

## Simmel Presentation

Georg Simmel (1858-1918) was a German sociologist who worked and published in the thirty years prior WW1. His favoured literary form – although there is one important exception – were condensed, subtle dissections of life in the modern city in which he was able to reveal a complex set of forces at play in the incidentals of our daily lives. He was enormously influential upon a whole generation of German cultural critics – people such as Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Georg Lukacs and the art historian Wilhelm Worringer. In the past twenty years or so, Simmel has undergone a considerable revival of interest and has been re-configured as *the* sociologist of modernity. His work is now seen as an extended investigation of the consequences of modernity upon European civilisation.

Why is he of interest in the present context? One reason is that his range of interests neatly triangulates the original topic as it was formulated in conversations with John. His magnum opus, and a work of uncharacteristic length and persistence, is *The Philosophy of Money* (1907). In this Simmel explores the ways in which modernity is inextricably intertwined with the development of a full-blown money economy. His motto in this book is 'Money is Modern!' As well, and unlike many other sociological theorists past and present, Simmel had a deep understanding of art and in particular of the Fine Arts. Art and the aesthetic realm in general coloured his whole outlook such that one Simmel scholar has observed that he 'adopted an aesthetic perspective in the articulation of his social theory'. How his interest in the minutiae of daily life and his 'aesthetic perspective' are related can be seen in the following observation.

For us the essence of aesthetic observation and interpretation lies in the fact that the typical is to be found in what is unique, the law-like in what is fortuitous, the essence and significance of things in the superficial and transitory. (1)

I want to take up the implications of this later.

Finally, in 1896 he wrote a short essay on The Berlin Trade Exhibition. This exhibition was an early attempt on the part of a newly unified Germany to match the 'World' exhibitions held in Britain and France.

So following Simmel, I will first discuss his ideas about money and modernity. Then I will, briefly, contrast this with his ideas about art and finally I want to look at the way in which he deals with the trade fair to see if it can throw any light upon those trade fairs of the art world, biennales.

### Money and Modernity

Simmel does not say that the emergence of a money-based economy *causes* modernity, rather he sees a money-based system as the modern form for contemporary economic activity. Again, whilst wary of asserting any one-to-one causal relationships between money and other areas of social life, it is clear from what he says in *The Philosophy of Money* that he sees monetary forms of exchange as constituting a template for other forms of social relationship. So how does Simmel construe money generally and what are the 'modern' consequences of it occupying this position of dominance?

Simmel saw money as arising from within a structure of purposive human behaviour that is from within the pursuit of desired ends via instrumental actions. All economic transactions he argued, are based upon the fact that I want something which another person possesses and which they will transfer to me if I transfer something to them that I have and they want. Money comes into being by inserting itself into the teleological chain between a desire and its fulfilment. Its initial function is to ease the processes of giving and taking. Money is modern in the sense that it provides a means for changing ownership over and above the 'primitive' forms of theft or the gift. Money's place in the teleological chain is secured because

(a) It is a system of value that enables goods and services to be converted into a common medium. Comparison between them, with an eye to exchange, is now possible.

(b) It is also a 'public institution' in the sense that it covers, and mediates between, the parties involved in an exchange. As Simmel says

Just as my thoughts must take on the form of the generally understood language in order to advance my practical ends . . . so my services and possessions must enter into the form of monetary value in order to serve my continuing volition. (2)

For Simmel, the modernity of money resides first in the way in which it enables a wider and wider set of goods and services to be drawn together under the heading of their monetary value. Diversity, local colour, individual specificity are not so much destroyed (initially anyway) as have their isolation punctured through being able to be represented abstractly as a monetary value. This institutes radically new forms of association. But, argues Simmel, the fact that this ever widening circle of diverse ends is represented as a series of equivalences means that a certain levelling and fluidity begins to operate in the textures of social life.

As he says

All in all, one can say that the peculiar psychological coloration – or better, decoloration – to which things are subjected by their equivalence to a completely colourless means of exchange brings, as it were, a certain smoothness, a grinding down of their sharp corners and, by easing and accelerating the circulation of things in that way, this is a side of the cultural process which transforms both ideals and realities from the form of stability, something unchangeably fixed and existing forever, into that of motion, the eternal flow of things and continuous development. (3)

By presenting the participants in an economic transaction with what Simmel refers to as an 'objective and general' system of value (that is one that is not immediately tied to the desires of the individual ego) and by refracting individual purposive actions through the medium of money a quite novel set of modern potentialities start to emerge from within the social order. I want to run through just a few of those presented by Simmel.

