

Interestingness

"Interestingness" names the quality that makes something hold attention because it rewards further looking or thinking. It is not beauty, novelty, or importance, though it borrows from all three. Its peculiarity is that it is relational and temporal: a thing is interesting *to* someone, *now*, given what they already know, and it tends to stop being interesting once it has been fully understood. That makes it one of the few aesthetic terms that has been taken up seriously by philosophy, psychology, information theory, and computer science alike.

A minor aesthetic category with a long history

In the late eighteenth century Friedrich Schlegel treated "the interesting" as the signature value of modern art, as opposed to the classical ideal of the beautiful. Where beauty aims at completion and repose, the interesting is restless, individual, and provisional; it belongs to an art of the fragment, of irony, of the unfinished. Kant had already defined aesthetic judgment as *disinterested* pleasure, so to call something interesting was, from the start, to place it slightly outside the classical aesthetic, closer to curiosity, knowledge, and desire.

Sianne Ngai's **Our Aesthetic Categories** (2012) revived this by treating "interesting," alongside "cute" and "zany," as one of the defining aesthetic judgments of late capitalism. Her point is that "interesting" is a cool, low-intensity verdict. It does not commit to praise; it marks something as worth returning to, and it is fundamentally tied to circulation, discussion, and information. Calling a work interesting is a way of deferring a final judgment while promising that there is more to say. This is why it became the default compliment of conceptual and post-conceptual art, where works are meant to generate discourse rather than settle into contemplation.

The psychology: arousal, novelty, and the inverted U

Daniel Berlyne's experimental aesthetics in the 1960s and 70s gave interestingness an empirical shape. He identified "collative variables" (novelty, complexity, surprise, ambiguity, incongruity) that produce arousal by setting what is perceived against what is expected. Preference, he argued, follows an inverted U, often called the Wundt curve: too little complexity is boring, too much is confusing or aversive, and interest peaks in between.

Later work by Paul Silvia separated interest from pleasure. On his account, something is interesting when it is appraised as both *novel-complex* and *comprehensible*: you sense there is a pattern to be grasped and believe you can grasp it. This explains why expertise changes what is interesting. Training raises one's capacity to understand, which shifts the peak of the curve toward greater complexity.

Information aesthetics: surprise as a measure

In the 1950s and 60s, Abraham Moles in France and Max Bense in Stuttgart tried to found an aesthetics on Shannon's information theory. Information, in Shannon's sense, is a measure of improbability: a message that could have been predicted carries little information. Moles and Bense saw the aesthetic object as a balance between order (redundancy, which makes a structure perceptible) and information (unpredictability, which keeps it from being trivial). Pure order is a blank wall; pure information is noise. Interest lives in the structured surprise between them.

This framework was directly formative for early computer art. Frieder Nake and Georg Nees, who exhibited plotter drawings in Stuttgart in 1965, worked in Bense's circle, and the deliberate mixing of rule and randomness in their work is a practical answer to the question of how to make a generated image interesting rather than merely regular or merely chaotic.

Computation: interestingness as something a machine can pursue

Computer science has repeatedly needed a working definition, because systems that explore must decide what is worth exploring.

Douglas Lenat's AM (1976) and Eurisko generated mathematical concepts and used explicit "interestingness" heuristics to choose which to pursue: a concept was promising if it had surprisingly many or surprisingly few examples, if it connected to other interesting concepts, or if it produced unexpected coincidences. AM's apparent "rediscovery" of prime numbers made interestingness look like a programmable engine of discovery, though later analysis showed how much of its success depended on the representation it was given.

Jürgen Schmidhuber proposed the most influential formal theory. In his account, an observer (human or machine) is always trying to compress its experience, to find shorter descriptions of the data it encounters. What is *beautiful* is what is already highly compressible; what is *interesting* is the *improvement* in compression, the moment when a new regularity is discovered and the description suddenly gets shorter. Interestingness is therefore the first derivative of beauty: the rate of learning. This neatly explains why white noise is boring (it can never be compressed) and why a fully understood pattern becomes boring (there is nothing left to learn). It also underlies "curiosity-driven" reinforcement learning, where agents are rewarded intrinsically for reducing their own prediction error.

Simon Colton and others in computational creativity have used interestingness as one criterion, alongside novelty and value, for evaluating what generative systems produce, and in data mining "interestingness measures" (lift, unexpectedness, actionability) rank which discovered patterns deserve a human's attention among millions of trivial ones.

A more mundane but culturally significant instance was Flickr's "Interestingness" algorithm (2005), which ranked photographs by patterns of views, favorites, comments, and who was interacting with them. Here interestingness was operationalized entirely as social attention, a revealing case of the term collapsing into circulation, exactly the dynamic Ngai describes.

Why the term matters for generative and data-driven art

For an artist working with algorithms and datasets, interestingness is less a property of an output than of the relationship between a system, its outputs, and a viewer. A few consequences follow.

A generative system can produce endless variation without producing interest, because variation is not the same as discoverable structure. What tends to sustain interest is a legible process whose consequences cannot be fully anticipated, so the viewer is invited to reconstruct the rule from its effects and keeps being slightly wrong.

Interest decays with comprehension. Once a viewer has inferred the generating rule, further outputs carry less information. Works that remain interesting tend either to have layered rules that reveal themselves gradually, or to couple the system to something outside itself (a dataset, an audience, a physical process, an archive) that keeps injecting genuine unpredictability.

Ranking and curating by interestingness is never neutral. Any metric, whether compression gain, prediction error, or social engagement, encodes a theory of the observer. Choosing the metric is effectively choosing whose attention counts and what kind of surprise is valued.

A working definition

Pulling these threads together: something is interesting when it presents an observer with structure they have not yet grasped but sense they could grasp, so that attending to it produces the experience of learning. Interestingness sits between the predictable and the incomprehensible, depends on what the observer already knows, and is used up by the very understanding it invites.

Further reading

- Friedrich Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry* (1795–97)
- Daniel Berlyne, *Aesthetics and Psychobiology* (1971)
- Abraham Moles, *Information Theory and Esthetic Perception* (1958; Eng. 1966)
- Max Bense, *Aesthetica* (1954–65)
- Douglas Lenat, "AM: An Artificial Intelligence Approach to Discovery in Mathematics as Heuristic Search" (1976)
- Jürgen Schmidhuber, "Driven by Compression Progress" (2009)
- Paul Silvia, *Exploring the Psychology of Interest* (2006)
- Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012)