

Passivities: Modes of Feeling, Modes of Knowing

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תקציר בעברית

נקודת המוצא של הפרויקט שלנו היא התייחסותו של אדמונד הוסרל לסבילות כרובד הבסיסי של תהליך ההכרה האנושי, הכר עליו נבנית הפעילות של האגו. תפיסה זו של סוגיית הסבילות מייצגת מהפכה כללית יותר בהיסטוריה של הרעיונות, נקודה ארכימדית שבה סבילות מפסיקה להיתפס כחוסר של יוזמה והתכוונות של היחיד בתחומי הקוגניציה, האסתטיקה והמוסר, ובמקום הופכת לבסיס לבחינה מחודשת ורחבת היקף של החוויה האנושית על שלל רבדיה. מטרתה של קבוצת המחקר שלנו היא לבחון את הגניאולוגיה של רגע מכונן זה והאופנים בהם הוא מערער על חלוקות בינאריות מסורתיות של אקטיבי/פאסיבי בתחומי המדע, האמנות והאסתטיקה החל מן הרנסנס וכלה במאה העשרים. בחינה זו תאפשר להסתכל על ההיסטוריה של תרבות המערב מפרספקטיבה חדשה, שתערער על מושגים מקובלים של קידמה, כינון הסובייקט כרצון לעוצמה וחדשנות אסתטית ואפיסטמולוגית, ותציע במקום זאת מהלך מורכב יותר שמגדיר מחדש את מקומה של הסבילות בעיצובו של העצמי המערבי. חקירה מעין זו תאפשר בחינה מחודשת של הסבילות כמרכיב מהותי לא רק במרחב האסתטי, הרגשי והאפיסטמולוגי אלא גם זה הפוליטי. הפרויקט מורכב מארבעה ממדים שונים, הנוגעים בסוגיית הסבילות באופן השוואתי ורב תחומי – הספרותי, המדעי, הפילוסופי, והחזותי. מבחינה מתדולוגית הפרויקט משלב בין היסטוריה של הרגשות, היסטוריה חומרית של המדע, תולדות האמנות ותיאוריה ספרותית, תוך חיפוש אחר מצע חדש לבחינה סינטטית של ההיסטוריה של התרבות באופן כללי.

Abstract in English

The opposition of passion and action pervades Western epistemological self-understanding. It is arranged in metaphors that contrast the mind as a mirror, passively reflecting external reality, to the mind as a searching lamp, projecting its own light on its surroundings. It is embedded in the philosophical polemic between a materialist notion of human existence, as a passive reaction to external stimuli, and the idealist celebration of the human creative capabilities in fashioning their own environment. This dichotomy, thus, constitutes the dynamic interface between human mental processes and the external world providing the

foundational framework for any cognitive act. Critically assessing this interface and the subtle moments of passivities it involves, our interdisciplinary project suggests tackling it from two angles, one historical, focusing on early modern Europe as a transitional phase; and the other, critical and philosophical, examining the notion of passivity from a phenomenological point of view.

Our collaborative project takes its cue from Edmund Husserl's intuition that a passive order of experience undergirds all phenomenological processes. This moment represents an epochal shift in the history of ideas, an Archimedean point where passivity ceases to be perceived as a lack of initiative or a failure of the individual will. The aim of our research is to trace the genealogy of this founding moment, to chronicle the way it problematised the traditional hierarchical distribution of the active/passive binary opposition, and to explore its implications in the fields of science, art and aesthetics for the formation of modernity.

Challenging long-standing assumptions about models of moral agency and epistemological mastery, our research will invite a re-examination of passivity not only in the realms of aesthetics and affect theory but also in the political sphere. The project will approach the concept of passivity in a comparative and multidisciplinary way, combining a history of emotions with a material history of science, and putting these in dialogue with the discourses of art and literature, thus suggesting a novel point of departure for a synthetic examination of the historiography of culture.