(1) A spirit of dispassionate calculation enters into social relationships. Because money enables, with the arrival of smaller and smaller units of value, for an

ever finer calibration of gain against loss Simmel argues that a similar neutral, (perhaps cool) ethos comes to dominate our non-intimate relationships. Money allows for a space to open up between the antipodes of 'for or against' of the local and specific. (Simmel observes that the loose change in our pockets is the economic counterpart of the watch on our wrists.)

- (2) As monetary value becomes the centre in which the most contradictory, alien and distant things find their common element there is an increase in the impersonality of economic ownership. The medium of money, because it comes to apply to an ever more diverse set of goods and services, allows for a 'lack of any personal colouration' with regard to an owner and their property. This relationship is now played out through the medium of money which acts as a kind of 'insulating layer' between the ego and its object. (This is particularly acute in Australia with the debate about whether to permit the individual ownership of traditional land amongst indigenous peoples.)
- (3) The emergence of an objective realm of 'dispassionate' value i.e. money standing over and against the immediate desires of the individual fosters an equally 'objective' and 'dispassionate' attitude towards those with whom one is socially engaged. Simmel refers to this as a purely 'technical' form of social relationship, that is a form of exchange that can be brought to a successful resolution regardless of the 'content' of the individuals taking part. Again money allows for the opening up of forms of sociality that are different to those based on notions of 'friend or foe'.
- (4) But at the same time that one's desires are forced to make a detour through the generally recognised means of exchange that is money new kinds of subjective freedom are opened up by this severing of the intimate link between subject and object. The interdependence of personality and material relationships typical of barter economies is dissolved by the money economy. What Simmel calls 'the personality' is freed from these external anchorings and allowed unprecedented amounts of mental and physical freedom.

He summarises these above tendencies so

The streams of modern culture rush in two seemingly opposing directions: on the one hand, toward levelling, equalization, the production of more and more comprehensive social circles through the connection of the remotest under equal conditions; on the other hand, towards the elaboration of the most individual matters, the independence of the person, the autonomy of its development. Both tendencies are supported by the money economy, which makes possible, first, a completely general interest and a means of connection and communication which is equally effective everywhere. Second, it permits the most pronounced reserve, individualization, and freedom of the personality. (4)

And the place where all this ferment is concentrated is the modern metropolis.

### Art and Money

You will recall that as the money economy comes into dominance what is regarded as fixed and permanent dissolves into 'motion', 'the eternal flow of things' and 'continuous development'. Art, on the other hand, Simmel characterises as a process in which human beings introduce the permanence of form into transient materials. Indeed, Simmel regards art as in many ways the antithesis of the web of relationships associated with the money economy. The artist engages in an act of production that involves the whole of their being. The object produced is one in which the 'typical' is integrated into the 'fortuitous'. The successful work of art is such that subject and object are mediated through the vehicle of form. In short, art embodies a set of qualitative values that are incommensurable with the quantitative values of the money economy.

We need to be clear as to what Simmel is up to here. His argument is not really about the fact that art is a commodity, that it is an object of monetary exchange. What he is doing is setting up a contrast between two polar opposites so as to be able to highlight two radically different forms sorts of sociality. Those deriving from the modern money economy are marked by an ever-increasing division between the subject and object; there is less and less correspondence between the inner life of the personality and the increasingly objective forms taken by culture. Culture, in other words, starts to approximate to the condition of

money. On the other hand art, through the 'abstraction' of artistic form, is able to keep subject and object in touch with one another.

However, Simmel also had a more nuanced, less oppositional view of the relationship between money and art. This emerged in his short essay on the Berlin Trade Fair of 1896.

### Biennales and Trade Fairs

In this essay Simmel began to explore how art might be affected by the ethos associated with the money economy. What happens if art, too, starts to resemble the form of money? So his argument is not so much about the commodification of the artwork but the ways in which the social relationships of an art world get restructured according to the principles of the money economy. He uses the impressions he gained at Berlin's first 'universal exhibition' as a touchstone for this revised view on the relationship between art and money.

