



Georg Simmel, *Essays on Art and Aesthetics*, ed. by Austin Harrington, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020

Giuliano Covetti

Volume 26, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091335ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091335ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Edizioni ETS

ISSN

1616-2552 (imprimé)

2512-1022 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Covetti, G. (2022). Compte rendu de [Georg Simmel, *Essays on Art and Aesthetics*, ed. by Austin Harrington, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020]. *Simmel Studies*, 26(1), 133–137. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091335ar>

REVIEWS

GIULIANO COVETTI

Georg Simmel, *Essays on Art and Aesthetics*, ed. by Austin Harrington, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Wholeness in philosophy is always welcome, especially when a scholar has to deal with thinkers like Georg Simmel. As we know, the biggest part of his works is composed of essays that very often are difficult to reunite in an organic body or an organized structure; that's a feature that has frequently contributed charging Simmel of being a non-systematic philosopher. In the philosophical field, the lack of systematicity has always been addressed (especially by the German thinkers and professors) as something to stay away from. Obviously, this should not persuade us to stay away from non-systematic philosophies or, even worst, to avoid any contact with Simmel's production, which is probably one of the most original in the early 20th century.

This is because Simmel's thought is completer and more complex than we think and the volume edited by Austin Harrington helps us to demonstrate it. The long and detailed introduction that Harrington provides is probably one of the best introductions to Simmel's works. That's so not just because it offers a comprehensive perspective on Simmel's life and thought, but mostly because, differently from other valid introductions, it focuses on a particular aspect which is so important that, after the reading, we are invited to reconsider it as a universal topic useful for Simmel comprehension: *aesthetics*. The role played by this issue and

its deepening constitutes one of the two fundamental contributions of the collection, which is, by the way, explicitly devoted to this theme. The second fundamental contribution is represented by Harrington's meticulous work a) in revising previous English translations of Simmel's essays and providing new ones; b) in the volume index arrangement, thanks to which the essays are well systematized in thematic clusters that go from Simmel's aesthetic thoughts to considerations about literature (see pp. 325-360), painting (see pp. 205-227), theater (see pp. 259-276), sculpture (see pp. 279-322), etc. From this point of view, Harrington's goal of providing the reader with a complete and well-structured collection of the most important Simmel's essays on art and aesthetics in just one book is fully achieved.

Stressing aesthetics' role in Simmel is important because it wouldn't be possible to get into his legacy outside the sensible dimension. As Harrington often remarks in his introduction, Simmel's philosophy is first of all a *visual experience* that is personally lived. It means that all of his further philosophical considerations concerning the cultural crisis of modernity and the contrast between life and forms have their roots in Simmel's life experience as a metropolitan man, a personality who's closely linked to the problematic situations of his time simply because he/she lives them; more precisely: he *sees* them. Simmel's philosophy is basically aesthetical because it's firstly a mental problematization that has a direct link to what it problematizes. Thus, the highest sensibility and receptivity to all of those formal and outer characteristics of a time it's required. It wouldn't be unfair to argue that Simmel has built a philosophy that is phenomenological and fully involved in the processes of symbolic transformations. Everything that changes (both evolving or devolving) in the social universe has a noticeable display: aesthetic forms reflect directly the social-based forms structure. As Harrington writes, «Simmel's concern is with ways in which typical social disposition and mentalities can be *aesthetically sustained* [*italics is mine*], sanctioned and reproduced in various respects [...] practice and institutions of art can reveal and realize

definite forms of social power and identity of group and individuals» (p. 12). The aesthetic dimension of forms is so important for Simmel because it brings to light all those elements that lay underneath in the social life, exposing them to the philosopher's mind. Everything expresses itself by a form, every form is the expression of something. In Simmel's interests, this principle is translated into the social realm. Art and aesthetics are «socially produced outcomes» (p. 13), this means that understanding them equals understanding society.