Detailed Description

In the *Analysis Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis*, Edmund Husserl refers to passivity as “the founding level” of experience, and as “the soil upon which the free activity of the ego moves.”¹ In its narrowest application, *passive synthesis* denotes a variety of phenomenological processes that take place at this founding level, processes that underpin the workings of subjective consciousness, but that cannot be reduced to the intentional (active, sense making) operations of the ego. At an initial stage of the interaction between the self and the world, one is to imagine a pre-subjective form of intentionality, that is a way in which the phenomenal world presents itself to the perceiving mind. It is a work of synthesis that regulates the manner in which raw sense data enter the phenomenological field and come to the attention of the senses. Husserl speaks, to this effect, of “perception’s proper and potentially purely passive

¹ Edmund Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001, 386.

course,” noting, further, that perception “has its own intentionality that as yet does not harbor anything of the active comportment of the ego and of its constitutive accomplishment.”²

The attention paid to the theme of passivity in the philosophical tradition referenced here coincides with an epochal shift in the history of ideas—a moment in which passivity ceases to be regarded in the privative mode, as an absence of individual agency or a dialectical negation of a subject’s sense-making activity. Challenging the traditional hyper-valorisation of egoic *action* and *activity* in cognitive, moral and aesthetic processes, the shift sets the stage for an ambitious reevaluation of the role of emotion in contemporary critical discourse, and lays the theoretical groundwork for ever more urgent discussions of affect, force, and vibrant materiality.³

Passivities: Modes of Feeling, Modes of Knowing reconstructs the genealogy of this conceptual shift. It proposes to interrogate long-held assumptions about the active/passive dichotomy, and to reexamine the traditional hierarchical ordering of these two categories in modern conceptions of human agency and affectivity. To this end, the research team will trace the vicissitudes of the concept of passivity and its revalorisation in modern scientific thought, literary history and aesthetics, from the emergence of Humanism, as Renaissance writers grappled with Stoic and Scholastic theories of emotion; through the epistemological upheavals of the 17th Century and the Enlightenment, as scientists and artists sought to reimagine the role of passive faculties and passive attitudes (observation, idle perception, pleasure, reverie) within creative and cognitive processes; to 20th-century phenomenology, as a new understanding of the mechanics of sense perception came to bear on contemporary reflections on materiality, embodied experience, and organic form. The aim of our project is to form a reciprocal relationship between these two historical moments and their novel understanding of the role of passivity in ways humans interact with their environment.

Recent developments in affect theory and new materialist studies have begun to show the need for a new understanding of passivity and of its key role in contemporary accounts of cognitive, moral and aesthetic processes. Yet there remains a dearth of scholarship on the long history of ideas that feeds into this philosophical moment. Our research project aims to address this lack by homing in on a key intuition in modern phenomenology – Husserl’s description of a passive order of experience that preconditions

² Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis*, 94.

³ For some background on the concept of “vital” or “vibrant” materiality see Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Evolution and the Untimely*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004; and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

and supplements all egoic activities – fleshing out its backstory and implications across aesthetic, scientific and literary discourses.

Gur Zak's contribution will examine the strong link between passions and passivity in the literature of the Italian Renaissance and the implications of this link for the major cultural and ethical debates of the period. More specifically, it will show how the critique of “passive” emotions was a central factor in the emergence of Italian humanism and underlies the conflicts between Latin and vernacular, ancient and modern genres, and classical and medieval ideals of the human in the Italian Renaissance.

In ancient and medieval thought, the passions, or emotions, were traditionally considered as passive and pre-reflective reactions to outward stimuli. As such, they were frequently contrasted with “reason”, or the “active intellect”, and were frequently associated with femininity. Nonetheless, while ancient schools of thought – from Aristotelianism to Stoicism – have called for different forms of control over the emotions, in late medieval culture there proliferated various literary genres – primarily the love lyric – and devotional practices – such as the meditation on the Passion – that relied heavily on the idealization of “passive” emotions, above all love and compassion. Not coincidentally, the vast majority of authors in those genres composed their works in the vernacular, the “mother tongue”, which was in itself strongly associated with both passivity and the feminine.