There is much that is common between these 'trade fairs' and contemporary art biennales. Both are attempts to condense into a single time and space a 'representative sample' of contents. Both exhibit a competitive element between the objects on display. Both stress observation over purchase. Finally, both reproduce the split between the 'technical' insiders and the general visitor. Simmel isolates four aesthetic tendencies at work in these new exhibition environments, all of which are the result of the generalisation of the social template of the money economy. These are:

- (1) Transience
- (2) Shop-window aesthetic
- (3) Stylistic relativity
- (4) Amusement

### Transience

You will recall that Simmel had defined art as the imparting of the permanence of form to transient materials. However, as he walked around the exhibition he was struck by the emergence of a new aesthetic of impermanence. This was

clearest in the buildings constructed to house the exhibits where 'an entirely new proportion between permanence and transience' predominates in their structure as well as in the aesthetic criteria which they obey. The temporary nature of the buildings now organises both the materials from which they are made the principles of their construction and their look. Architecture, and by implication art in general, now has a style to match the 'flow of things' in the money economy. The transient has found its style. Nor should it be thought that Simmel disapproved of these new art of the transient since he comments upon the 'grace and dignity' of the new buildings.

### Shop-window Aesthetic

Within the form of the exhibition the visitor encounters a high level of 'concurrent diversification' amongst the objects on display. This leads, Simmel argues, to the cultivation of an 'aesthetic superadditum' in the look of objects. He describes it in the following way.

The production of goods under the regime of free competition and the normal predominance of supply over demand leads to goods having to show a tempting exterior as well as utility. Where competition no longer operates in matters of usefulness and intrinsic properties, the interest of the buyer has to be aroused by the external stimulus of the object, even the manner of its presentation. (5)

Perhaps we have here an early version of the idea of the commodity spectacle and although Simmel is referring mainly to utilitarian objects his observations, like those on transience, carry a set of much broader implications. The effects upon art specifically designed for Biennales might be profitably looked at through his ideas on the competition between 'tempting exteriors'.

### Stylistic Relativity

For Simmel, nowhere are the ramifications of the modern money economy into the domain of the aesthetic more evident than in the contemporary situation of style, or rather styles. The modern individuals love of change can be seen in the way in which at any one point in time and space a multiplicity of styles taken from 'the world' can be found alongside one another. (Indeed Simmel in another

essay argued that the modern universal exhibition and the modern domestic interior displayed a similarity of form.) For such situations to occur there has to be both an external and an internal set of enabling conditions. Trade obviously deposits the world's stylistic variety at the doorstep of the consumer but there must also be a degree of 'cosmopolitanism' in the consumer in the first place for this to be effective. The individual has to be prised out of their 'home style' so to speak

Only where a variety of given styles exists will one detach itself from its content so that its independence and specific significance gives us the freedom to choose between the one or the other. (6)

This stylistic 'detachment' enables both styles and consumers to be exchanged ever more easily. But detachment, whilst enabling for a much freer movement across styles, leads to a diminution in our affective relationship to any one style formation. The most appropriate emotion for the modern consumer is that of amusement.

### Amusement

As Simmel strolled around the Berlin Trade Fair he came to the conclusion that 'in the face of the richness and diversity of what is offered, the only unifying and colourful factor is that of amusement'. But why amusement?

In his discussion of the psychologies of the money economy, Simmel had identified one particular disposition as being very typical. This he referred to as the blasé character. (note - this has certain elements of the notion of cool.) This is an individual who subscribes (completely) to the idea that there is nothing that is price-less. Nothing impinges more closely upon the ego than anything else. The blasé character is the adept consumer able to move easily between objects in the assurance that there only 'secret' is how much they are worth. Simmel argues that the most appropriate emotion at the moment of consumption by the blasé character is that of amusement. Why?

(1) There is a minimum engagement on the part of the subject. It is not a strong, engulfing emotion.

- (2) It is easily transferable from one object/situation to another.
- (3) It is of short duration.
- (4) It implies a similarity of response to a diversity of experiences and objects. It is not susceptible to internal differentiation.
- (5) It takes place against a backdrop of disengagement, neutrality. It diverts only to return to its initial starting point.

This then is Simmel's revised 'realistic' view of the relationships between the money economy and the modern art world. But it is worth remembering that he never collapsed these two models into one another. The 'idealistic' view of art remained, with the implication that there were *at least* two very different sorts of art circulation at work. This is something that we too would be wise to bear in mind in the course of our deliberations here today.

#### Notes and References

- (1) Simmel, G., 'Sociological Aesthetics', quoted in David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity, 1985, p. 57.
- (2) Simmel, G., 'On the Psychology of Money', in *Simmel on Culture*, eds. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone, London, Sage, 1997, p. 234.
- (3) *ibid* p. 242
- (4) Simmel, G., 'Money in Modern Culture', in Frisby and Featherstone, p. 247
- (5) Simmel, G., 'The Berlin Trade Exhibition', in Frisby and Featherstone, p. 257
- (6) Simmel, G., *The Philosophy of Money*, ed. David Frisby, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 463.