



Sociological Aesthetics, or How to Make Sense of Symbolic Forms

Frédéric Vandenberghe¹ 

Accepted: 25 September 2023

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Abstract

This article questions some of the basic assumptions of sociological aesthetics. Taking the “linguistic turn” with Susanne Langer, it assumes throughout that art is a social phenomenon that involves body, emotions and symbolism. To understand the experience of art today, it takes an articulation between phenomenology, hermeneutics and critical theory. The synthesis of Georg Simmel, Talcott Parsons and Theodor Adorno can only work if the social forms are explicitly brought into the cultural system and meanings and power are not evacuated.

Keywords Sociological aesthetics · Symbolism · Georg Simmel · Talcott Parsons

The origin of Helmut Staubmann’s sociological aesthetics is wonder (*thaumazein*). He hears a riff by Keith Richard and he’s enthralled and moved. Something touches his soul. Not only his. His soul is vibrating unisono with all the other souls who have gathered in the stadium to hear the Rolling Stones playing live. He watches a self portrait by a famous Dutch painter of the Golden Age and wonders why this representation of an aging man affects him so much. Is it because of the play of light on this weathered face with the ridge of the nose that separates the brightly illuminated and shadowy areas? Or is it perhaps because the frailty of the painter tragically evokes his own finitude? He watches the Game of Thrones and wonders why people are so thrilled by this American fantasy drama. Is it because of the complexity of the story arcs or because the dragons archetypically represent the monsters within us? Those questions are at the heart of this collection of essays on aesthetic and social theory. One way or another, these essays all want to understand how aesthetic experience—the “whoa” of the wonder as it were—is possible and if cultural sociology can help us to understand it without losing the phenomenon. Given its secular tendency to superimpose its own problematic—the social as in the social aspects of art and culture—and its own categories—the social meanings and norms

✉ Frédéric Vandenberghe
fredericvdbrio@gmail.com

¹ Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, IFCS, Largo São Francisco de Paula, 1, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

that are expressed in art, Staubmann doubts that sociology can grasp the miracle of resonant art.

His contribution to social theory is mainly an analytical and critical one. It is analytical, because in the spirit of Talcott Parsons, he wants to extract and abstract the aesthetic (the aesthesis and the art forms) from the empirical manifold as a separate dimension of reality. And it is also critical in so far as he questions the traditional approaches of sociology, from Marx to Pierre Bourdieu that explain art with reference to material interests, from Weber to Alfred Schütz with reference to meanings and from Durkheim to Talcott Parsons with reference to norms. To make his case and un-earth the aesthetic as an analytical dimension of reality, Staubmann proposes an original and heterodox version of Parsons' conversion theory. He advances his argument that to understand the aesthetic dimension of reality sociology should be focusing on the senses, the body and the emotions by pairing Georg Simmel to Talcott Parsons (in a first moment) and Talcott Parsons to Theodor Adorno (in a second moment). In this review essay, I will question both of these moves. I will argue that the articulation between Simmel and Parsons is problematic. Over and against his analytical approach of the aesthetic, I will defend a more synthetic approach that does not disconnect the senses, the emotions and the body from language and culture, but follows them all the way through from the senses through the symbolical forms to the arts. If the articulation between Simmel and Parsons fails for theoretical reasons, the articulation between Parsons and Adorno fails for ideological reasons. Arguing with Adorno and Bourdieu against Staubmann, I'll try to indicate the lineaments of a dialectical sociology of culture that integrates social structure, culture and practice in its analysis of aesthesis and the arts. Of necessity, I will have to present my observations as fragments that point to an evanescent unity that cannot be presented here.

Formal-Analytic Sociology

Sociology in a New Key. Essays in Social Theory and Aesthetics is a polemic book. It wants to bring in some elements from aesthetic theory into social theory. Via a detour of reflections on the senses, sensations and emotions, it wants to redefine some of the main concepts of sociology (society, social forms, culture) and reorient it from cognition (meanings) and valuation (norms) to expression (arts). It is easier to state what the book is against, however, than what it is for. The book positions itself against the main currents in social theory, like Marxism, structural functionalism, phenomenology and rational choice that want to explain aesthetics and the arts sociologically, but in doing so impose their own categories and preoccupations on the perception of the world. As a result, they lose track of the phenomenon itself – the “animal in the foliage” is dimly perceived, as Harold Garfinkel would say (Lynch & Eisenmann, 2022), but not properly extracted from the manifold. Covered up by the conceptual apparatus of sociology, the originary experience disappears. Instead of reverting to the body, the senses and the emotions to understand aesthetic experience and its role in society, sociologists bring in norms and values (functionalism), meanings (phenomenology) and semantics (systems theory), interests (rational

choice) and ideologies (Marxism) to explain what is social in individual expression and collective communication. The experience that comes to expression in the arts is thus not understood in its specificity. Rather it is reduced to what it is not and explained away as an epiphenomenon of society.

