations. In this case interesting content is condensed into certain short passages while the text as a whole lacks energy and intrigue. In fact, a good writer often needs to sacrifice an interesting fragment in order to build up a momentum of expectation. This accumulation of trivial instances, each one puzzling in itself, helps to direct interest toward an unexpected development (of thought or action) that is yet to come. The most interesting books are usually written not for the sole purpose of being interesting but to explore the world and human nature, to engage in emotional and intellectual self-expression, to invent new stories or to create original images. Such is the dialectic of the interesting: it reaches its goal more effectively in deviating from it.

Ironically, the interesting has to be independent of those “consumers” whose interest it aspires to arouse. This “disinterestedness” of the interesting originates from the same paradox that we discussed earlier, namely, the combination of provability and improbability. This implies that the interesting itself should not be overwhelmingly and straightforwardly interesting but should stand out from the contrastive background of the non-interesting, as a surprise rather than a predictable pattern. The interesting usually sparks and glimmers rather than shines brightly and evenly. What interests us deeply is interesting only to the extent to which it does not cede to outside interests. It grips us, rather than submitting to our desires. Ignoring this paradox and attempting to arouse interest from the very start and without interruption, interestism often ends in failure, obliterating wonder by making it routine. Only on a superficial level can it be said that “pleasing” the consumer or the reader should lie at the very core of the interesting. Martin Heidegger mentions such cases of interestism that lack their own center and therefore lead to indifference:

Interest, *interesse*, means to be among and in the midst of things, or to be at the center of a thing and to stay with it. But today’s

interest accepts as valid only what is interesting. And interesting is the sort of thing that can freely be regarded as indifferent the next moment and be displaced by something else, which then concerns us just as little as what went before. Many people today take the view that they are doing great honor to something by finding it interesting. The truth is that such an opinion has already relegated the interesting thing to the ranks of what is indifferent and boring.⁶

How might we relate such an account of the “interesting thing” to the question of an interesting person? We know that even the most talented people are sometimes so full of their own personalities, bright ideas, and deep emotions that they leave no space for anyone else to communicate and participate creatively. Strangely enough, they thus become akin to superficial people—“indifferent and boring,” like Heidegger’s “interesting thing”—who have nothing substantial in them and cannot lead the listener or the reader anywhere. Just as there is the tragedy of a poor man who has nowhere to go (consider Dostoevsky’s Marmeladov), there is the tragedy of a dull man who has nowhere to lead. Some people are like fountains, emanating their rich contents; others are like cotton wool, so entirely dry that nothing can be squeezed out of them. Finally, there are a few—and these are the most interesting personalities, existing between the polarities of interpersonal communication—who, like sponges, can both absorb *and* emit.

The interesting involves us in the “inter-being” of external objects, but the root of the *inter esse* is within ourselves. There is an interior relation between my actuality and my potentiality: I can be unpredictable and surprising to myself. The interesting functions as a kind of mediator between me and myself, to the extent to which I *may be* different from what I *am*. In fact, what we find interesting in the world around us are those things that enrich our lives with a range of possibilities. Even trivial interests reflect a discrepancy between the actual and the potential self, between what one is and what one can be. For example, a person interested in athletic activity does not simply exercise her body; she actually exercises her alterity, her capacity to surprise herself. She is finding her different self as an “athlete,” exploring the possibility of becoming faster

and stronger than she is. The interesting plays a central role in this person's self-potential, in her self-definition as a potential being. Whatever our external interests are (professional, social, or recreational), our engagement in a variety of activities reflects our desire to wonder at and be puzzled by ourselves, to experience something in ourselves that is, as yet, unknown and undiscovered.

There is a certain dynamic between individuals and interests: one individual can have multiple interests, just as one interest can be shared by many individuals. In this respect interests are similar to universals, the general concepts of metaphysics. Interests can be characterized as "universals-for-individuals," as opposed to the traditional "universals-in-individuals" of the realm of philosophy. In this conventional sense, universals are objective attributes of an individual (be it person or thing) and do not depend upon the individual's consciousness or desire. Such universals as *nation*, *class*, *temper*, *cognition*, and *language* (understood as the ability to think and speak) cannot be considered interests. But *reading*, *science*, *art*, *politics*, and *sport* can be viewed as universals-for-individuals and therefore as interests in that they are matters of conscious choice, matters of potentiality. Unlike traditional universals that establish our identities, interests are dynamic: they do not relate to properties but to intentions of their subjects, making the latter different from themselves.

The interesting interlaces truth and wonder, the obvious and the incredible, the actual and the possible, increasing the intensity of their interrelationship. Now and then one side starts to prevail over the other; the obvious is scrupulously argued or the incredible bluntly asserted. In these cases the interesting tends to be lost, lapsing into the boredom of easy consent or the frustration of disbelief.

Notes

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1. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
2. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 172–73.
3. Freeman Dyson, *Infinite in All Directions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 298.
4. John Horgan, *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 197.
5. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugo Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 82.
6. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 5.