

How to be interesting

Description

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Online social media bring to light the human desire to be more interesting. After all, thatâ??s how you get â??likes,â?• friends, dates, self esteem and success. Search online for *interest, attraction* and/or *attention* to get the measure of how interested people are in being interesting.

In fact, interest implies connection. The word â??interestâ?• suggests â??to be betweenâ?• (Latin: â??interâ?• = between, â??esseâ?• = to be). So someone with an interest in the outcome of a business transaction will be connected to the transaction (a beneficiary perhaps), as opposed to being a *disinterested* observer. In the same manner, to be interested in a book, an artefact, a conversation, a blog or a person, implies a connection.



The connection idea certainly fits the world of everyday interconnections as amplified, nuanced, reconfigured and severed via electronic media. Whatever the medium, one of the most common declarations of interest comes with the realisation that thereâ??s a connection, however tenuous or coincidental â?? they both drive the same brand of car, the moon is about the same size in the sky as the sun, tramlines are like connectors, *interest* seems a bit like *attention*.

The sociability of interest

â??Interestâ?• is indeed an interesting word. It has a strong social use. An Australian once remarked he didnâ??t realise how interesting he was until he came to the United Kingdom.

In her light hearted commentary on social manners Kate Fox concurs:

> â??It takes foreign colleagues and clients a while to realise that when the English say â??Oh *really?* How interesting!â?? they might well mean â??I donâ??t believe a word of it, you lying toadâ??. Or they might not. They might just mean â??Iâ??m bored and not really listening but trying to be politeâ??. Or they might be genuinely surprised and truly interested. Youâ??ll never know. There is no way of telling: even the English themselves, who have a pretty good â??sixth senseâ?? for detecting irony, cannot always be entirely sure.â?•

Sianne Ngai draws attention to a short story by Lydia Davis consisting of various contradictory insights at a party, under the title â??Interesting.â?• Hereâ??s one example.

> â??Here is a very handsome English traffic engineer. The fact that he is so handsome, and so animated, and has such a fine English accent makes it appear, each time he begins to speak, that he is about to say something interesting, but he is never interesting, and he is saying something, once again, about traffic patternsâ?• (49).

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Itâ??s clear that whether genuine or feigned, not everyone expresses interest in the same things and at the same time, and not everyone is able to forge the same connections. We also use â??interestâ?• and â??interestingâ?• to ease our way into and out of social situations.

A cognitive emotion

Elsewhere I referenced how Jonathan Flatley in his book *Affective Mapping* states, â??Only when I am curious can new objects present themselves to me as interesting.â?• (See After affects.) By this reading curiosity is a mood that prepares us to register certain objects or events as interesting. Without that mood I canâ??t *feel* interested. Interest is a feeling, a cognitive emotion directed at something specific. It rides in on the coat tales of a curious disposition.

Interest is something to be cultivated â?? like a sudden bloom tended within a curious garden. (See how strained metaphors excite, extinguish or frustrate our interest!) Another metaphor is that of *engagement*, a relationship that most speakers, writers, artists and entertainers wants with their audiences. See Audience disengagement.

Selective attention

Elsewhere Iâ??ve referred to the psychologist William Jamesâ??s account of the necessity and capability of humans to pay *attention* selectively to things in the environment. In fact we are *incapable* of attending to everything around us all at once.

There are various ways of accounting for this necessity to attend. Consciousness is one of them. Itâ??s common to say that if Iâ??m interested in something then Iâ??m conscious of it. But then I might have an interest of which I am unaware, or my interest (or many of them) may be working in the background while thinking of (attending to) something else entirely.

For example, I retain my interest in the wildflowers next to the country path even while exhibiting a momentary interest in a bee, the sound of a lark, a piece of litter, or whatâ??s for dinner. Interest seems to have an inertia. Otherwise I would be like a bee, buzzing from one source of excitement to another (which no doubt serves the bee well).

The locus of attention

Neuroscientist William Uttal shows how difficult it is to pin down *attention* as an actual cognitive function. You certainly canâ??t identify â??the locus of attention,â?• i.e. where it happens in the human brain. That phrase is interesting as it usually refers to the target of our interest, and that too is difficult to pin down at any particular moment.

Emotion words (anger, love, joy) have currency in particular situations. *Interest* is similar. So for the cultural theorist itâ??s probably sufficient to think of *interest* as a term with linguistic use value, as in the social examples given above.

And in that *interest* may also have therapeutic uses. After all, we think that one of the secrets of a full life is to have interests, to be interested in the things around us, to make connections, and to have people say that they are interested in us and what we say and do and write.

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Note

- Also see Soft fascination, and Art challenges life.
- The image above is of the tramline at Sighthill, Edinburgh. In the distance on the right is Arthurâ??s Seat. This stretch is particularly *interesting* as it makes a beeline for the castle and the centre of the city.

References

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Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. attention
2. engagement
3. interest
4. soft fascination

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