Zak's line of research will develop the argument that the major cultural movement of the early Renaissance – namely humanism – emerged as a direct response to what its proponents perceived as the overly “emotional” and passive nature of late medieval culture. Deeply influenced by the critique of the emotions inherent in Stoic works such as Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* and Seneca's *De clementia*, the humanists' revival of classical Latin – the “language of the father” – alongside the valorization of genres such as the ancient epic, may be seen as an attempt to constitute a new “manly”, “active”, and “rational” community that would counterbalance current dominant structures of feeling. This major facet of humanism will be demonstrated through a close examination of works such as Petrarch's *Africa*, Giovanni Conversini's autobiography, *Rationarium vite*, the epistolary collections of Salutati and Bruni, and the consolatory treatises of Manetti and Filelfo.

At the same time, the research will show how these new humanistic writings often found it difficult to disengage entirely from the emotional tendencies of their recent predecessors. In the Latin works of those humanists, we detect a continuing – and at times inadvertent – recourse to emotions traditionally considered as “passive” and “effeminate”, such as sorrow, melancholy, and compassion. Furthermore, their works frequently display a

longing for peaceful solitude and scholarly leisure which may well be considered in itself as “passive”, a withdrawal from the taxing demands of the “*vita activa*”. Such withdrawal is often cast in the terminology of quietude and serenity and shares close affinities with the Freudian account of the death drive. Despite their efforts to eliminate it, “passivity” remained an inherent feature of humanist literary culture itself.

The oscillation between passive and active elements within humanist literary culture contributed to the emergence of new hybrid genres in the Italian Renaissance, among them the romance epic. In works such as Petrarch’s *Triumphs*, the Latin *novelle* of Leonardo Bruni and Giannozzo Manetti, and ultimately romance epics such as Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered*, we witness a mixture of Latin and vernacular, epic and lyric, ancient and modern stylistic and ethical features. This hybridity points to the lingering appeal of “passivity” and emotionality among Renaissance authors and ultimately to an attempt to fashion a literary culture that strives to balance the opposing poles of the passive and active.

Raz Chen-Morris will explore the radical transformation in human modes of perception witnessed at the turn of the 17th century, following the rebellious rejection of the accepted Aristotelian assumption of the infallibility of the human senses *qua* senses.

The erosion of trust in the veracity of human visual experience led early modern natural philosophers and mathematicians to seek new ways to overcome the eye and to find new perceptual modes to go beyond what the eye sees, in other words to fashion suitable techniques in order to capture what is invisible. Such techniques consisted of novel apparatuses, novel practices and modes of operation and novel understanding of the ways the human mind is affected by sensory stimulations. Through the 17th century and the early Enlightenment a whole new economy of passivity was molded, in order to keep a fine balance between moments of reception and moments of knowledge production. More precisely, the crisis demanded a radical rethinking of the balance between the passive instrument, as light rays are falling on its lenses, and the active human ingenuity that shaped and produce the instrument; between the passive recording of observation and the active mathematical calculations invested in turning them into viable descriptions of the world; and between the moral importance of a dispassionate mind and the active pursuit of knowledge.

Chen-Morris will investigate this cultural transformation by focusing on three instances (and one treatise), where the introduction of instruments as mediators between the natural world and the observer significantly altered the equilibrium between the senses and the mind, thus suggesting new modes of passivity as guarantors of true knowledge. In what ways could human ingenuity and inventiveness engage with the phenomenal world without

distorting it? How can one rein these active dispositions to form a clear table on which sensory stimuli can present uninterruptedly the truth of the physical world? How can one shape a dispassionate yet curious and attentive mind? Chen-Morris's research will probe these tensions between detachment and attention, between active production and passive representation as they molded not only new epistemologies but also a new persona of a scientific observer that can sustain these contradictions in a meaningful way.

The first instance this project proposes to investigate is the transition from the *camera obscura* to the telescope as the chief instrument in deciphering the secrets of the heavens. In moving from one instrumental mediation to another also the ontology of sight metamorphosed, replacing shadows with refractions. This change redefined the moment of passivity in the process, from the observer within the dark-room passively watching the flickering lights and shadows on the screen to the active manipulator of lenses and images. Chen-Morris has dealt with this topic in several of his papers, focusing largely on its technical aspects. In this proposed research, however, he suggests to expand the analysis to include the political and moral implications of this transition focusing on a series of treatises on optics and the passions from Johannes Kepler to René Descartes.