It follows that art for Simmel is something more than aesthetics. While the latter could be defined as an epistemologically valuable concept linkable to theories of knowledge, the former represents a *total dimension* that gathers the individual element and the social one in forms of expression that are not just aesthetic manifestations but *the total dimension of being*. Every work of art, according to Simmel, is a *unique fragment* of the cross-border space placed between the individuality of the artist and the sociability of the cultural world he/she belongs to. The capability to create symbols has not just a social or cultural origin; it is strictly embedded in the human being (that has to be intended as a subjective dimension) who perceives, re-elaborates, and creates *in his own way*, out of a fully automatized reproducing process. Every human creation is for Simmel the result of a *particular view* of the world that is actually lived; it is not simply the result of a *Welt-Anschauung*, but of a *Lebens-Anschauung*. The inner unity of Michelangelo's sculptures, the individuality of characters that arises from Rembrandt's portraits, and the dissolution of forms that involves Rodin's works express magnificently the dynamism of life (a pure motion) which is, at the same time, in a certain epoch and in a certain place (determined) and beyond them (undetermined). All of them (just like any artist) bring to humanity a small piece of the permanent changing flux of ideas through the aesthetic dimension of art. As prescript by its human source, art amazingly expresses the harmony of the elements and the «feelings of fracture» (p. 32) at once; art is a sort of human

cultures thermometer, whose illnesses can always, for Simmel, symbolized through forms that lay on the surface of everyday life.

Every free expression of life is artistic; every artistic expression is free and lifeful. Art (just like the natural realm for Goethe) is the exhibition of life's autonomy and independence. And it is precisely this level of autonomous experience of the social realm that Simmel intends to understand; for doing it, that's necessary to catch those elements of social dynamics that partly appear through a *style* or that sensuous form whose recurrent aesthetic elements (visible in art, architecture, and fashion) fits spontaneously in its epoch, thus through the recurrence of those characteristics which open the access to the direct and synchronic comprehension of societies creatively unveiling the flourishing aspects as well as the tragic ones. On the other end, some elements of social dynamics do not appear directly in social life; they are recognizable via their particular (and in some cases non-corresponding) perceivable extension through forms that express a hidden state of reality. Together with Simmel, we could say that the philosopher and the sociologist (or more generally the man who is interested in understanding the social processes) are constantly engaged in *the translation of the language of cultural representations*, that ultimately come to define the health conditions of contemporary *Vergesellschaftungen*, thus the state of human relationships that men experience among them and their objects, them and their world(s) and (last but not least) among themselves. As Harrington specifies, «expression in art [...] involves more than mere acts of relay of inner states of the self. Mental and emotive contents are not dissociable from outward forms of these contents in shared symbolic systems of expression, and no soul or subject of communication preexist mutually understood codes of signs materialized in sounds, gestures, actions, and surface of meanings» (p. 61).

Even though this could open the possibility of a social critique in a Marxian-Frankfurt School style, the reader of Simmel's essays on art and aesthetics will easily find that the author was not interested in formulating a critical assessment. Georg Simmel was a

viewer who was firstly interested in understanding, decrypting and so clarifying (first for himself) the social universe before criticizing it and thus trying to estimate what kind of disposition of things should be appropriated. Even if in some works (e. g. *The Philosophy of Money*) a refusal of a certain situation described can be felt, Georg Simmel placed himself in a different position, devoted to seeing and listening the things instead of changing them. He was literally seduced by the images of his *Umwelt*. In this sense, he was near to that historical conception of philosophy which was fully expressed (and accomplished) by Hegel and radically modified by Marx: the comprehension *by means of concepts*. From a certain point of view, the lack of a critical theory in Simmel constitutes a lost opportunity. But the wit and the uniqueness of his essays, together with Harrington's patience, will allow us to forgive him. The readers of *Essays on Art and Aesthetics* will find out soon.

VINCENZO MELE

Enrico Campo, *Attention and its crisis in Digital Society*, Abington: Routledge, 2022.

From a look that is not blinded by the supposed novelties of the present, it is evident that the fear of the advent of the “Middle Ages of Distraction” caused by technological innovation is not only a recent fear related to the advent of digital media, but has accompanied the West since its origins, accentuating since the advent of the industrial economy. Indeed, capitalism is characterized by the prevalence of rational action over purpose, which – as described by both Marx, Weber, and Simmel – requires not only physical effort but equally a mental effort of concentration toward a task that becomes increasingly specialized and one-sided. At the same time, however, in capitalism individuals must not only be “concentrated” producers but also “distracted” consumers by