Staubmann protests against the “reification of the non-identical”, to invoke Adorno’s (1997) evocation of the aesthetic as the non-conceptual element that resists incorporation into the system. He wants to remove layer after layer all the sociological interpretations of culture and return to the aesthetic experience itself. If that sounds like Heidegger’s *Destruktion* of the layers of philosophical ideas that obstruct access to the truth, it should be immediately added, however, that the author has not much sympathy for hermeneutics, phenomenology or ethnomethodology. Notwithstanding evident affinity and thematic relevance, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty or Garfinkel are never mentioned. With Georg Simmel, he wants to understand the contribution of aesthesis (the senses) and aesthetics (the arts) to the constitution of society. When people look at each other, when they hear each other, when they take their distances from each other to keep a safe distance, the senses, sensations and emotions directly structure the social interactions that make society. So far so good, but whereas Adorno, the phenomenologists and the ethnomethodologists wanted to go back to the experience of the non-identical and rescue the thicket of experience from the apparatus of formal-analytics that risks to strangle it, Staubmann proposes to get away from essentialism, by which he basically means reductionist approaches that a priori define what is social in terms of normativity or meaning, by an extra dose of formalism. Somewhat surprisingly, he returns to cybernetics, complexity theory and Bateson’s metacommunication to define the specificity of the arts and separate out cognitive from aesthetic information. From this cybernetic perspective, the form is “the difference that makes a difference”, to use a famous turn of phrase one finds in Bateson, Spencer-Brown and Luhmann. Instead of trying to recover the phenomenon itself from underneath the formal-analytic apparatus to analyse its meaning, contexture, endogenous organisation, etc., he wants us to focus on the aesthetic forms of human life. Without ever explaining what a form is, how many there are, how you extract them or how they are interrelated into a system, he wants to define sociology not by any substance or essence, like norms, meanings-structures or material interests, but by the forms that make society possible. In terms of theory technique, this formalising move corresponds to a move from empirical realism to Talcott Parsons’ analytical realism. In this perspective, the senses, sensations and emotions he associates with aesthetics no longer refer to empirical domains of reality, but to analytical aspects of reality. The cognitive, normative and aesthetic are aspects of reality that are always interwoven in reality. The task of the analyst is to extract and separate the aesthetic aspects from reality to define their specificity.

While I recognise that such an analytic approach to reality is possible in theory, I am not convinced, however, by the way it is worked out in the book. For three reasons. Firstly, all too often, Staubmann opposes the aesthetic to the cognitive and the normative. Instead of arguing, as I will do in this essay, for their full integration, he advances by subtraction, leaving the impression that aesthesis and aesthetics can be understood without reference to symbolic forms. This position is misguided and I will argue against its one-dimensionality. I do not exclude the

possibility that I have misunderstood or misconstrued Staubmann's position. But if that's the case, and the turn to aesthetics occurs within the "linguistic turn", I will feel vindicated and our disagreement will give way to the felicity of an alignment of our positions. Secondly, the analytic extraction of the aesthetic from reality through abstraction and formalisation, does not allow for a synthetic reconstruction of the aesthetic experience in my opinion. The formal-analytic apparatus does not respect the experience of the actors. It substitutes a third person perspective to a first person perspective with the result that the aesthetic forms of the analyst replace the aesthetic experience of the actors themselves. Thirdly, this disjunction between a first and a third person perspective vitiates the heterodox fusion of Georg Simmel's formal sociology and Parsons' analytic sociology that undergirds Staubmann's theoretical project. The categories simply do not match. Between formal abstraction and eidetic variation there's a gap that is difficult to bridge. This is the reason why Parsons (1937) eventually removed the chapter he had written on Georg Simmel from the final version of *The Structure of Social Action*. Levine (1991) tried to combine Parsons and Simmel, but eventually had to acknowledge major divergences between Simmel's forms of interaction and Parsons' substantive contents of action. Similarly, Alexander (1993) concluded that Parsons did not integrate Simmel into his theory of action, because he fundamentally disagreed with him. In a letter to Alexander, the grand master of post-war sociology explicitly rejects "the idea that the forms of social relationships should be the center of attention rather than the substantive content of social action" (quoted in Buxton, 1998: 66). As a specialist of Talcott Parsons and an admirer of Georg Simmel, Staubmann no doubt is aware of these debates about theory construction in the history of ideas. It is therefore up to him to explain the reader how he proposes to overcome the conceptual conundrum and to succeed where Parsons, Levine and Alexander failed.

Old Locks, New Keys

This is not a book, but an assemblage of texts written over the last 30 years. The gist of the book goes back, as the author acknowledges in the Preface, to a research project on Action Theory and Aesthetics that was finalised in 1997. The book at hand represents, thus, as he says, a "concluding conspectus" (Staubmann, 2022: xvii). All the texts, with the exception of a short essay on the popular series *Game of Thrones*, and the references, with the exception of Jordan Peterson (!), could have been written in the twentieth century. The locks are thus old ones, but what about the keys that are supposed to unlock them? The keys are borrowed from Susanne Langer (1948) well-known *Philosophy in a New Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*. Her keys and her concepts don't fit his old locks, however. In her book, she takes the "linguistic turn" with Cassirer, Wittgenstein and Whitehead. She defends a symbolic approach to reason, rituals and art that is compatible with Simmel and Parsons, but jars with Staubmann's approach to reality. While Langer develops a general theory of meanings, signs and symbols that is also applicable to

non-discursive symbolic forms, most notably art and especially music, Staubmann wants to return to the sense data and refuses any theory of meaning, values and norms that overcodes senses and sensations.