The second instance this research aims to explore is the way the microscope entered England in the aftermath of the Restoration and the way Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* molded the Royal Society's attitudes in regard to observation and language, imagination and the passive reception of empirical facts, and especially as the backdrop to John Locke's image of the diverse faculties of the human mind. This project will suggest that whereas the telescope brought to the eye images of distance objects that were the domain of human imagination and conjecture since the Pre-Socratic philosophers, the microscope was directed at objects that are near at hand, where the questions of the imaginary and the real acquire different values. In the case of the microscope the question of controlling the imagination and of fashioning a detached observer whose mind is a passive tabula rasa becomes crucial to the formation of knowledge.

As the two cases above examined how the introduction of new instruments of observation reshaped the claims to knowledge of the New Science, the third instance Chen-Morris proposes to probe a different attitude towards optical instruments prevalent among Jesuit circles during the 17th century. From François de Aguilón, through Christoph Scheiner to Athanasius Kircher the question of optical distortion, fantastic images and the use of instruments and lenses from the telescope to the magic lantern was crucial to Jesuit

polemic and mission as much as to their Spiritual Exercises in instituting the moment of passive reception of divine grace.

As a postscript to this project Chen-Morris will re-read Denis Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient*, suggesting it presents a moment of critical reflection on these strands of practices of knowledge at the root of the Enlightenment. This multi layered treatise addresses a variety of moral, epistemological and political issues with a nuanced erotic flare situates the blind person as the culmination of the scientific revolution with its celebrated optical instruments. A different sense of passivity emerges from the text as the blind persons fumble their way in the world by constantly calculating and comparing the passively received sensations yet unable to have a clear picture of what is and notwithstanding their constant tactile and erotic engagement with the material world surrounding them.

Lola Kantor-Kazovsky will analyze passive and unintentional factors in the production and experience of visual art, in light of early modern physiology of cognition. She will focus on Descartes' writings, on their effect on the theory of cognition, and on the conception of visual arts in France and Italy. Art historians tend to view Descartes' influence on art in rationalist terms, thereby perpetuating a bias in favour of "active" techniques of perception of images. This interpretation follows a model originally proposed by Charles Le Brun. However Le Brun's academic theory of painting is not in the strict sense Cartesian, because it accommodates Descartes' observations to a traditional Aristotelian paradigm.

The truly revolutionary factor in the development of early modern art was Descartes' understanding of aesthetic pleasure as a passive experience. The significance of this moment has escaped the attention of art historians thus far because Descartes formulated it in his early treatise *Compendium on Music*, a text that has no evident connection to the plastic arts. Yet, as Kantor-Kazovsky has shown in previous research, the artists, philosophers and theoreticians of visual arts of the late 17th and early 18th century, who were most perceptive to the ideas of the new science, were well acquainted with it.

According to Descartes' subtle analysis of music's influence on hearing and on the mind, serious work of perception is painful while total passivity is not engaging, so that the pleasure effect resides somewhere between those two extremes, closer to the passive pole. This insight enables a deeper understanding of early modern artistic theory – beginning with that of Descartes' most famous contemporary, Nicolas Poussin. Kantor-Kazovsky will revisit Poussin's art and writings from the point of view of the balance of "work" and "rest" in visual perception, and from the perspective of musical theory that Poussin, like Descartes,

used in his reflections on aesthetic pleasure. She will continue with the analysis of Roger de Piles' idea of aesthetic perception. De Piles' approach revolutionized the academy and was a milestone on the way from the early modern to the modern idea of art. The Cartesian aspect of his description of perfect composition as giving rest, or *repos*, for the eyes, his championing of easy visual grasp, and of color consonance as the central agent of this effect, has never been analyzed or even been mentioned thus far.