At a deeper level, she espouses a philosophical anthropology that conceives of the human being as a *homo symbolicus*: “Quotations could be multiplied almost indefinitely [...] to substantiate the claim that symbolism is the recognized key to that mental life which is characteristically human and above the level of sheer animality. Symbol and meaning make man’s world, far more than sensation” (Langer, 1948: 21). While she underscores with the pragmatists (like Dewey and Whitehead), the culturalists (like Cassirer and Piaget) and Gestalt psychologists (like Koffka and Köhler) that the Anthropos is a meaning making animal, in his critique of the *homo sociologicus* and the *homo economicus*, Staubmann would like to remove what is typically human and bring back the human being to its senses. He approvingly quotes Luhmann’s inversion of the anthropological model, “tilting it from the head to the feet as it were” (Staubmann, 2022: 4), only to chastise him for falling back on a semantic model of meaning. In opposition to the normativist and cognitivist vision of the socius one finds in the functionalist and phenomenological tradition, Staubmann thus brings in a diminished version of the Anthropos as a bundle of senses, sensations and emotions. He repeats that the human being cannot be partitioned into analytical dimensions, hinting at a more a synthetic position, but as he fails to tease out their interpenetration, existence appears rather impoverished. It must be said that contemporary anthropologists and ethologists have refused this brute vision of the animal. By generalising semiosis, they have found signs in nature. They make “forests think”, “mountains dance” and “animals write”, while Staubman would like to go back to the basics of sense data and elementary sensations.

Making Sense of the Senses

“In the beginning was the word (logos)”, according to the Gospel (John 1: 1). For Goethe, action came first. Staubmann for his part wants to start with the senses and bring the human being back to earth. He rejects both philosophical anthropologies that privilege mind over matter and sociologies of action that interpret subjective meaning to explain social behaviour. Although he repeatedly affirms that the human being is a unity that cannot be separated in mind and body, his wrath is clearly directed against the dominant paradigms in the sociology of culture that relate the senses, the sensations and emotions to meanings, symbols and signs. He wants a sociology that does not overwrite the body and the senses into a theory of action, but stays with the body and investigates how the five senses are directly implicated in the constitution of society. What he’s after is intercorporeity, the intertwining of the bodies via the senses into a common experience. One would think that a phenomenology of embodiment would be the ideal starting point. Not necessarily Edmund Husserl, though his careful investigations of the intentional correlation of body and mind in the second book of his *Ideas* (Husserl, 1989) are foundational for any sociology of intersubjectivity that takes embodiment seriously. Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology*

of *Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) is also an indispensable reference for an original sociology that grounds the constitution of a “We” in the lived experience of the body. His wonderful writings on expression in language and art (mainly painting, but also literature and film) are obviously relevant for an aesthetic approach that purports to trace the connection between the senses (aesthesis) and the arts (aesthetic forms). Merleau-Ponty does not figure in the bibliography, however. The only references to phenomenology are to Alfred Schütz, and they are invariably negative. Even his texts in which he directly analyses the synchronisation of bodies, rhythms and movements of musicians who are “making music together” (Schütz, 1964) are discarded, allegedly because by interpreting behaviour in the language of action, Schütz has reduced the communication between bodies to a communication between minds. Newer phenomenological approaches that investigate the role of the body, sensuality and affectivity in the communicative constitution of reality (Knoblauch, 2020) are much more subtle than Staubmann acknowledges. Without any reduction, they analyse in detail the interweaving of body and minds, sensations and meanings, affects and symbols in the constitution of sociality. By means of a subtle micro-analysis of the communicative constitution of society, they show the complexity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon of sociality that is at the centre of *Sociology in a New Key*.

Staubmann draws on Georg Simmel’s interactionist sociology of social forms (Simmel, 2009) and more particularly on his small essay on the sociology of the senses (Simmel, 2007: 109–120) to make the claim that the senses are constitutive of sociality as such. The problem, however, with this line of argumentation is that it presupposes what it is supposed to explain, namely sociality (Knoblauch, 2020: 72–99). The role of the body is evident in situations of interaction. Persons who are physically co-present can see and hear each other. If they are close enough, they can also smell, touch and taste one another. Staubmann accepts the traditional bourgeois hierarchy of the senses and takes sight and the exchange of the gaze as the paradigmatic example that is supposed to show how the senses are constitutive of sociability. He does not distinguish between sensation and perception. Nor does he contextualise interactions. According to him, the mutuality of cause and effect (*Wechselwirkung*) that is exemplified in the gaze is sufficient to bring them into contact and communication and, thus, to form a society, however fleeting and minimal it is. Indeed, for Simmel, society is not a substance, but a process, and it emerges when two or more people mutually affect each other, directly and, at least in Staubmann’s reading, without mediation by culture, meanings or norms. To underscore the emergent and processual nature of these evanescent micro-societies, Simmel used the term *Vergesellschaftung*, which is often translated as “sociation” rather than socialisation to avoid confusion. The point I want make, however, is that the bodies and the senses that are supposedly at the origin of society are always already socialised. By saying this I do mean to espouse a sociologistic view of the world. I do no more subscribe to an “oversocialised” conception of the human being than our author does. My argument is fundamentally an anthropological one and has to do with the ways humans constitute the world as a world that makes sense.

With the phenomenologists—though I could make the same point with Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead or Marcel Mauss (Vandenberghe, 2023)—I simply want to underscore that senses and significations are intrinsically intertwined.

There is no way one can claim that the senses can operate without any socialisation, signification or contextualisation. The anthropology of the senses works with the assumption that society, culture, history and personality all intervene between the human being and the world (Le Breton, 2017). The senses are primordial, but so are meanings, values and cathexes. The meanings and values are not in the mind of the actors, but they are, as Merleau-Ponty indicated, “in the world”. Perception is, therefore, always and invariably, also interpretation. The interpretation is not reflexive, but pre-reflexive and pre-predicative. The vision of the world presupposes a world-vision that is relatively transparent—“diaphanous”, as C.S. Peirce phrased it. To overcome the typically Western and bourgeois overreliance on sight, instead of world-vision, we might as well speak about “world-olfaction”, “world-gustation”, “world-audition” or “world-tactility” (Le Breton, 2017: 18). Culture, society and history disclose the space of possibility that pre-structures the sensible world by demarking the visible from the invisible, the hearable from noise, the tactile from the untouchable, flavour from the tasteless and smell from the odourless. Even if one is interested in sound and music, as Staubmann is, one still has to account for “resonance” (Rosa, 2016). How does it come that some sounds are heard while others are simply neglected? In French, the verb *entendre* means both to hear and to grasp or understand. It indicates the synaesthesia of our being-in-the-world. Perceptions vary from one society, one culture and historical period to another. They are formed by education and socialisation, but also vary according to one’s personal history. For this reason, the give and take of the *Wechselwirkung* between individuals who interact with each other can not be presented as the elementary form of sociability. Sociability presupposes reciprocal action and exchange of perspectives. Without culture, without symbols and signs, the exchange of positions cannot be explained. Instead of opposing the body to the mind, nature to culture, sensations to significations, one should, in fact, think them together like two sides of the same phenomenon. With the Gestalt-psychologists that were so important for Merleau-Ponty and Susanne Langer, one could think of the poles as a “chiasm” in which the poles are invariably intertwined like background and figure or form and content.

Aesthetic Sociology

Georg Simmel considered himself first and foremost a philosopher. The distinction between form and content that underlies all of his work is of Kantian origin. In Kant’s philosophy, the distinction between form and content is clearly defined and related to his distinction between the transcendental and empirical levels of reality. In Simmel, neo-Kantianism is wedded to *Lebensphilosophie*. A static notion of form or structure is thereby conjoined with a dynamic notion of life, flows, processes and interactions. The distinction between form is far more impressionistic in Simmel than in Kant. It means one thing in his microsociology, another thing in his macro-sociology, and still another in his metaphysics (Vandenbergh, 2001). One should therefore be rather careful when one proposes to build one’s own perspective on such a problematic distinction. The notion of form is in itself absolutely formless. It is not a substantive, but a relational notion. It only gains its contours when associated to another concept

to which it is paired. In Simmel, the notion of form shifts as its paired and opposed to i) content, as happens in his micro-sociology, ii) individuals, as happens in his macro-sociology, or iii) life, as happens in his philosophy of culture. As he continuously shifts from sociology to psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, ethics and aesthetics, it is difficult to pin him down to sociology.

The latest reception of Georg Simmel has broken through the sociological ghetto and reclaimed him as a cultural theorist (Goodstein, 2017) or a philosopher of culture (Amat, 2018). They convincingly show that most of Simmel's work, and not just his essays on art (on style, the frame, portraits, exhibitions, etc.) and artists (Rodin, Böcklin, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Goethe), incorporates aesthetic motifs (Cordeiro de Farias, 2022). Staubmann seeks inspiration in Simmel to develop an aesthetic sociology that envisions art as a model for social analysis. He does not consider his whole oeuvre and does not refer to the comprehensive anthology of Simmel's (2020) essays on art and aesthetics, edited and with an introduction of almost 100 pages by Austin Harrington. Instead, he focuses on a couple of well-known essays (e.g. on the senses, sociological aesthetics, adornment and fashion) from an older collection on culture (Simmel, 2007) that exemplify the formal-aesthetic approach to social life.

Staubmann's aesthetic sociology is a sociology of culture that straddles Simmel's sociology of the forms of association and his philosophy of symbolic forms. Unlike other approaches to the sociology of culture, which conceive of culture and the arts as *explanandum*, Staubmann wants to give analytical independence to culture and the arts. In this perspective, neither the aesthetic nor the social are to be defined a priori by matter. They are defined solely by their form—the forms of association and the aesthetic forms are correlated. How exactly remains a bit of a mystery. My impression is that Staubmann wants to trace how the aesthetic impulses (the sensations and emotions), which are non-social, traverse the social space and become autonomous in aesthetics (the higher forms of culture, more particularly the arts). Pre-social at the beginning, fully social in the middle, and extra-social at the end. If that is indeed the trajectory from content to form, then the social is at were the medium where the aesthetic dimension of reality takes form. From the presentation of one's body to the others, which one already finds in the animal world (Portmann), to the presentation of self in interaction rituals (Goffman) and the full formation of design, fashion and the arts (Simmel), one can follow the process of increasing formalisation and differentiation of aesthetics. The short analysis of Simmel's sociology of the senses, the role of adornment and the carousel of fashion that the author presents seems to point to a sociology of cultural sublimation in which vital impulses and contents are contained, canalised, sublimated and cultivated in symbolic forms that follow their own laws.