In his *Dioptrics*, well known to the artists of the 17th and 18th centuries because this work deals with vision, Descartes provides the basis for the modern trends of thought that would give the passive or involuntary image formation in the brain the most basic role in visual perception. According to him, sensory data come to the mind through the mediation of the nerves in the brain, with the consequence that it is impossible for the mind to know whether any given impulse came from the external world or from the internal life of the body. Notably, the epistemological implications of this far-reaching claim extend to the impossibility of discriminating between reality and dreams.

Kantor-Kazovsky's research will consider the influence of Cartesian physiology on the concept of dream, or *rêve*, as a model for image making and image perception in 18th-century art, focusing on 18th-century Venice. Early and mid- 18th-century cognitive, poetic and artistic theory in Venice betrays a fascination with the psycho-physiological realm of "*sogni*" and "*fantasia*" in its complex relation to the mind. Inspired by Descartes (whose influence in Italy was long lasting), Lodovico Muratori and Antonio Conti wrote special treatises on fantasy, in which they sought to classify the cases in which it works independently or in conjunction with reason. The most intellectual Venetian artists of the time, among them G.B. Tiepolo and G.B. Piranesi, shared their interest in involuntary imagination: ambiguity of the image and the idea of impossibility of discrimination between reality and dreams became notable approaches in their work that they conceived in the genre of *capriccio*. The same tendency was characteristic for the new literary genre of fantastic novels. As the coda to this research, and closer to modernity, the influence of these concepts on Francisco Goya will be inspected. Being well acquainted with Tiepolo and having the Spanish translation of Muratori's treatise on fantasy at his disposal (which hasn't been noticed yet), Goya connects well to this trend. His *Caprichos* and his very concept of "sleep of reason" as their generating principle can be interpreted anew in the light of the idea of "creative passivity."

Ruben Borg's contribution to the *Passivities* project will be an investigation of the concept of passive synthesis in the context of 20th-century literary history and aesthetic

theory. His research will demonstrate the importance of this concept in 20th-century aesthetics, arguing for its explanatory potential within modernist studies while seeking to flesh out its reverberations within key developments in the literary and artistic practice of the time. Borg's inquiry will focus in particular on innovations in the art of the novel (the history of which invites a direct association with the values of late modernity), and on a metacritical discourse staged in the encounter between the novel and the medium of cinema (a medium that captured the imagination of 20th-century writers and thinkers, and prompted, by its very existence, reflections on the production and technical manipulation of images, on the mechanisation of the human eye, and on the disarticulation of perspective from the human body). The project will draw on a selection of texts that take stock of the progressive mechanisation of sensation and affect in modern times, and will show that literary engagements with this theme often coincide with a desire to examine what Husserl calls "perception's proper and potentially purely passive course."⁴

Modernist art, in probing the notion of passivity, reacted to an ongoing crisis of *fin de siècle* psychology. No longer a study of the soul, psychology had become a science of consciousness, now understood as the totality of subjective processes and operations responsible for synthesising manifold impressions, affects and empirical data into representations of a coherent reality. But the emphasis on consciousness and perception as predominantly active processes (rational, self-organising, sense-making) belied the existence of an order of reality that could not be reduced to the subject's intention.

Fernand Léger's reflections on the uses of close-up in cinema beautifully illustrate the ways in which a radical innovation in film technique might feed into a metacritical discourse on early 20th-century aesthetics, and then carry over into a discussion of affect and sense-perception. Borg proposes to read Léger as an exploration, in filmic terms, of the technical challenges of thinking through problems of self-constitution and passive synthesis. In Léger's visual language, as demonstrated in his own experimental film *Ballet mécanique* (1924), rhythm is deployed as a purely mechanical affect, a reduction of material reality to its primary, self-organising procedures. By insisting on the objectal character of body parts, placing the foot and the eye on a single ontological plane as a pipe, or a typewriter, Léger affirms the priority of the part over the whole. As the body is disassembled, perception is made inorganic, and reality is atomised, released for the moment from the synthesising labor of consciousness only to be built again, to be given to attention, detail by disjointed detail.

⁴ Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis*, 94.