Subjectivity, intersubjectivity, objectivity and transcendence form indeed a logical sequence that is at the very heart of the analytical part of Simmel's *Philosophy of Money*. Inspired by Kant's Third Critique, this masterwork is a modern *Gesamtkunstwerk* in itself (Lichtblau, 1996: 203–232). The recent literature on Simmel has rightly put it at the centre of his oeuvre. It is the key to his universe. Spanning the arch from the genesis of money to the full development of the commodity form, money is treated as a symbol that condenses the totality of social relations. In the Preface, Simmel (2004: 51–53) states his philosophical aim: to drop a plumbline

from any place in the world to the depth of the soul and show how everything is ultimately connected in a dynamic web of life. The Austrian sociologist does not give much attention to the symbolic-interactionist, relational-processual philosophy of life that is expressed in the philosophy of money. He even affirms that Siegfried Kracauer, who has written the best study of Simmel's relationist *Weltanschauung* (Kracauer, 2004), did not really know what to make of Simmel's work as a whole. Instead he focuses on his late monograph on Rembrandt, which he translated from German into English, to draw some lessons for sociology.

Given that the book on Rembrandt is an essay in the philosophy of art, it is a bit surprising that Staubmann commends it as a model for sociological analysis. It would be more accurate to describe it as a countermodel. It is seen as exemplary, not in spite but because it eschews any reference to the social, cultural, historical or autobiographical context of the artist and his work. Simmel's abstention from historical description, cultural interpretation and sociological explanation is seen as a virtue. By focusing on the work and nothing but the work of art, the magic of Rembrandt becomes tangible: the universal and the particular shine forth at the same time. Thanks to a "reflexive judgment" (Kant) that does not subsume the particular under the universal, the law and the particular are given at the same time in an "individual law" that is valid only for this unique case. The interiority of the artist is perfectly expressed in the objectivity of the work. The most individual expression attains in exemplary fashion the universality of a work of art that transcends the space and time of its production and reception.

This is all good and well, but one wonders if this sublime experience can be understood without the mediations of art history and social history. If Rembrandt's paintings move us in a certain way, it is because of the "expressive symbolism", to borrow a category of Talcott Parsons, that manifests itself in the work of the Dutch painter. We recognise it as his work, with its magnificent play of light, and we also remember the various self-portraits of the artist that show us the human being in its frailty. To understand the meaning of, say, *The Nightwatch*, his famous painting of the *The Shooting Company of Frans Banning Cocq and Willem van Ruytenburg* (1642), we also need to know about painting technique, the history of the Dutch republic during the "Golden Age" and compare the representation of the militiamen with similar ones of the same epoch. Only then will we be able to fully grasp the magic of the movement that makes the painting unique as well as of universal significance. It is only when all the mediations between the painter, his oeuvre and his times are reconstructed that we can grasp it as an exemplary expression of the painter. In other words, in art, there is nothing like direct expression of emotions. As the young Georg Lukács (2012) has shown in his so-called "Heidelberger Aesthetics", the artist realises the fusion of material and form, experience and art, and s/he does so by transforming the individual experience into the objectivity of the artistic form. To understand a work of art, one has to follow how the artistic intention traverses the emotion and brings it to completion in a symbolic form that transcends, includes and expresses the subjectivity of the artist. It takes a subtle articulation between phenomenology and hermeneutics to understand the symbolic transformation of contents into forms and experiences into art. The injunction to stay with the art and nothing but the art does not help to capture the experience of art.

Systemic Affects

Staubmann is not only a Simmel scholar. He has been awarded the Georg Sarton Medal of the University of Gent in 2015 for his work in the archives of Talcott Parsons at Harvard and has co-edited one of those massive handbooks on Talcott Parsons Studies. When structural functionalism became sclerotic and went out of fashion, Staubmann stuck to it and fought with dedication against the “deparsonisation” of social theory. That is indeed laudable. Now he wants to fold Simmel’s formal sociology into Parsons’s systems theory and defend the autonomy of culture and its subsystems. This fusion of Simmel and Parsons explains why he moves to higher levels of abstraction to open up sociological concepts for all contents. As I have indicated before, this synthesis of formal sociology and systems theory is not self-evident. Simmel’s forms and Parsons’ categories do not match. There’s a gap between a first person approach to symbolic forms and a third person approach to cybernetic ones. Simmel’s forms of association are probably somewhere in between. However, that needs to be shown. In Simmel, we don’t know what exactly the status is of the social forms: Are they transcendental categories (as in Kant) or are they historical (as in Foucault)? Are they ideal types (as in Weber) or real types (as in phenomenology?). How does one extract them from reality? Does one do it via empirical abstraction, inductive generalisation or eidetic variation? In Parsons, the outline of his categories is analytically more clear, but as his system of concepts develops, it becomes more labyrinthic and one easily gets lost in the definitions, classifications and conceptual modifications.

In his chapter on the aesthetic in systems theory, Staubmann reconstructs the trajectory of the “affective-cathectic-expressive complex” in the work of Talcott Parsons. As usual among commentators, he distinguishes three periods in Parsons intellectual development: The voluntarist theory of action (1937), normative functionalism (1952) and the AGIL paradigm (1964). In the *Structure of Social Action*, norms and values play the central role. They have a regulative function, not an expressive function. Parsons mentions “matters of taste” and “modes of expression”, but as those are not accompanied by obligations, they fall beyond the remit of his voluntarist theory of action. Meanwhile, Parsons was trained as a psychoanalyst in the Freudian tradition. In structural functionalism, he introduces the concept of cathexis to theorise libidinal investments and affective attachments. Finally, in the cybernetic phase of his work, the expressive-affective dimension is redefined in a normative-integrative sense and disappears in one of the many boxes of his systems theory. Staubmann’s reconstructions show that aesthetic considerations were never at the core of Parsons’ work. If we follow the Kantian division of culture in its cognitive, normative and aesthetic dimensions, it is clear that the American theorist was first and foremost interested in the normative aspects of social action. While Parsons does not completely neglect the affective and expressive dimension of human existence, which Staubmann identifies with the aesthetic, it is fair to say that it remains a bit of a residual category in his oeuvre. At best, it’s ornamental.

Whatever the place of affects and expressions may be in Talcott Parsons’s general theory of action, he never disconnects them from symbolism. Remember that

in Parsons, culture (in singular) is a theoretically defined category or aspect of social life that must be abstracted out from the complex reality of human existence. Culture in this abstract sense is organised into systems of symbols and meanings and differentiated from the social system, which is more concerned with norms and institutions. Notwithstanding his fidelity to Parsons, Staubmann systematically underplays the constitutive and regulative role of symbolism. Though presupposed, it is a residual category, not a keynote of his reflections. Together with the instrumental-cognitive, the ethical-normative and the existential-religious, it is just one of the analytical dimensions among others of social action. To be fully convincing, he would have to show how the three dimensions intersect in every concrete case. Instead of such a demonstration, he undermines his own case by lashing out against other approaches that parse the cognitive and normative dimensions, criticising them for their reductionism.

The sociologist from Innsbruck is not the first one who wants to push structural functionalism in a more aesthetic direction. Clifford Geertz and Jeffrey Alexander have been there before. Clifford Geertz is not seen as an ally, however. He's written off as one more reductionist who projects his own meanings and categories of interpretation, as well as those of his discipline, onto the actors. In a devastating critique of *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973), he attacks the "cultural turn" in anthropology and rejects each of the central planks of the interpretative programme: its philosophical anthropology, its semiotics, its conception of the social order and its methodology of "thick description". Jeffrey Alexander for his part is never mentioned, notwithstanding his ground-breaking interpretation of Talcott Parsons synthesis of the classics (Alexander, 1983) and his later development of cultural sociology (Alexander, 2003). One might think that Staubmann would have an interest in cultural sociology, especially in its latest developments on the iconic front where Alexander directly writes about the arts.

Staubmann moves within Parsons' system, but as he never explains how the expressive system is articulated with the symbolic system, the former tends to fall outside of the latter. It is backgrounded. Without symbolism, culture, meanings, norms and interpretations, all that remains at the end is affect. One of his central ideas, which he borrows from Jean-Marie Guyau, is that the social order is actually of a visceral order. People are not motivated by ideas or values, the social order is not kept together by norms and social control, but by affects, sentiments and emotions. This idea is, of course, nothing new. It goes directly to the heart of the Scottish Enlightenment (Hume, Hutcheson and Adam Smith), one of the immediate precursors of sociology. The emphasis on moral sentiments, like sympathy and benevolence, is also central in the symbolic interactionism of Mead and Cooley. When Parsons proposed his articulation between Durkheim and Freud, he incorporated American pragmatism in his theoretical synthesis. Staubmann leaves it out and falls back on an elementary conception of the aesthetic as a combination of affect and expression. While both are essential elements of aesthetics, I would argue with Parsons, but also with John Dewey and Susanne Langer if necessary, that one needs symbolism as a third term to get a satisfactory account of art as experience.

If he had kept up with contemporary research on emotions, affects and atmospheres, he could have discovered a whole new literature associated with the

“affective turn” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Like him, it reacts to the linguistic turn in the human sciences and wants to capture something that precedes consciousness, representation and culture. The affective turn is a post-poststructuralist approach to social, animal and organic life that harks back to the belle époque, and, ultimately, to Spinoza. To reactivate *Lebensphilosophie*, it draws on Darwin and Nietzsche. Deleuze continuously vibrates in the background. Radicalizing the praxeological turn, the affective turn reacts to poststructuralism, constructivism and cultural studies by rejecting every form of representation. Moving from the molar to the molecular level, it focuses on vital processes below consciousness that are at once subindividual, intimate and transpersonal. Affects operate at a deeper level below the social, the human and the personal. They are vital and visceral. They can be shared. And when they are shared, they form evanescent communities and societies—like Simmel’s sociations.