A corresponding example from literary history might be Virginia Woolf's famous exhortation to the novelists of the day to attend to reality in its minute processes, to prise the techniques of novelistic representation away from descriptive accuracy, in order to embrace perception as an event—in other words to show each percept in the process of emergence:

Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.⁵

To distil the issue further, one might single out two developments in the history of the novel that resonate with the themes set forth here, and that promise to offer grist to the mill of Borg's research project: (1) During the 20th century, the novel becomes increasingly more attentive to a "transcendental empirical" exploration of an ever-changing reality, observed at the minute, atomic level. Where the 19th century excels in individual psychology, character portraiture, and wide-ranging social critique, the new form seems to turn its attention to the impressionistic study of the mechanics of sensation. Descriptive technique and narrative perspective are recalibrated to capture infrasensory stimuli, while affect and rhythm – rather than fully individualised characters – become the minimal components, the atom or irreducible formal unit, of this new materialist aesthetic. (2) Representation embraces the mechanisation of the body, and the consequent becoming-inorganic of perception. Accordingly, the modernist novel takes on a bottom-up (atomistic) approach to problems of perspective, formal unity and composition.

Group Structure, Three-Year Work Plan and Modes of Collaboration

The threads that link our respective projects are multiple and readily apparent, and indeed drew us to putting together this joint proposal. Passivity as a subjective, cultural, literary, and political phenomenon is a theme that runs through our four research projects. We believe that our joint collaboration will allow us to reevaluate the role of passivity in modernity and problematize in significant ways the traditional dichotomy between the passive and the active that undergirded much of modern creativity and thought. The project traces the

⁵ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), 155.

emergence of a new intellectual trajectory of the relationship between the active and the passive from the later Middle Ages to its more mature form in the Enlightenment up to the modernist refashioning of this structural opposition.

Gur Zak's portrayal of Renaissance humanism as a distinct "emotional community" in conflict with contemporary communities perceived as "passive" is taken up by Lola Kantor-Kazovsky's research on the tensions between Italian and early Netherlandish and German art in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. It is then picked up again by Raz Chen-Morris's discussion of the tension between the moral importance of a dispassionate mind and the active pursuit of knowledge from Kepler to the Enlightenment. More broadly, our project will explore the applicability of the notion of "emotional communities" in various cultural contexts from the Renaissance to modernism, both as a heuristic and analytical tool.

The interaction between artistic pursuits and scientific investigations of the nature of sight reverberates between Chen-Morris's and Kantor-Kazovsky's projects. These cultural interactions also reshape notions of early modern passivity, delineating the gap between the instrumental and the mental – a moment that is then taken up by modern phenomenology and absorbed into early 20th-century novelistic and cinematic techniques (as analyzed in Ruben Borg's project).

In order to test and develop these areas of collaboration we propose a three-year project, which will be divided according to the following plan:

First year – Methodology:

The first year will be dedicated to a weekly seminar aspiring to form a common methodological ground for the project, integrating the different disciplinary points of view. The seminar will involve the primary researchers of the group, post-doctoral and doctoral associates, and guests from the Hebrew University and other universities in Israel and abroad.

Second year – Passivity and the History of Emotions:

The second year will be dedicated to an in-depth reading of primary sources and relevant secondary literature on the history of emotions and its relation to passivity. In this framework we will explore ways to integrate phenomenological research with historicist attitudes. Additional time will be invested in preparation of individual publications, and sharing of work in progress.

Third Year – Passivity and the Senses:

The third year will be devoted to the examination of the changing demarcating lines between the human mind and perceptual modes that are comprised of sense organs, instruments, and the imagination. Our analysis will integrate two lines of inquiry: the first dedicated to the material and technical dimensions of passive sensory experience (from scientific instrumentation to cinema) and the active modes of participating in these experiences; the second dedicated to the ethical demands and emotional consequences of the new ways in which images are produced and affect our being in the world. At the end of the year we will organize an international workshop devoted to an interdisciplinary discussion of passivity in the various facets discussed throughout the project. This will be followed by the publication of a collaborative volume, or special journal issue, which will be a starting point for further reevaluation of the role of passivity in literature, art, science, and technology.

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