Paint it Black

Sociology in a New Key does not only propose a rather heterodox synthesis of Simmel and Parsons. It also wants to integrate Theodor Adorno into his theoretical exercise. This is by no way evident, not only because of the theoretical adversity between Adorno and Parsons, but also because of their ideological incompatibility. Once again, the question how one can integrate different approaches (functionalism and dialectics, idealism and materialism, consensus and conflict, Durkheim and Marx) in a few pages without falling into contradictions has to be answered by the author, not by the reader or the critic. The fact that he rejects Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production, which I personally consider as the most brilliant implementation of the Frankfurt School’s research programme of critical theory, makes his convergence thesis all the more intriguing. In the spirit of critical theory, to conclude, I will now propose a Bourdieusian reading of Staubmann’s sociological aesthetics. If I allow myself to bring in class elements into the analysis, it is as an explicit refutation of Jordan Peterson, who is quoted much too often in the book (Staubmann, 2022: 9, 100, 104, 105), always positively and without the necessary distance from his reactionary critique of “cultural Marxism”. My critique is not a personal one, but a political one. If I formulate it, it is because I assume that here as well, notwithstanding our theoretical differences, we share not only the same values, but also a worldview.

With Parsons, Staubmann starts from the idea that in modernity culture has become differentiated, autonomous and rationalised. The cultural spheres that were once unified by religion fall apart and follow their own laws. Religion, ethics, the law, the sciences, the arts, and within the arts, literature, painting, theatre, etc. are animated by an autonomous logic with their own validity claims. This idea of the differentiation and rationalisation of value spheres, which is theorised in Max Weber’s “Intermediary considerations on the Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions” (Weber, 2009), is shared by all neo-Kantians. In Luhmann’s systems theory the functional differentiation is elevated to the point of incommunicability between the various subsystems. Each subsystem finds all the other subsystems

in its environment. They can irritate one another, but they cannot directly communicate with each other.

Staubmann subscribes to this idea of the autonomy of culture, and so do I. But the acknowledgement of the autonomy of culture does not mean that one cannot or should not also explore the interrelation between the autonomous and the heteronomous dimensions of culture. In the spirit of Weber, Mannheim and Bourdieu, I favour a dual approach that combines a more philosophical approach to the cultural *Eigenlogik* with a more sociological approach to its carriers. Here as elsewhere, the point is not to oppose interpretation (*Verstehen*) to explanation (*Erklären*), but to integrate them. I would even go further and argue that a sociology of culture should contemplate the whole gamut of methodological and epistemic operations that give access to cultural forms and contents: phenomenological description, interpretation of subjective meaning, explicitation of objective meaning, causal explanation, aesthetic evaluation and social critique. Here as elsewhere, my approach is rigorously multidimensional and synthetic. Staubmann argues that an aesthetic approach needs to respect the epistemic pretensions of the cultural subsystems. That means that literature should be evaluated as literature, music as music, and theatre as theatre. That may sound tautological, but it means that one should access cultural realms and disclose their contents without bringing in heteronomous criteria from other spheres, like economics, politics or religion. In his badly tempered critique of Bourdieu, which he miscategorises as a “positivist” and reads as a “mixture of Watson’s behaviorism and Marx’s materialism” (Staubmann, 2022: 97), he accuses the latter of economic and political reductionism. Instead of taking culture as it word (and worth), it reduces culture to capital and power. Culture is no longer a value; it becomes a means of distinction. That is not completely wrong, of course, but when he follows Adorno and goes on to associate distinction with the parvenu, the snob and the *Bildungsbürger*, the educated middle-class persons “who devote much time to a subject that remains inaccessible to them” (ibid.), their own class prejudices and privileges are unwillingly revealed. “A theory of such deplorable creatures”, Staubmann exclaims, “cannot simply be taken as a model for cultural sociology in general” (id., 98). His critique of snobbism is itself somewhat snobbish. Like Adorno, he judges those who do not have the cultural capital to know all the ins and outs of the artistic field in question from the point of view of the expert.

In a series of short essays on Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno and the Rollings Stones, Staubmann moves from social theory to a sociological theory of modernity. The essay on Kracauer is particularly revealing of what a sociology of forms might amount to. Whereas Simmel introduced references to geometrical forms (triangles, circles, lines, etc.) as a mere analogy, Staubmann takes them literally. To illustrate the force of abstraction, formalisation and rationalisation, he compares the geometrical figures of ornaments in pre-modern and in modern times as they appear in some of Kracauer’s texts. In pre-modern times, society stills forms a “schöne Totalität” (Hegel), a beautiful, undifferentiated totality with meaning and value diffused through all its members. The way of life of the collective is communal, organic, and shared. It is reflected in the elaborated lattice ornaments on windows, doors, balconies, etc., that Kracauer analysed in his dissertation in architecture. In modernity, the arts and crafts have been replaced by manufacture and industry. The organic designs have been

rationalised into the abstract linear, symmetrical constructs of a mechanically engineered “iron cage”. In the absence of a shared cosmivision that imparts meaning and value, unity is imposed from outside on the atomised individuals. Like in the cultural industry, every movement, every image and every sound is produced and performed for the entertainment of the masses. The dance company of the Tiller Girls (which exists till today), whose movements on stage are mechanically coordinated, becomes the emblem of a society without soul and without spirit. The pseudo-individualisation of the dancers is akin to the pseudo-spontaneity of Adorno’s jazz fans. Paradoxically, against Staubmann’s intentions, Kracauer’s analyses of mass culture in *The Mass Ornament* shows how reification advenes when the symbolic representations of society are removed from the analysis and society is reduced to an artificially produced community of bodies, emotions and affects.

If there’s thinker of reification, it’s Theodor Adorno. His metaphysical, epistemological, sociological and aesthetical reflections all circle around the alienating effects of formal rationalisation in capitalist societies. His musical writings, which constitute the bulk of his oeuvre, underscore the dual character of rationalisation of music. On the one hand, formal rationalisation standardises, mechanises and artificially unifies the empirical manifold to make it calculable and predictable; on the other hand, art protests against the reification of the non-identical and expresses this protest in its own language, with its own rationality, through a mimetic and non-violent synthesis of the contents into an aesthetic form. Like Adorno, Staubmann refuses to reduce music to a mere epiphenomenon of rationalisation. The rationalisation of music and its instruments, which was analysed in a rather technical text of Max Weber, does not diminish the structural complexity of music. To the contrary, Adorno’s analysis of Bach’s Well-tempered Clavier shows that it enhances it, according to Staubmann. The problem is nowadays with those whom Adorno calls the “culture consumer”, the “emotional listener” and the “entertainment listener” (Adorno, 1972: 1–17). In his typology of musical conduct, they represent the lowest level. Unlike the “expert” who has an entirely adequate structural hearing and even the “good listener”, who’s not or not fully aware of the technical and structural implications, but has unconsciously mastered their immanent logic, the lower types do not really understand what they hear. The “culture consumer” is a voracious listener and well-informed snob, who treats music as a cultural asset and a mark of distinction. The relation to music of the “emotional listener” is less rigid and fetishist. Music is enjoyed for the energy it releases and the emotional stirrings it triggers. The “entertainment listener” enthusiastically seeks the thrills the cultural industry provides. Transgressing the normative taboos of society, s/he appears hooked to and dominated by forces s/he does not control.

In his study of the Rolling Stones, the Austrian sociologist gives prime attention to the types of listeners Adorno abhors. He does not criticise them. Nor does he criticise the pop industry and the entertainment business. He wants to understand the magic of the performance and share the enjoyment of the spectacle. Against sociologists and musicologists who want to treat music scientifically, he wants to go back to the musical experience itself: “Just as is the case with any music, the music of the Rolling Stones cannot be ‘explained’ by any scientific means. In the first place it can only be experienced and aesthetically enjoyed. By

means of the scientific inquiry of music, music itself is ‘slipping away’, to borrow the words of Keith [Richards]” (Staubmann, 2022: 72). Notwithstanding his admonition—the same one we had encountered in his analysis of Rembrandt— he then proposes an analysis of the aesthetisation of society, post-modern pop culture, the expressive revolution, the dissolution of forms and affective effervescence. All themes that have been treated scientifically by contemporary sociologists of culture, from Jeffrey Alexander and Randall Collins (in the Anglophone tradition) to Nathalie Heinich and Bernard Lahire (in the French tradition) and Andreas Reckwitz and Hartmut Rosa (in the German tradition). Rosa, the youngest representative of the Frankfurt School, just released a sociology of heavy metal (Rosa, 2023). His sociology of hard rock may not be hard science, but unlike Staubmann, he does not reject outright the whole of sociology and musicology to understand the “thing itself”. To the contrary, he uses sound sociology to follow the arc that goes all the way from a tremendous build-up of hellish energy to the highest level of heavenly transcendence.

Is it because I share most of Staubmann’s theoretical references and a good deal of his assumptions that I have reservations about the book? I don’t know if this dossier on social and aesthetic theory in this journal will be followed by the author’s response to his critics. To facilitate the discussion, let me summarise my critique in three points. 1) Against the analytical approach to aesthetics, I have championed throughout a synthetic approach that does not oppose the body to the symbolic, sensations to meanings or emotions to norms, but thinks them all together so that one can trace the conceptual genesis from emotions and sensations to the validity of autonomous values spheres. 2) I am not convinced that Simmel’s forms of association can be easily integrated into Parsons’ systems theory. While I recognise that Simmel’s concept of form is itself rather formless, I don’t think his formal sociology is formalist. If anything, it is phenomenological and hermeneutic, interactionist and symbolical. 3) In the same way Simmel cannot be integrated into Parsons’ system, dialectics cannot be squared with the formal-analytics. If one engages critical theory on its own terrain, one should also accept some political blowback.

Authors’ Contributions N/A.

Funding None.

Code Availability N/A.

Declarations

Ethics Approval N/A.

Consent to Participate N/A.

Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests N/A.

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